Mormon History Association, June 8-10, 2016 Snowbird, Utah

Session 2C: Holy Theatre: Mormon Performance, Identity and Representation 2:00-3:30p

Performing Trek: Becoming "Pioneer Children" in the Digital Age

Tona Hangen, Worcester State University / Email: thangen@worcester.edu

Abstract:

The rise of Mormon pioneer re-enactment youth conferences, often just called "trek," is a phenomenon of recent vintage and increasing popularity. The practice mobilizes significant financial and human resources each year and has spawned a profitable business industry catering to trek participants and organizers. With some similarities to military reenactment and cosplaying in its emphasis on costuming, role play and historical storytelling, youth trek evokes and romanticizes selected aspects of the Mormon past to cement identity and commitment. It is a unique, recent, and remarkably uncorrelated form of Mormon public history, and raises key questions about the uses (and misuses) of Mormon history in contemporary contexts. Not unlike the early 20th century movement promoting Christian "fundamentals" in response to modernity, early 21st century Mormons – largely at the grassroots – have invented trek wholesale as a defining youth experience in response to certain cultural trends which they perceive as harmful to the formation of strong Mormon identity. Treks therefore valorize small fragments of the Mormon migration story, replaying them in perpetual syndication as acts of remembrance, commemoration and sacred theater.

My presentation will showcase trek cultural productions and explore how trek employs history and historical memory. I argue that trek is a potent example of lived religion and embodied ritual. Instead of receding farther into the past, the handcart pioneer experience has been yanked forward through the wormhole of time, where it has become a useful and highly adaptable vehicle for building Mormon identity in an era of rapid growth, global extension, and the proliferation of social media. Although it purports to be a trip backward in time, trek is very much a creation of the present cultural moment, and the consequences of this ongoing practice that simultaneously celebrates and denies aspects of the authentic Mormon past are worth close scholarly attention.

Performing Trek: Becoming "Pioneer Children" in the Digital Age

In 2009 and 2013 my stake organized a 3-day pioneer trek for youth conference. My local leaders' embrace of this version of youth conference and my own firsthand participation activated my historian brain even while I was fully immersed in being an adult leader and parent of participant youth.[1] Partly it was the novelty of the setting: I live in New England, not in the Wasatch front region, the sagebrush plains of Wyoming, or along anything remotely resembling a traditional handcart route. Instead hundreds of us took 20 fully loaded handcarts along 21 miles of a public rail trail through dense woodlands over 3 days (sharing it with startled cyclists), camping trailside at night, accompanied by a water truck and a porta-john company that invisibly delivered "privies" just ahead of our arrivals at predetermined stops.

Youth treks both inside and outside the actual historical landscape of the handcart companies have become commonplace: unusual enough to generate local news coverage, but frequent enough that a whole subculture has sprung up to support and celebrate it. A Mormon History meeting seems an appropriate place to cast a closer look at this emergent phenomenon, in part because of the nature of trek's relationship with the past ("it's complicated"). Overlapping on the one hand with reenactor culture, for example Society for Creative Anachronism cosplaying[2] and Civil War battleground "farbs," and on the other hand with role-playing or alternative reality gaming in imagined worlds (beginning maybe with Oregon Trail), youth trek evokes and romanticizes selected aspects of the Mormon past to perform Mormon identity and enhance youth commitment and socialization.

Trek is a unique and actually very recent form of largely uncorrelated LDS public history. Unlike Pioneer Day, it does not have a long history or backstory. There were some early versions in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly among BYU young adults. But trek in its current

---

[1] An early version of this paper appeared as a blog post for Juvenile Instructor, 7 August 2013, reposted 24 July 2015. http://juvenileinstructor.org/trek-public-history-digital-age/. I am greatly indebted for research assistance to Elizabeth Whatcott, and many thanks to my fellow panelist Megan Sanborn-Jones, and to the lively MHA audience discussion that followed our papers. The clips referenced in the paper are posted at http://tonahangen.com/projects/trek-links.

