



Mormon women and children preparing to board a train prior to their departure from Northern Mexico, bound for El Paso, Texas, where they hoped to find temporary refuge, July 1912. Photograph courtesy Church History Library.



One hundred years ago (1912), Mormon refugees fleeing northern Mexico, arrived at the El Paso train station which still stands today. Photograph by Kenneth R. Mays.

Finding Refuge in El Paso: Commemorating the July 1912 Mormon Exodus from Mexico

Fred E. Woods

LDS Church President Spencer W. Kimball has suggested that the word *remember* may be the most important word in the dictionary.¹ This seems especially true with regard to centennial anniversaries. A reflective and joyful commemoration occurred on July 28, 2012, as hundreds of citizens of El Paso and Latter-day Saints came together to remember the compassionate acts rendered by El Pasoans a century ago when several thousand LDS men, women, and children fled Mexico and crossed the U.S. border to safety. These Mormon refugees were in great need, their lives uprooted and threatened due to the tumultuous events of the Mexican Revolution.²

The abruptness of the Mormon departure from Northern Mexico is apparent in the journal entries of John Walser, who lived in Colonia Juarez. In April 1912 he wrote: “My family are well, and we feel grateful to God for His great blessings, and protection over us. Colonia Juarez looks like a flower garden. The fruit trees all blossoming.” However, in his next entry, recorded only a few months later in July, he wrote: “We were compelled to deliver up our arms to the rebel forces, in consequence of this we sent our wives and children to El Paso.”³ This unexpected change of events is further attested by seventeen-year-old Willard Whipple, who recalled: “I had played violin in an orchestra for a dance in the Juarez Stake Academy celebrating the 24th of July [Pioneer Day],” but four days later, the exodus had already begun and the Saints began to pour into El Paso.⁴ Hyrum Albert Cluff recounted the rapidity of the times: “July twenty-fourth, we held a dance and had quite a good time.

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Ribbon-cutting ceremony for the opening of the exhibit “Finding Refuge in El Paso” at the El Paso Museum of History, El Paso, Texas, July 28, 2012. L-r: Steven L. Olsen (senior curator of the LDS Church History Library), Julia Bussinger (director of the museum), Michael L. Hutchings (board member of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation), and Fred E. Woods, professor of Church History and Doctrine, BYU.

Photograph by Kenneth R. Mays.

July twenty-eighth, we received word to leave our homes. . . . We just walked out and closed the door and left everything.”⁵

Planning and preparations for the 2012 centennial commemoration began over a year earlier. Local El Pasoans Michael R. Mullen and Jared Tamez were helpful in planning various aspects of the commemoration, as well as Keith A. Ereksen, professor of history and the director of the Center for History Teaching and Learning at the University of Texas at El Paso, who helped sponsor the commemorative events via publicity and planning for the commemoration banquet. Karl T. Murphy, president of the LDS El Paso Mount Franklin Stake, was also a great support.

The centennial commemoration began with a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the opening of the exhibit “Finding Refuge in El Paso” at the El Paso Museum of History. The exhibit was sponsored by the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation (MHSF), the LDS Church History Library, BYU Religious Education, and the El Paso museum staff. Julia Bussinger (director of the



“Finding Refuge in El Paso” exhibit at the El Paso Museum of History, El Paso, Texas, July 28, 2012. The exhibit was planned and designed by Steven L. Olsen (senior curator of the LDS Church History Library), Fred E. Woods (professor of Church History and Doctrine, BYU), Michael L. Hutchings (Mormon Historic Sites Foundation board member), Robert Spencer (free-lance designer), and Barbara Angus (museum curator). Photograph by Kenneth R. Mays.

museum), Michael L. Hutchings (MHSF board member), Steven L. Olsen (exhibit designer and senior curator of the LDS Church History Library) addressed the audience at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Michael, Steven, Fred, Robert Spencer, a free-lance designer, and Barbara Angus, the museum’s curator, planned and designed the attractive exhibit, which consisted of a number of colorful panels depicting Mormon life in the colonies, the exodus, and the relief efforts by El Paso citizens. The displays were augmented by rotating digital images as well as bilingual texts and captions in both Spanish and English to meet the needs of these borderland peoples.

