

The Fort on the Firing Line

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Chapter 1

In that silent and sunburned solitude two men appeared from the mouth of the canyon, one of them on a horse, the other afoot. Astonished eyes followed them through the mist of heat and distance while they prospected far out across the valley, to return and disappear in the mountain when the sun hung low in the west. Next day a little company of men emerged from that same canyon, made their way through the sagebrush along the tracks made by the two the day before, and when they reached a stream, they stopped and fell to work at once as if with premeditated plan to make that their permanent abiding place. Nothing like that had ever happened there in all the known ages of the past-white men coming without invitation or permission to inhabit Salt Lake Valley. The Indians gazed in astonishment, dragging their half-filled net of crickets and grasshoppers idly behind them. They must go over there; they must see these white invaders with their animals and wagons and other strange gear. In three days a long stream of wagons came pouring out of that canyon - fifty - seventy-five - maybe a hundred! And a hundred and fifty-a hundred and seventy-five-maybe two hundred white men. They drove their teams of oxen and horses and mules to where the little company had stopped, and spread out there like an ant-hill in a big camp, buzzing with work and strange preparations. That company of white men from the canyon knew that as invaders they would be resisted and possibly attacked by the people of the land. They began therefore at once to build a fort, a hollow square of adobe houses to serve as a place of defense while they established themselves firmly in the area around it.

In the autumn of that year, while the colony worked early and late with an aggressiveness to arouse surprise if not fear in the minds of the staring natives, more people began stringing out of that canyon from which the first had come. Along the twin-wheel tracks worn in the sagebrush the long procession coming, coming-a hundred wagons, maybe more. A thousand people-maybe two thousand! To the Shoshone and his brother-tribes this was a most serious matter, a grave throat to their further possession of the precious hunting grounds which their fathers had given them. But, alas, they lacked the essential strength of union; they had always preyed one on another and still cherished deep hurts and bitter differences. Also they lived like wolves in poverty, never having reserve supplies, but devouring what they found from day to day. To form an effective union and resist the wondrous organization which these intruders operated, was far beyond anything they had learned to do. Through the long cold winter the Indians drew their scanty rabbit-skin robes around them and nursed the little fires in their wickiups while they talked of the adobe fort and its determined builders. From some of their people who begged and spied at the fort, they learned that the strangers wanted to be friendly; but friendly or not, they had come to take the

country; and if more of them came, they would no doubt build another fort and a town around it. When the summer came again, the summer of 1848, other companies did come stringing out of that canyon, startling numbers of them and coming to stay. Scouts from the fort went spying out the country north and south for hundreds of miles, and a good-sized company of them made their way down into Sanpete Valley, built a fort, and made there another beginning a hundred and fifty miles southeast of Salt Lake. Very soon after that another strong company came out from the city springing up around the adobe walls, put up a stockade for defense near Utah Lake, and began there another center to spread in the regions around it. Something had to be done or the Indians would lose their inheritance. With their poor understanding of how weak and disorganized they were, and how potent the arm of law and government among the settlers, they came in the nighttime and drove away a herd of horses and cattle from the new stockade at Fort Utah (Provo). With the coming of daylight, they saw the men of the fort hot on their trail. They hurried into Rock Canyon and made the best defense their weapons and their understanding afforded, killing two or three white men, but losing so many of their own men that they scurried as best they could for the shelter of the brush and willows towards the lake. How sternly they were undeceived by the fight which followed; twenty or more of their braves fell; and the few remaining sneaked terrified away. The families of the dead, facing winter with nothing to eat, saw no better way to survive than to throw themselves on the mercy of their victorious enemies, and when they had been fed and treated with kindness in Salt Lake till spring, the report of it tended to hush the rising call for war.

The year 1851 the Mormon chief, Brigham Young, sent a colony to build a fort and establish a place called Parowan, three hundred miles south of Salt Lake. These long and aggressive strides to the south, matched by other aggressive movements to the north, caused Chief Walker of the Utes to consider with alarm what was happening to his country, but he considered, too, the warm friendship of these strange white people, and their eagerness to help the Indians, and instead of reacting with hostile gesture, he made a friendly call on the Mormon chief, telling him where other towns could be made, and encouraging the Mormons to spread out and build up the country. The sprawling frontier, extending now in a ragged line for hundreds of miles through wild valleys, rock-ribbed canyons, and over-timbered mountaintops, was reinforced at its most important vantage points with forts, stockades, and other structures of defense. Trusting eyes of children, of the old and the defenseless, peered trustingly from the portholes of sheltering walls at the silent wilderness around them from which unfriendly Indians might appear at any time. It was only the brave or the venturesome who went alone or unprotected beyond the barriers, for whether or not there was open declaration of war, there was always danger. Chief Walker had made wordy professions of friendship, but he was not supreme even with his own tribe, and he might at any time change his mind. The fort was the indispensable protection to each new step farther into the big wilderness, and the extending zone of these protections radiated out from that first adobe fort at Salt