[2] Shukla Pravina, *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 131. She discusses SCA (medieval) cosplaying as "an outlet for creativity, aesthetic delight, and psychological release, achieved partly through the mandatory donning of historic garb" and identifies a strong social motivation, i.e. "one can express this truer version of oneself only within the communal context of an SCA event, with other members present."

form – typically a several-day stake-directed handcart journey for youth ages 14-18 with outdoor camping conducted by pretend "families" in costume – was rare before the 1997 Sesquicentennial celebrations commemorating the arrival of the first wave of LDS pioneers in the Salt Lake Valley, and in fact really only took root after the Church's 2004 purchase and restoration of Martin's Cove in southwestern Wyoming. Interestingly, it arose and gained traction bottom-up, not top-down. Until very recently, very little direction about treks came with explicit direction from Church headquarters. Like the early 20th century fundamentalist movement that invented and then promoted a series of Christian "fundamentals" in response to modernity with initial investment from Christian laymen, early 21st century Mormons – mainly at the grassroots – have invented trek as a defining youth experience in response to certain cultural trends perceived as harmful to the formation of strong Mormon identity in youth, especially in highly developed nations like the U.S., such as media saturation, overabundance of screen time and physical comforts, and heightened focus on the hypersexualization and display of bodies, particularly female bodies.

When I experience trek as a historian and scholar of Mormonism (rather than only as a participant and parent), I find it endlessly fascinating and a little unsettling which parts of the past lend themselves to this kind of activity and which parts are forgotten or discarded in order to adapt the past to the realities of the present. It's also impressive that there has been such a rapid and spontaneous convergence of these highly selective elements, so that treks look more alike than different regardless of where and by whom they are planned.[3]

---

[3] Treks valorize merely a small fragment of the Mormon migration story, and then replay those fragments in perpetual syndication, trek after trek. Handcart pioneers themselves were relatively few compared to those arriving by wagon or railroad (just 10 companies between 1856 and 1860, an estimated 3000 handcart pioneers in total, representing less than 4% of the 19th century Mormon migration to the Great Basin), often serving as an inexpensive way for new British and Scandinavian converts to emigrate to Utah. Modern treks further winnow even that handcart story to a few basic core elements, or reinvent new parts of the experience wholesale. Stake youth treks almost always include a women's pull after the men/ boys have been called away temporarily into the Mormon Battalion or on missions (although neither of those events actually happened during any of the handcart journeys)—sometimes with the men then observing the women from a distance—and some kind of symbolic Sweetwater River crossing to recall the winter rescue of the snowbound Martin and Willie handcart companies. Some include elaborate "Welcome to the Valley" celebrations at trail's end, stretches of "silent walks" to honor the dead, "angel pulls" where white-clad silent adults appear to assist along difficult terrain, the delivery of encouraging spiritual letters from parents, or the symbolic death and trailside burial of family members or flour-sack infants. Our stake trek began by assembling on the grounds of the temple to discuss how mournful it was to leave the Nauvoo temple

Example: montage of common elements, Torrance CA 9:38 – 13:57

Clearly there are a lot of directions we could go in considering the narratives constructed there. To quote Frederick Jameson, "It is for such objects that we may reserve Plato's conception of the 'simulacrum'—the identical copy for which no original has ever existed."[4] Let's begin simply – what is this? Why does it take this particular form? And why *now*?

It's fair to say the rising popularity of trek is not because it's cheap or easy. Quite the contrary. Our stake, for example, shares its two dozen expensive Amish-made handcarts with several other neighboring stakes, requiring warehousing in the off season. Over a year's worth of work goes into arranging for permits, water, sanitation, food and camping accommodations for close to two hundred people, and involves dozens and dozens of people in arranging and performing music, printing materials, providing trek swag, planning activities, and performing costumed portrayal of historical Mormons. All this expense and hoopla has its detractors. One blogger complained: "Thank goodness they did not have this nonsense when I was a kid…. The worst part of it all is that our stake is paying some company $20,000 [- $50,000, *or more*] to come and walk around on their land in silly outfits. … I do not need to go gallop around in the sand and wind for 3 days to appreciate what the pioneers went through for months. I already appreciate it."[5] One leader's detailed description conveys the scale of the logistics, and also a less cynical sense of the "why" behind the mobilization of such resources. Blog commenter "Duane" describes:

> We provided LOTS of support. For 150 kids, we had around 70 adults. A Ma and Pa for each group of 8-10 kids, a few leaders trekking along, and all the rest were mostly invisible. Each company (a third of the group) had 3 medical support members and a ham radio person. An additional 2 nurses at base camp with relief tents. Close to a thousand gallons of extra water, hundreds of pounds

---

behind (although none of the handcart companies departed from Nauvoo in winter and most had never even seen the Nauvoo Temple, usually travelling directly from their home countries to Iowa City for outfitting), just further examples of invented / hybrid story traditions.

[4] Quoted in Richard Handler and William Saxton, "Dyssimulation: Reflexivity, Narrative, and the Quest for Authenticity in 'Living History'," *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 3 (August 1988), 242-260, p. 242.

