
A Rare Account of the Haun's Mill Massacre: The Reminiscence of Willard Gilbert Smith

Alexander L. Baugh

While researching and writing a chapter analysis of the Haun's Mill massacre for my dissertation, almost by chance I happened to come across an interesting and illuminating narrative of the October 1838 tragedy. The account, written as a reminiscence by Willard Gilbert Smith, was published in an obscure LDS family history and genealogy publication by the Fry Family Association, a copy of which was located in the LDS Family History Library in Salt Lake City. The fact that no actual manuscript of the narrative could be found in the LDS Church Archives or any other depository suggests that the reminiscence has merely been passed on through family connections.¹

Those familiar with the incidents surrounding the massacre will likely recognize the name of Willard G. Smith. Although only eleven years old at the time of the attack, he played a prominent role in the ordeal. He was the first Latter-day Saint to come out of hiding once the assault was over. As the first to return to the scene of the conflict, he was also the first to enter the blacksmith shop and observe the terrible human carnage. Sadly, there he found a wounded brother, and viewed the remains of his own father and a younger brother. One can only imagine what horrible images remained in his young, impressionable mind throughout the rest of his life.

Willard G. Smith was born on May 9, 1827, in Amherst, Ohio, the eldest of five children born to Warren and Amanda Barnes Smith. Upon hearing the restored gospel taught by Simeon Carter, the Smiths joined the Church

ALEXANDER L. BAUGH (alex_baugh@byu.edu) is an Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University. He received his BS from Utah State University, and his MA and PhD degrees from Brigham Young University. He is a member of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation board and editor of *Mormon Historical Studies*.

in 1831, then moved to Kirtland the following year. During the summer of 1838, the Smith family, consisting of Warren and Amanda, Willard, Sardius (sometimes given as Sardis), twins Alma and Alvira, and Ortencia, left Ohio bound for Missouri with the Kirtland Camp. However, because of problems encountered during the journey, the Smiths eventually fell in with a smaller group, consisting of ten families headed by Joseph Young. The company arrived at Haun's Mill in eastern Caldwell County on October 28. Here, they intended to remain for a few days before continuing the rest of the way to Far West. Two days after their arrival at the Mormon settlement, the fateful tragedy occurred.² Willard Smith's account is as follows:

With my two younger brothers, I was at the blacksmith shop with Father when without warning a large body of mounted men with faces blackened or painted like Indians rode up yelling and commenced shooting into the group. The men at the shop called for "quarters" but the mob paid no attention, continuing to shoot. The men then shouted to their wives to take the children and run for their lives.

We were surrounded on three sides by the mob, and the old mill and the millpond were on the other. The men ran for the shop, taking the little boys with them. My two little brothers ran with Father. But when I tried to enter the shop, my arms flew up and braced themselves against each side of the door, preventing my entrance. In my frenzy of fear, I again tried to enter the shop, and again my arms were braced to prevent my going in. After a third futile attempt, I ran around the corner of the shop and crawled into a pile of lumber, hiding as best I could.

Immediately, the mob began shooting at me and the splintered lumber flew all around. I crawled out and ran into an empty house on the slope near the pond. Here I found an old Revolutionary Soldier, Father McBride,³ who had been wounded and had crawled into a potato cellar under the floor of the house. Although I warned [him] that the mob would find and kill him, he begged for a drink of water and to be helped out of the cellar. I then went to the millpond to get him some water and was deliberately fired upon, the bullets spattering in the water like hail. I escaped without a scratch. (The mob did find this aged Veteran, and as he raised his hands in supplication for mercy, they were hacked and the fingers split down by a dull corn cutter.)⁴

I made the old gentleman as comfortable as possible and as the bullets were flying thickly around us, I ran from this house into another one close by. Here I heard sobs and whispered comfortings, and lifting the valance around the bed, I found six little girls huddled in fear. As the bullets had followed me into this house, I said to the little girls: "Come we must get out of here or we will all be killed." So we ran to the millrace which we crossed on a board reaching the woods on the other side of the pond—with the mob shooting at us all the way.

After our race for life, the little girls scurried off like prairie chickens into the brush and tall corn. Knowing that my father and two brothers were in the shop with the mob still firing, I took shelter behind a large tree where I could watch the activities of the mob with comparative safety. Finally, they ceased firing, dismounted, and went into the shop where they finished killing any whom they thought were not dead. From there, they went into all the cabins and tents destroying or taking groceries and furnishings. Then after taking all the horses belonging to their victims, they rode off howling like Indians.

