
Reviewed by Stuart I. Wright and Ronald E. Bartholomew

The primary thesis of the book is the replacement of Utah Lake as the geographical icon of Utah Valley in favor of Mount Timpanogos. Farmer’s historical analysis, which is accurate, asserts this was done first violently, by the displacement of the Ute Indians away from their native habitat and fishing resource which has come to be known as Utah Lake by the Mormon pioneers (Chapter 2), and, second, by the invention of a cultural narrative by these same Mormons that eventually replaced historical facts with a legend of a Ute Indian nation that revered and even worshipped a mountain (Timpanogos) that they did not even distinguish from other mountains in the range when they actually inhabited Utah Valley.

Ultimately, this is a book about geography written against the backdrop of historical analysis and interpretation. Farmer mentions four ironies arising from this approach:

1. “Collective memory involves forgetting as much as remembering. . . . Less often, societies choose to forget. They erase or suppress historical knowledge considered discomfiting or dangerous. Hierarchal churches and totalitarian states excel at memory suppression. . . . The LDS Church and its early official historians—and later folk historians—mythologized Utah’s pioneer period. Discordant pieces of the past were discarded incidentally or buried deliberately. The Indianness of Mount Timpanogos resulted from the separate implantation of false memories: the Indians of Utah Valley were mountain worshippers who lived here sometime in the distant past before the Mormon Pioneers planted a stake in a desert wilderness. ‘Timp’ is a special kind of memory site—a monument to forgetfulness” (12–13; emphasis Farmer’s).

2. “The LDS Church, the main architect of collective memory in Utah, made this book—this counter-memorial—possible thanks to its assiduous preservation of archival resources” (13).

3. “Mormonism, a religion indigenous to the United States, originally embraced American Indians as spiritual kin, or ‘Lamanites.’ Metaphysically and geographically, this religion reserved a privileged place for natives. But prophecies, dreams, and intentions never quite became realities. In high relief, Utah history exposes an unsettling incongruity of U.S. history: the senses of place that make present-day Americans feel at home would not exist with-
out past displacement” (16).

4. “To my knowledge, Utah Indians have not contested the Indianness of ‘Timp’; to the contrary, certain Utes have recently cooperated with it” (13).

In the context of these ironies, Farmer asserts that this book was written to address what he sees as a crucial problem in the field of Utah and Mormon historical studies:

The Great Basin, the Mormon’s region of settlement, remains outside the purview of mainstream American history. This . . . is best explained by a geographic metaphor. The Great Basin is that large piece of North America that has no outlet to the sea. Its runoff flows inward, where it pools and evaporates. So it is with Utah history. Because of the LDS stronghold in Utah, and because of the LDS emphasis on history, the state sustains a steady flow of scholarship. However, the water lacks proper turbidity. It’s unnaturally pure because so many historians have filtered out non-Mormons and native peoples. Because of provincialism, scholars of Utah rarely push beyond the rim of their basin. They write for an audience of Mormons. History pools at their feet; their stream never reaches the ocean. Meanwhile, in the seaboard cities where opinion generally takes shape, most U.S. historians ignore Utah history and Mormon history. In their coast-to-coast historical surveys, scholars may occasionally glance down, may even notice a curious patch of blue—an inland sea of history. Yet whether through prejudice or indifference, they rarely descend for a closer look. They should. The Great Basin is the perfect place to be disoriented and reoriented. (14)

Farmer offers himself as the perfect guide to navigate this terrain as a native son/expatriate of Utah Valley who came to know the problem by becoming an “insider-outsider.”

The book contains three parallel narratives, each beginning in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries and continuing to the present day. Chapters 1–3 focus on the historical centrality of Utah Lake and its fish to the indigenous Native Americans, and the devastating effect the influx of Mormon pioneers had on that ecosystem and the original possessors of that land—the Ute Indians.

Chapters 4–6 chronicle the emergence of “Utah Lake’s foil” (15), Mount Timpanogos, particularly the role of Eugene Roberts, the director of athletics at BYU, whose annual hike helped cement the cultural significance and mythology surrounding “Timp” to the present day.

The purpose of Chapters 7–9 is to explain, against the backdrop of extra-local historical analysis, how Eugene Roberts—or anyone like him for that matter—can turn a previously unknown geographical location into a locally revered icon. In other words, Farmer attempts to place the displacement of Utah Lake in favor of Mount Timpanogos in its broader historical and geographical context (as promised in the introduction and as quoted above). He does this by comparing what happened with geography and history in Utah Valley with what has happened in other places and times. He also shows what hap-
pened when two distinctive cultures, “Mormon” and “American” clashed in a predictable but unsettling way.

Co-reviewer Stuart Wright picked up the book while browsing the “local” section in an Orem “big-box” bookstore. Though he does not consider himself an expert on Native Americans nor Mormon history, he grew up and continues to reside in the shadow of “Timp.” In the past couple of years, he happened on documentaries about Utah Lake and the Black Hawk War on the Utah Valley University channel. Thus, he comments, “When I read the book’s jacket I was immediately drawn in. Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed the book. I found it extremely thought provoking, not only historically but also in terms of the implications of that history on the future of the valley. I’m not sure the book would resonate nearly as much with someone unfamiliar with Utah Valley and Utah Mormon culture even though Farmer attempts to make it accessible to a general reader.”

Both of us commend Farmer for exploring a broad range of viewpoints to support his thesis: the early history of Native Americans in Utah Valley, the relations between the Mormon pioneers and Native Americans, the role of Eugene L. Roberts, and the cultivation of geographical icons generally in U.S. history. The treatment of all of these topics made for good reading.