[5] Abe "Cheeseboy," "Mormon Youth Treks are LAME!!!" The Blog O'Cheese 6 April 2008, http://theblogocheese.blogspot.com/2008/04/mormon-youth-treks-are-lame.html

> of ice, 11 ATVs, and fueled vehicles with navigators pre-set to local hospital. We also had some ingenious logistics that kept most all of it out of sight from the kids. It was a ton of work. But every one of us that saw them helping their neighbors by pushing a second or third cart up a difficult hill (some singing between grunts), camped in their families at the end of the trail, sack racing and tug-of-warring with all the might their tired bodies could muster, kicking up a mile-high cloud of dust at the final night's dance, and bearing testimony of Christ and their legacy of faith with tears streaking their dusty sunburned faces, thought it a small price.[6]

Though numbers are impossible to come by, it's clear that many American stakes now pull off this kind of event routinely, and that they happen in many places outside the U.S. as well, including examples from Europe, Taiwan, Mongolia, and Australia. It's obviously become big business. A whole cottage industry has sprung up to support Mormon trek, including exuberant online merchandising, DIY tutorials from Mormon bloggers, memes, and trek-related Pinterest boards.

The "trekonomics" are significant, though unlike Civil War reenactors, having homemade or rustically thrifted approximations for trek costumes is actually encouraged, rather than paying premium dollar for historical accuracy in one's accouterments. The recommended trek costume for women/young women could conceivably consist of a calico sunbonnet, a thift-store blouse, a long skirt worn over hemmed scrub pants, and a simple apron. Men/young men wear a striped or plaid cotton shirt with the top part of the collar removed, a pair of store suspenders, a straw, cloth or felt brimmed hat (no cowboy or baseball hats) and khaki pants. Both men and women are instructed to wear well-broken hiking shoes or sneakers. Youth and leaders dress basically alike. Trekkers trade their everyday clothing for this temporary wardrobe, transported in a humble home improvement or food storage 5-gallon bucket. Shukla Pravina helpfully points to a key distinction between one's *dress* – which communicates "who we are" and "establishes [one's] individual identity within a cultural context" versus *costume*, i.e. "the clothing

[6] John C., "Learning The Wrong Lessons," *By Common Consent*, 10 June 2008 https://bycommonconsent.com/2008/06/10/learning-the-wrong-lessons/#comment-113217

of who we are not," designed to express a "performance identity."[7] There is a definite, and recognizable, universal Mormon trek costume which evokes elements of the 19th century without being true to it in almost any way.

Clip 2 – Ashburn GA (note "authenticity" language) 0:00 – 2:52

Trek merchandising and Mormon social networking has helped standardize this costume across the church, and probably so has the LDS church's inevitable but very recent effort to correlate trek planning and practices. It published a leaders' handbook in 2015 outlining official guidelines and policies, produced three professional "training videos" posted on the youth website of lds.org centered on a fictional young woman's experience attending trek, and has provided or promoted several Church-owned sites on which trek can be staged.

1) The costuming suggests a performance, is it? … Performance can actually be a mode of knowing about the past, a form of embodied historiography.[8] Charlotte Canning writes that performing history "can demonstrate aspects of and ideas about history that are less possible in print. It can encourage considerations of the gestural, the emotional, the aural, the visual, and the physical in ways beyond print's ability to evoke or understand them."[9] Some parts of trek are definitely scripted, expected, and depend on rote learning. Drawing on Diana Taylor's work on the creative liminal gap between the archive and the repertoire, we can say that trek performs a vital act of cultural transmission each time one happens. Trek provides a reasonably challenging coming of age / initiation (even adoption) into an imagined community. Through it, young (and indeed all participating) Mormons orient themselves to both Mormon past(s) and present(s) by conforming to cultural expectations and playing their "proper" roles in order. Just as Pioneer Day celebrations over the years have generated and perpetuated Mormon folk identity, so the recent invention of trek also is a form of contemporary Mormon "ethnogenesis."[10] Trek participants literally model Mormon peoplehood. They reorganize

---

[7] Pravina, *Costume,* 3-4.
[8] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). Quoted in Scott Magelssen, *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), p. 7-8.
[9] In Magelssen, *Simming*, p. 44, see note 51.
[10] The term is Eric Eliason's, from *Celebrating Zion: Pioneers in Mormon Popular Historical Expression* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas Austin, 1998).

themselves into pioneer "companies" and named families and assume mock sibling and parent/child relationships. Trek's fictive kinships not only imitate but *constitute* new and sometimes quite powerful social and quasi-familial connections that may last long beyond the experience itself.