As soon as I was sure they had gone, I started for the shop and was the first person to enter this holocaust, stepping over the dead body of my Father in doing so. I looked around and found by brother Sardis dead with the entire top of his head shot away, and my brother Alma almost lifeless lying among a pile of dead where he had been thrown by the mobsters who, evidently, thought him dead. I picked up Alma from the dirt and was carrying him from the shop when I met my Mother who screamed: "They have killed my little Alma." I replied: "No mother, but Father and Sardis are dead." I begged her not to enter the shop but to help me with Alma.⁵

Our tent had been looted, even the ticking cut and straw strewn about. Mother leveled the straw and covered it with some clothing and on this awful bed we placed Alma, cutting off his pants to determine the extent of his injury. After placing Alma on this improvised bed, my mother, Amanda Barnes Smith, a woman of dauntless courage and implicit faith in her Heavenly Father, found that the entire ball and socket of the left hip had been shot away leaving the bones about three or four inches apart. As soon as Alma was conscious, Mother asked him if he thought the Lord could make him another new hip, and he replied that if she thought he could, then he, too, believed it could be done. Then she called her remaining three children around the bed, and they knelt and supplicated the Lord for faith and guidance. Mother dedicated Alma to the Lord, praying that he be restored and made well and strong, but if this were not possible, to take him in his innocence. This picture of my Mother's implicit faith in her Heavenly Father remained as a living testimony to her children through their lives.

In her terrible sorrow and bereavement, her only help could come from divine guidance. By inspiration, her prayers were answered and she knew what to do. First she was directed to take the ashes from a fireplace and made a mild lye solution with which she bathed the gaping wound until it was as white as the breast of a chicken, with all the mangled flesh and bone gone. Then she prayed for further guidance and was prompted to take the roots from the slippery elm tree and made poultices for application. She asked me if I had seen any elm trees, and I replied that there were some on the banks of the stream feeding the millpond.

By this time, dark had descended upon this tragic scene, and when my Mother asked if I could take a shovel and get some of the roots, you can appreciate the terror which gripped my heart as an eleven-year old child. However, Mother assured me that the Lord would protect me and with a lighted torch of Shag-bark Hickory, I began by search.

Women and children were lamenting loss of husbands, fathers, and children; dogs were howling, and the cattle smelling fresh blood were bellowing, and no one could know how many mobocrats lurked in the menacing shadows. It required all the courage I could summon to take the shovel, and with the aid of a dim torch, follow the stream and secure the roots from which Mother made a soothing poultice. The story of the miraculous healing of Alma's hip has been related many times, but few realize the constant terror of the stricken family, unable to leave the State as Alma could not be moved because of his injured hip; yet they were repeatedly warned that if they did not leave, they would be killed.⁶

They were forbidden to call the family together for prayers or even to pray vocally alone. This Godless silence, Mother said, she could not stand, so one day, she went down into a corn field and crawled into a shock of the corn which had been cut. After carefully ascertaining that no one was within hearing distance, she said she "Prayed till her soul felt satisfied." As she left the shock of corn, although there was no one in sight, she plainly heard a voice repeating these words:

“That soul who on Jesu s hath leaned for repose
I cannot—I I will not desert to it foes.
That soul, ’though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.”⁷

From that moment Mother said she had no further fear of the mob, and she inspired us children with faith that if we conscientiously did right, the Lord would shelter us from harm. Although Alma lay in the same position for five weeks while the wound was healing, strength seemed to come to the limb suddenly. One day, when Mother was carrying a bucket of water from the spring, she was alarmed to hear the children screaming in the house. She rushed through the door to see them all running about the room with Alma in lead, crying “I’m well, Ma, I’m well!” Something had grown in to take the place of the missing ball and socket, and he was able to use the limb with no inconvenience. Although it was necessary in later years to pad the side of his trousers, he never suffered any pain or discomfort, although he filled a mission in the Sandwich Islands where he did a great deal of walking.

As soon as Alma was well enough that we could plan to leave Missouri, great difficulties presented themselves, one being that our horses had been confiscated by the mob. Finally, I went with Mother to Captain Comstock,⁸ leader of the mob, and she demanded the horses, one of which was in the field. He said we might have the animal by paying \$5.00 for its feed bill. This Mother could not do as all her money had been stolen by the mob. I admired her courage when she walked out into the field and tying her apron around the horse’s neck, led it home with no further objections.

Smith’s description of the massacre adds a number of interesting details to the historical record. His several attempts to secure his personal safety amid a barrage of constant gunfire further substantiates additional Mormon accounts of the fact that the Missourians were bent on wholesale murder and intentionally fired at innocent women and children, not just the Mormon defenders. The fact that only two children lost their lives, and only one child and one woman were injured is remarkable, considering the random shooting that occurred.