While we both enjoy a thought-provoking tangent in the overall narrative, we occasionally found the exploration of these supporting topics so deep that it took some work to maintain their relationship to the main thread. A good example is Farmer’s treatment of the fractious relationship between the Mormon settlers and the Native Americans in Utah Valley. As more of an observation than a critique, this section could be read as a stand-alone history of nineteenth-century Mormon/Indian relations in Utah Valley, with the transition between the focus on Utah Lake to Mount Timpanogos becoming a sideline. Another of these explanatory side trips, or secondary theses, is how the Mormon view of “Lamanites” changed from the status bestowed on them by the Book of Mormon to a more hostile and wary view once the Mormon pioneers actually began living alongside these culturally divergent groups who did not always cooperate with the Mormon willingness to “redeem” them as fallen Israelites.

Another side trip we found both interesting and personally challenging was the role of Fort Provo in the relationship between the settlers and the Indians. Our recollections of Fort Provo are as a youthful playground which obstructs the real historical meaning of the site—a tragically imposed meaning to the Utes who once peacefully resided and fished around the lake. It is only against a deeper historical background that the significance of the fort’s construction as signaling a drastic change in their lives comes into focus. Another ironic note is that the original settlers in Utah Valley were, in some respects, mavericks who weren’t always in line with Church headquarters’ thinking—whereas Utah Valley is now the bulwark of Mormon conservatism.

We found the early chapters about the Native Americans who lived in Utah
Valley and the Great Basin and their relationship to other Native American groups in the surrounding region to be very illuminating in terms of understanding the conflicts that eventually (and perhaps predictably) arose between all those residing and/or traveling through the area. Like most books on the history of Native Americans, it can be tough reading with a modern perspective, since there is no way of avoiding the fact that the triumphalism of Euro-Americans came at a horrific human cost, borne by those who made their homes in what are now our suburban backyards. Tying the abusive treatment of the native peoples to the abusive exploitation of the lake as a presumably infinite resource—a tragically mistaken assumption—was a very thought-provoking element of the book. It was sobering to read Farmer’s documentation that, not only have the current residents of Utah Valley shifted their focus from the lake to the mountain but also that modern Utes have reinvented their own history, orienting it away from the lake and toward the mountain as well.

The pages devoted to Eugene Roberts were entertaining. Farmer comments that “Roberts was by today’s standards a deviant Mormon,” individualized to the point that he was actually “an agnostic” (184). It is difficult to imagine someone whose educational focus was zealously centered on outdoor recreation as opposed to the traditional spiritual underpinnings of BYU that play such a visible role at BYU today. While BYU and the surrounding valley are far too densely populated to support Roberts’s vision for outdoor group activities today, we were reminded of positive group activities we’ve enjoyed in the local mountains. The history recounted in the book engenders respect for the complexity and important responsibility that today’s multi-use-directed managers face in the sustainable administration of our natural resources.

In the world of marketing everything—including our hometowns—it was interesting to read that, while the marketing tools have changed, the inflation of locally revered geographic landmarks has not. It was amusing to read about the history of place names and their artificial link to pseudo-Native American stories and language. However, once again, the main thread languished within the overly expansive historical account of the ubiquitous “Lovers’ Leaps” throughout North America. While tie-ins to Native Americans may have waned in fashion, the relationship of politicians and international corporations to the local yokels continues today with similar, at-times, laughable results. For example, Farmer’s description about the naming of Utah’s neighboring states Wyoming and Idaho verged on the ludicrous: “As early as 1842, the aesthetics of Indianisms had reached the point that a literary critic could argue that indigenous place-names could be constructed out of sounds when the original names could not be recovered. Presenting ‘war,’ ‘ran,’ and ‘ca’ as examples of euphonious syllables, the author assembled some new ‘Indian’ names ready for a place on the map: Warranta, Warcaran, Ranwarca, Rancawar, and
Cawarran. As ridiculous as it may seem, Congress actually approved such a name: ‘Idaho’“ (162–63).

More seriously, Farmer explores the deeper significance of creating names: Farmer quotes Whitman, then comments on the process of nomenclature: ‘Names are magic,’ wrote Whitman. ‘One word can pour such a flood through the soul.’ Poets value names for their compact power. Corporations reward consultants for naming their brands and products, for consecrating them. Names are chosen—often ceremonially—to carry deep meaning. Yet names can be the emptiest of words, mere vessels for meaning. Frequently they are nonsensical; and the quantity of nonsense just increases with time” (142). Our personal experiences with product-naming sessions provide ample proof that the grotesque/laughable/deadly serious issue is still as much alive today as it was in the past.

We would have liked more discussion devoted to the current era and how having Timpanogos as the favored icon affects development and even politics in Utah Valley. A conspicuous example is the 2008 proposal for a causeway across Utah Lake to increase development of the west lake shore and the current development of the former Geneva Steelworks area. While Farmer included some discussion on the demise of the lake as an ecosystem, this topic could have been expanded to include more details about the potential impact of current development trends on the environment.

In the end, the book has not really changed our perspective on Timpanogos or the other mountain peaks that ring Utah Valley but it has changed our perspective on the lake and other bodies of water along the Wasatch Front. A ride to Salt Lake City on the Frontrunner commuter train reveals how strenuously we’ve tried to engineer the natural corridor between Utah Lake and the Great Salt Lake. While the celebrated irrigation projects have allowed the Wasatch Front to prosper, we have lost much of the simple beauty of a meandering river and pristine lake shore as well as contributions that the indigenous fishermen could have provided to better protect these valuable resources had they been better accommodated within the onslaught of Manifest Destiny. The historical lesson reverberates every time the iconic Mount Timpanogas is veiled with pollutant haze during the winter inversions that plague the valley.

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