

Hidden history

Research paper turns spotlight on historic Utah Expedition

By BARBARA UNDERWOOD

William MacKinnon probably knows more about a state he has never visited than most people know about a state they may have lived in all their lives.

MacKinnon, a native New Yorker, graduate of Yale and Harvard and a Michigan resident since 1972, has written numerous articles about Utah and is a member of the state's historical society, but he has never been there.

"I have been through Utah on the train but I don't want my family to spend whole summers crawling through forts," he said recently.

His interest in Utah history is "my interest and I don't inflict it on anyone else," he added. "I don't go out and poke along the Oregon Trail."

MacKinnon, a Bloomfield Township resident, became interested in Utah when he majored in history at Yale University undergraduate. MacKinnon is general director of worldwide personnel administration for General Motors.

"I HAD to write a major paper during my last two years," he said. "My advisor was the curator of the

Western Americana Collection at Yale."

MacKinnon zeroed in on Utah when he learned that little had been written about the Utah Expedition of 1857-58, he said.

"James Buchanan took office (as president) in March 1857," he said. "In May he ordered an army expedition there to suppress what Buchanan believed to be a Mormon rebellion and to bring Utah back under federal control."

"I got interested in the origins of this (rebellion) and spent a lot of time going through documents," MacKinnon said.

"Yale tends to teach history through a critical examination of documents with a very strong emphasis on going back to original sources and drawing your own conclusions."

"I HAD total immersion in documents during my four years at Yale," he said. His entire paper, more than 100 pages, was on the origins of the Utah expedition.

MacKinnon believes the A grade he received on the paper was largely responsible for his magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa honors from Yale.

His research did not end with graduation from Yale. Since then he has pursued the manuscript collections in the New York Public Library, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the National Archives and Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Throughout his research, MacKinnon said one discovery always leads to another, resulting in "a great deal of detective work and great cooperation from those individuals, librarians and research organizations through whose manuscript collections I have been wading for the past 20 years."

Through the efforts of Bloomfield Township Library staff members, MacKinnon said he has "had access to about every library in the country."

AND BECAUSE he has no rigid time schedule, he finds the time he spends researching documents "fun rather than drudgery."

"It is fascinating for me to piece together many of the puzzles on which I have been working, especially since I find that generally no one has been working on these areas of interest before," he said.

The Utah Expedition of 1857-58

was "the most extensive and expensive" United States military expedition in the years between the Mexican and Civil wars, MacKinnon said. Some historians argue that the estimated cost of the expedition, ranging from \$14-40 million, was the "real beginning of the national debt," he said.

MacKinnon has published four articles and about 20 book reviews and is often asked to speak to various groups. His first published article, in the Utah Historical Quarterly in 1963, dealt with the origins of the Utah Expedition.

WHILE RESEARCHING that article, MacKinnon found, at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, a letter written to President Buchanan in 1858 from a captain serving with the expedition as the commander of a company of volunteer infantrymen.

The letter aroused his curiosity because until then he had thought the campaign was waged entirely by regular army troops.

After much digging, he located the personnel records of the volunteer group in the National Archives along with the journal of one of the officers.

Further digging led MacKinnon to

a series of letters written by the company's sergeant major to newspapers in St. Louis and Belfast, Ireland.

But the letters did not check out when compared to the sergeant major's stories to his company commander who passed them along to Buchanan.

ALL OF this research, which also involved checking the records of the British East India Company and the Royal British Army in London, has led MacKinnon almost to the end of his search for material on the volunteer battalion.

"But when I will get to the writing state is probably a matter of several years distance," he said. "I have enough to do for the next 20 or 30 years, but I have no timetable. I chip away at it on weekends, vacations or whenever I have time."

MacKinnon's interest in the Utah Expedition led to his interest in the volunteer battalion and while researching that he came across an anonymous 100-page poem, "Mormonland."

The satire on the army, the Buchanan Administration and Brigham Young was published in Boston in 1858. MacKinnon found one of the dozen or so existing copies in the Yale Western Americana Collection

and is engaged in research to determine its author.

"This poem has never been mentioned in the literature relating to the Utah Expedition," he said. "My intent is to develop the more than 300 footnotes that are required to annotate some of the meanings of the text and write an introduction to explain the poem's background and significance."

THE ANONYMITY of the author is both intriguing and vexing, MacKinnon said.

"I have tried to track (the author) down by examining the copyright papers filed in Boston in 1858 as well as the records of the now-defunct publishing house," he added.

"My thought is that this might be an unattributed work of James Russell Lowell because of some similarity to his earlier work and because of his interest in the Utah Expedition in the late 1850s while in Boston serving as editor of the newly-established 'Atlantic Monthly.'"

"This, however, is certainly only a hunch," MacKinnon said.

But he believes the poem was "obviously written by a Republican very familiar with Washington (who was) anti-Buchanan, anti-army, anti-Brigham Young and anti-Mormon," all attributable to Lowell.

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