Immediately following the launch of the exhibition, a historical conference titled “The History of Mormonism in Latin America and the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands, was held at the El Paso Public Library. The conference was organized and chaired by Jared Tamez, a doctoral candidate in history at UTEP. Presenters included Barbara Jones Brown (“A Very Pitiable Sight”: Mexican Revolution, Mormon Exodus, and the Break-up of Polygamous Families”), Cathy Ellis (“A Miner’s Wife: Roberta Flake Clayton in Mexico and El Paso”), John Glaser (“Accommodating the Voice, Struggle,

Major General Dana J. H. Pittard (center), commander at Fort Bliss (the U.S. Army's second largest installation), was an honored guest during the commemoration. Photograph by Kenneth R. Mays.



and Identity of U.S. Latinos within Latter Day Saintism's Larger Narrative: Exploring the Community of Christ's Experience"), Mark Grover ("Zion, Lamanites, Outposts, and Converts: The Image of Latin America in the Church"), Daniel Herman, "The Mormon Legacy of Arizona's Rim County War"), Ed Jeter ("The Central States Mission: A Transnational, Mormon Space, 1885–1915"), Michael N. Landon ("Fruits of the Mormon Exodus: The History of the El Paso Douglas Street Chapel), Barbara Morgan ("Academia Juarez and Bilingual Education in Mexico"), Elisa Pulido ("From LDS Indigenization to Reunification: Mexico's Third Convention"),



Fort Bliss 1st Armored Division Band, conducted by First Sergeant Justin Ahrens. Photograph by Kenneth R. Mays.

John F. Cook, mayor of El Paso, performed a special guitar number at the commemoration. Photograph by Kenneth R. Mays.



and Jared Tamez, (“Gender and Mormon Worship in Early Twentieth Century Mexico”). The papers are currently being prepared for a book publication by the University of New Mexico Press.

While conference lectures were being given, hundreds of other El Pasoans enjoyed a self-guided tour of the Mormon exodus to El Paso exhibit, as well as community events, also sponsored by the El Paso Museum of History, in connection with its annual “Cowboy Days.” In the evening, the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation hosted a wonderful commemorative banquet. Scores of special guests and dignitaries attended the dinner, held on the campus of UTEP, which included El Paso’s mayor, John F. Cook, and Major General Dana J. H. Pittard, commander at Fort Bliss.

Immediately following the banquet, attendees were ushered into the beautiful UTEP Cinema Theater. Here, Michael Hutchings conducted a delightful program which included the singing of several stirring hymns by a Latter-day Saint combined stake choir led by Mary Lee Johns, and also special musical numbers performed by the Fort Bliss 1st Armored Division Band, conducted by First Sergeant Justin Ahrens. This impressive military cohort played two of the same musical numbers that were performed for the Mormon refugees in 1912.⁶ In addition, Richard E. Turley, Assistant LDS Church Historian and Recorder, discussed salient features of the Mormon experience in the colonies. Finally, Karl T. Murphy, President of the El Paso Mount Franklin LDS Stake, presented El Paso Mayor John F. Cook with a history of his family genealogy prepared by local LDS stake members.

The evening concluded with the premier showing of *Finding Refuge in El Paso: The 1912 Mormon Exodus from Mexico*, directed by Martin L. Andersen and co-produced by Fred E. Woods.⁷ The documentary was made possible through funding received by private donors, the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, and BYU Religious Education. Sources for the film included footage from the Library of Congress of the Mexican Revolution, period photographs taken by John Edward Wall (Wall had been appointed

by Junius Romney, Juarez stake president to document the exodus), as well as audio tapes of the 1912 Mormon refugees made over fifty years ago.⁸

This memorable, inspiring commemoration reflects the unselfish efforts provided by scores of people who offered their talents and their hands and hearts to help others remember and understand the great service rendered by the citizens of El Paso a century ago. The Latter-day Saints who made the trip from Utah, Mexico, and other locales to El Paso to participate in the commemoration learned that El Pasoans in general really have not changed with time. The words written by



Richard E. Turley Jr., Assistant LDS Church Historian and Recorder, gave the keynote address during the commemoration. Photograph by Kenneth R. Mays.

the LDS El Paso Relief Committee and published in the *El Paso Times* in the summer of 1912 seem most appropriate in again thanking these friendly citizens for their kindness and goodness: “May He who rewards all men according to their works do unto you and yours as you have done unto us.”⁹

Notes

1. Spencer W. Kimball, “Circles of Exaltation,” in *Charge to Religious Educators*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 8.