Young Willard’s heroism is especially noteworthy, particularly in the case of his efforts to assist Father McBride and the six young girls whom he helped reach safety. In recounting the incident with McBride, additional information is learned concerning what happened to him just before his death. McBride went into the blacksmith shop and was either wounded while inside, or while making an attempt to escape. During his flight, he made his way to a cabin where he secured temporary safety in a potato cellar, but because of the extent of his injury, could go no farther. While trying to make his own way to safety, young Willard came upon the injured man. Parched with thirst, McBride requested a drink of water, which Willard heroically provided. A short time after this incident, McBride was discovered and brutally killed.



Willard Gilbert Smith, date unknown. He was eleven years-old when he witnessed the attack at Haun's Mill and was the first person to enter the blacksmith shop following the assault. He lived a faithful life as a Latter-day Saint and was the first stake president of the Morgan Stake. Photograph courtesy Morgan County Historical Society.

Finally, Willard fully believed divine providence interceded in sparing his life, as noted in his description of some invisible force that prevented him from entering the blacksmith shop. Given the fact that of the thirty-five men and boys who can be identified as having entered the structure, only five escaped without being killed or suffering some degree of injury, he was indeed fortunate. Following the ordeal, he clearly recognized that had he gone into the shop, chances were, he would have been killed or severely wounded.

Willard lived a full and eventful life. As a young man in Nauvoo, he learned the trade of a stonecutter and worked on the Nauvoo Temple. In 1846, he became a member of the Mormon Battalion, arriving in Utah in 1848. He spent a short time in Oregon farming then returned to Utah where he lived until 1860 when he was called on a mission to England. In 1865 he was ordained a bishop and called to preside over the Saints in Morgan, Utah. In 1877 he was chosen as the first stake president of the Morgan Stake and served in that capacity for sixteen years. He died on November 21, 1903, in Logan, Utah, at the age of seventy-six.⁹

Notes

1. Willard G. Smith's account is found in Jeanine Fry Ricketts, ed., *By Their Fruits: A History and Genealogy of the Fry Family of Wiltshire, England, and Their Descendants, Including the Allied Lines of Harwood, Ramsden, Toomer, Thurston, Bosen and Maddox* (Salt Lake City: n.p., n.d.), 181-83. In 1998, I published a short article in the *Missouri Mormon Frontier Foundation Newsletter*, highlighting Smith's remarkable account. See Alexander L. Baugh, "A Rare Account of the Haun's Mill Massacre: The Reminiscence of Willard Gilbert Smith," *Missouri Mormon Frontier Foundation Newsletter* nos. 18/19, (Spring/Fall 1998): 1-4. Using the material from that article, Beth Shumway Moore recently republished the account in *Bones in the Well, The Haun's Mill Massacre, 1838: A Documentary History* (Norman, Oklahoma: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2006), 71-77. However, Moore failed to provide adequate author attribution, source citation, and background information regarding Smith's account. For these reasons I have chosen to republish the article with a few minor revisions.

2. Andrew Jenson, "Willard Gilbert Smith," in *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1901), 1:473; also Estella S. Tolman, "Willard Gilbert Smith," in Kate S. Carter, comp., *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1955), 4:516-17.

3. In a number of sources Thomas McBride was reported to have been a soldier in the American Revolution. This, however, is an error. The confusion apparently lies in the fact that he was born in 1776, the year the Revolution began, making him sixty-two years old at the time of the massacre. See James McBride, *Autobiography of James McBride*, typescript, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 5, 11.

4. Thomas McBride was killed by Jacob Rogers, a resident of Daviess County, Missouri.

5. At this point in the narrative, Smith appears to be citing information about the af-

termath given in other sources by his mother, Amanda Barnes Smith. See Amanda Barnes Smith, Reminiscence, in Edward W. Tullidge, *Women of Mormondom* (New York: n.p. 1877), 121-132; Emmeline B. Wells, "Amanda Smith," *Woman's Exponent* 9 (May 1, 1881): 181-82; 9 (May 15, 1881): 189-90; and Journal of Amanda Barnes Smith, typescript, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1-4.

6. With the assistance of his mother, in 1840, Alma Smith dictated a sworn affidavit about his observations and experiences at the time of the massacre. See Clark V. Johnson, ed., *Mormon Redress Petitions: Documents of the 1833-1838 Mormon Conflict* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 537.

7. "Hymn 82," *A Collection of Sacred Hymns for the Church of the Latter Day Saints* (Kirtland, Ohio: Printed by F. G. Williams & Co., 1835), 112-13, 7th stanza. Among present-day Mormons the hymn is known by the title "How Firm a Foundation."

8. Nehemiah Comstock was actually a captain of one of three companies that attacked the mill. Following the Mormon surrender at Far West, he oversaw the state militia occupation at Haun's Mill. Numerous Mormon sources cite his activities.

9. Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 1:473-74; and Tolman, *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 4:517.