2) Trek also shares some characteristics with historical reenactment, especially as it retraces (sometimes on precisely the same ground) an epic historical journey and replays certain pieces of an actual historical past. Of course that replaying is a creative mash-up that playfully recombines historical elements into a new & therefore non-historical narrative, so it's not a reenactment in a true sense. But it carries some of the same weight and has some of the same core purpose, that of coming to terms with the past (in German: *Vergangenheitsbewaltgung*). Reenactment, Vanessa Agnew notes, "indulges the twin passions of work and play, which are generally divorced from each other. It licenses dressing up, pretending and improvising, casting oneself as the protagonist of one's own research, and getting others to play along." Also like trek, reenactments is in a renaissance moment, with greater popularity, followers, and market entanglements in recent years. Although they generally unfold with fidelity to a known past, reenactments also emancipate the reenactors who "select their own past in reaction to a conflicted present." In particular, "reenacting an earlier journey may… be a gesture of utopianism as well as one of witnessing and mourning."[11] Her observations seem quite fitted to how trek functions and also how it distorts the past through its 21st century LDS lens, and how its participants interpret the experience for themselves. [12]

3) Trek also resembles aspects of the practice of living history, particularly in its concern with authenticity, or at least with what Handler and Saxton have called "token isomorphism" – which can definitely be seen in trek's reproduction handcarts, its faux-Western/pioneer costuming, and its concision in reducing a trip of many weeks into a highly plotted story that unfolds over just a few days. They also note how studiously living historians ignore the

---

[11] Vanessa Agnew, "Introduction: What is Reenactment?" *Criticism* 46, no. 3 (Summer 2004), 327-339, p. 327-329.

[12] John C., "Learning the Wrong Lessons." This post has a lengthy comment thread of "trek run amok" stories detailing cringe-worthy episodes of physical deprivation and emotional manipulation on various youth treks, with many of the commenters pillorying trek as self-indulgent, disingenuous, "cult-like" or borderline abusive.

"present-day cultural routines that underpin the production of particular simulations. In other words, they do not see living history as a genuine aspect of present-day culture," which of course it is. [13]

4) One of the scholars whose work I found most helpful as I looked into trek was Scott Magelssen, whose recent book *Simming* borrows that term from the digital world, where it's used to signify online text-based role-playing games or creating worlds in chat room or in virtual environments (Second Life, SimCity, The Sims), often employing a digital avatar personae.[14] Magelssen instead reframes "simming" to mean any "bounded action that bears performance reference to another action… an embodied practice involving its participants in a simulated, three-dimensional physical environment."[15] Magelssen studies, for example, purposefully uncomfortable tourism experiences like simulating a Mexican border crossing or a nighttime museum event that simulates antebellum slaves escaping north, along with the simulated Afghan city in the California desert used for military training and community disaster preparedness training exercises. Such experiences might serve one of a variety of cultural functions, including invocation or effigy, reification, aesthetic beauty, witnessing, time travel, or even sandboxing or "pre-simulation." Simming events have to be "like enough" the original (or the imagined original) to work as intended, but instead of replaying or reenacting, simming participants "create new experiences that draw on, play with, wink at, or otherwise comment on the events they reference" without getting hung up on faithfulness to the original.[16]

A blogger captures this referential perspective well:

> "Some people think of trek as an actual re-enactment, which honestly, it's not. You'll be told the women's pull is to signify when the Mormon Battalion left to fight in the war with Mexico. But you know, that didn't happen when they were pulling handcarts, that happened when they were crossing the plains with wagons. Because of trek clothes, we think that's how the pioneers dressed, but

[13] Handler and Sacton, "Dyssimulation," 243.
[14] Scott Magelssen, *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 191.
[15] Magelssen, *Simming,* 3-5.
[16] Magelssen, *Simming,* 9-10, 184.

> if you do an ounce of research, you realize 'trek clothes' aren't much like the real thing. Really, trek is an opportunity to rip off your name brands, get rid of technology, get down to who you really are inside, get to know people you wouldn't have met otherwise, do some hard work, maybe learn some new skills, hear some inspiring stories…, wonder if you are faithful enough and if your testimony is strong enough to do today what God asks of you, and make any course correction in your life to get you to where you want to be. Trek really is an outstanding experience, even if it's not a true re-enactment."[17]

Many youth activities put youth in the roles of consumers and spectators. In contrast, handcart trek compels active participation and awakens historical empathy and imagination and ideally, devotion. Instead of receding farther from the present into the past, the handcart pioneer experience has been yanked forward through the wormhole of time, where it has become a useful and highly adaptable vehicle for building Mormon identity in the digital age.