2. For an overview of the Mormon colonies in Northern Mexico see Thomas C. Romney, *The Mormon Colonies in Mexico* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938; reprinted Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005); B. Carmon Hardy, “The Mormon Colonies of Northern Mexico: A History, 1885–1912” (PhD diss. Wayne State University, 1963); Joseph B. Romney, “The Exodus of the Mormon Colonists from Mexico, 1912” (MA thesis, University of Utah, 1967); Michael N. Landon, “‘We Navigated by Pure understanding’: Bishop George T. Sevey’s Account of the 1912 Exodus from Mexico,” *BYU Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004): 63–101; and Joseph B. Romney, “‘The Lord, God of Israel, Brought Us out of Mexico!’: Junius Romney and the 1912 Mormon Exodus,” *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 208–58; The primary reason for Latter-day Saints migrating to northern Mexico was the persecution and prosecution of Mormon polygamists and their families. Between 1885–1906, approximately 4,500 Latter-day Saints lived in nine major Mormon colonies established in the two

northernmost Mexican states of Chihuahua and Sonora, which distribution was as follows: Diaz (750), Dublan (1,200), Juarez (800), Pacheco (275), Garcia (275), Chuichupa (275), San Jose (200), Oaxaca (64), and Morelos (625). See Romney, "The Exodus of the Mormon Colonists from Mexico, 1912," 2–3; and Romney, "Junius Romney and the 1912 Mormon Exodus," 211. El Paso Mormon historian Michael R. Mullen has also found evidence of at least one other settlement, and perhaps more.

3. John Jacob Walser, Journal, April 8, 1912, and July 28, 1912, in "My Life," compiled by Bonnie Simon, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, cited in Matthew G. Geilman, "Document Analysis Paper: The Exodus of the Mormon Colonies from Mexico, Summer, 1912," 3, unpublished document in possession of author.

4. Willard Whipple, "The Life of Willard Whipple" (Sunnyvale, CA: October 1977), 13–14, unpublished manuscript in the possession of the author. I express appreciation to Michael Mullen for bringing this source to my attention.

5. Hyrum Albert Cluff, Journal, in Nelle Spilsbury Hatch and B. Carmon Hardy, eds., *Stalwarts South of the Border* (California: n. p., 1985), 122.

6. The local El Paso paper reported: "In honor of the refugees [Mormons as well as other refugees] who are in El Paso . . . the 22d infantry band will give a special program in Cleveland square. The program . . . has been arranged by C. F. Waddington." Included among the nine musical numbers performed by the band for the refugees was "Napoleon's Last Charge—Descriptive March-Gallop," by Ellis Paull arranged by William Schulz; and "A Slippery Place—Comic Rag-March," by Phil M. Hacker, arranged by J. Bodewalt Lampe. See *El Paso Herald*, July 30, 1912, 2. These two numbers were performed at the commemoration by the Fort Bliss 1st Armored Division Band.

7. The documentary DVD is included in a combined package along with the book by Fred E. Woods titled *Finding Refuge in El Paso: The 1912 Mormon Exodus from Mexico* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2012).

8. A number of these images are included in the Mormon exhibit at the El Paso Museum of History.

9. "Colonists Express Their Thanks to Citizens," *El Paso Morning Times*, August 2, 1912, 1. The committee of five LDS Church leaders who signed the letter included Anthony W. Ivins, Henry Eyring Bowman, Orson Pratt Brown, Joseph E. Robinson, and Guy C. Wilson. Ivins likely penned the letter, since he presided over the committee and provided the first signature.