Yet even though trek aspires to be a technology-free throwback to the 19th century, it's very much a creature of its age. It never really unplugs from technology. Stake trek websites build anticipation, share information, and permit online registration. Trek logistics involve cell phones, GPS, radio communication, and sophisticated photography (the drone!). Compilation videos, slide shows, Facebook albums and the like capture the experience in digital formats designed for hashtagging and social media sharing.

Two vivid examples:

Clip 3: Mesa Central Stake 17:45 – 20:18 (the drone!)

Clip 4: Joplin MO Mission Call by Pony Express 0:00 – 2:25 (ironically, to Salt Lake) – a brilliant yet bizarre mashup of filmed mission-call openings and trek videography that only really "happened" because a digital camera was there to catch it.

---

[17] "What is Trek?" *Buns and Baskets*, 17 August 2014. http://howtodresslikeapioneer.blogspot.com/2014/08/what-is-trek.html

A final point I want to make highlights some of the racial aspects of this cultural phenomenon. Whether conscious or not, I some of the impulse behind the surge in treks at this historical moment is assimilative and reactionary, substituting a (primarily white) historical backstory for the diverse real histories of the Church's millions of members. Trek provides a conveniently coherent, sanitized, simplified, Mormon genesis story delivered at a formative time in a young person's life. It generates unity but at the expense of diversity, performing whiteness in response to the growing nonwhite membership of the Church in the 20th and 21st century. Though probably with the best of intentions, trek denies the authenticity of other Mormon histories, other Mormon pasts, by making only the white/European handcart pioneers the heroes of our collective story. This is as much an intentional forgetting as an intentional remembering.

Eliason's observation remains truer than ever: "How Mormons come to conceptualize the relationship between a pioneer heritage and a new world religion potentiality tells us much about who we are now and has profound implications for the shape of Mormon culture to come… Teasing out a usable Mormon historical past that does not seem to privilege white Americans' experience will be difficult."[18]

There are carnivalesque elements of trek, too, even "ethnomasquerade"[19] or dressing as the Other. One stunning example came up recently in a Facebook thread about trek, where a woman recounted: "The last trek one of my daughters went on also featured an Indian raid …. What [some male priesthood leaders] did at each camp site was rush in and make all kinds of noise and chaos and went through all their belongings like they were being raided. The kids literally had no privacy—adult men looking through my daughter's clothes, literally her underwear, searching for electronic/digital devices to confiscate…. True story. I could not

[18] Eric A. Eliason, "The Cultural Dynamics of Historical Self-Fashioning: Mormon Pioneer Nostalgia, American Culture, and the International Church," *Journal of Mormon History* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2002), 139-173, p. 140, 162.
[19] Agnew, 330. Citing Kader Konuk, "Ethnomasquerade in Ottoman-European Encounters: Reenacting Lady Mary Wortley Montagu." *Criticism* 46, no. 3 (2004): 393-414.

believe my ears when my daughter was back home and telling me about Trek."[20] Some things should *not* be reenacted, period.[21]

An even more interesting "redface" variation on trek is a Book of Mormon themed youth conference called Quest. Now rather than imitating pioneers of whom we have a solid photographic and firsthand documentary record, participants craft an entirely imagined past, its geography and landscape and borrow its visual markers straight out of Hollywood and Mormon pageants. I have a few images from stake websites, Pinterest boards, and personal blogs to show you.

And lastly, without further comment – this year's trailer for a stake in Arizona doing Quest. (Clip 5)

To conclude, let me invoke David Rieff's new book, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies*. He has said that "History is really about the past. [Collective] memory is about using the past for the purposes of the present, or for some group in the present."[22] When writing about historical reenactment, Alexander Cook agreed that they "are not in any direct sense 'about' the period or events being reenacted. Rather, they are about a modern set of activities that are inspired by an interest in the past. They are about placing modern individuals in dialogue with a historical imaginary."[23] Trek (and its related spinoffs) do just that, and in so doing they generate new webs of meaning for their participants and for interested scholars of both contemporary and historical Mormons.

---

[20] Rachel Moore Hamrick, commenting on a closed-group Facebook thread about trek, women's pull, and authenticity. Feminist Mormon Housewives Society, OP by Lindsay Hansen Park, 10 April 2016.
[21] James D. Bigley, "Living History and Battle Reenactment: The Dilemma of Selective Interpretation," *History News* 46, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 1991), 12-18.
[22] Rieff, speaking to Slate on 5/13/16.
[23] Alexander Cook, "The Use and Abuse of Historical Reenactment: Thoughts on Recent Trends in Public History," *Criticism* 46, no. 3 (Summer 2004), 487-496, p. 494. See also Agnew, 330.