Lake City, like the ring-waves in a pool of water from a falling stone. This fort-zone and its firing line was destined to mature in the north and the west, but in the south and east it was to focus at last in one faraway corner, there to build the last fort in Utah.

This age and its way of fighting had a tremendous lure, not only captivating mature men, but also infusing into its own children an undying love for the thrills of its peculiar warfare. One of its enthusiastic devotees was Peter Shirts, the Daniel Boone of the Rocky Mountains. In the remoteness of the upper Pahreah, east of what is now Kanab, he with his wife and three children turned their house into a fort and fought Indians there all winter instead of moving away for safety as their few neighbors had done. With a love like that for the firing line, it is only to be expected that Shirts would follow it on and on, and that he will be found again trying to find it in the faraway. Chief Walker of the Ute tribe, did change his mind about that peace policy. When he considered the wholeheartedness with which the Mormons accepted his invitation to spread and build new towns, he raised a howl of protest against them, and incited his people to attack the new settlements. In 1853-54, he and his people carried on the war with such fury that some of the new forts had to be abandoned. Yet, however dark they made the picture for the struggling settlers, it was more dark still for the Indians, and they began soon to realize that they were not prepared for war. It was not only unprofitable, but also disastrous, more so to them than to the settlers whom they robbed, and Walker was glad to meet President Young at Chicken Creek and agree to a treaty of peace. That was the official end of the war, though outlaw bands of Indians continued to make raids on livestock and attack unprotected travelers, especially in the southeast. Yet even before the Walker War, and right soon after the settlement was begun at Parowan in 1851, and a little start made on the Santa Clara much farther south, these hardy frontiersmen began gradually to be aware that off to the southeast of them lived a tribe of Indians who were natural robbers, considering it folly, to make peace with any people having valuable substance of which they could be despoiled.

The sturdy explorers and settlers of what came to be called the Dixie Country, found themselves looking away with apprehension at the blue profile of Buckskin Mountain in Arizona. From the dark shadows hovering above it ten thousand inveterate robbers seemed to gaze in eager anticipation at the precious teams and milch cows the settlers had brought with them. These robbers, the Navajos, struck always where they were least expected, and they had made such careful preparation for retreat, they got far away in the rocks before their raid was discovered. Elusive and wary as coyotes by ages of training in their vocation as robbers, they were not striking in reprisal for any wrong they had suffered nor because their country was being invaded, but in long and well-planned expeditions from their homeland they were intent on getting horses, sheep, cattle, anything they could use or sell for gain. They proved to be a more crafty and a more implacable enemy than any the Mormons had encountered in all the mountains and valleys from Salt Lake City to the Santa Clara. While this tribe from the southeast wore their plundering trails deeper every month, the suffering settlers along the border appealed to their leaders for wisdom and a way to survive. Walker and his braves had been pacified, and comparative peace restored to the settlements, but this Navajo menace seemed ever to be getting into better gear for greater activity. The Mormons had offered peace to the Utes, and sued for peace before taking up arms against them. The logical and only consistent thing now was to send messengers into

the distant Navajo country, inviting them to be good neighbors and to have good neighbors, to come over and trade and to live in peace. These messengers were also to visit the Hopis, a very friendly and industrious people whom the Navajos had hated and plundered. But behold, to the Navajo, his most profitable neighbor was the one on whom he could prey to the best advantage. Jacob Hamblin, a great lover of the Indians and an ardent advocate of peace, made the long, hard journey over desert and mountain and river into the Navajo country with his offering of good will to this nation who had been despoiling his people. He was accompanied by Thales Haskell, George A. Smith, Ira Hatch, and others, and they toiled from place to place, seeking in vain to get a hearing. This kind of plea to the Navajos meant nothing but weakness and fear. And when the Navajos observed that these peace envoys consorted with the weak, despised Hopis who were always cringing and pleading for peace, they concluded that the Mormons and the Hopis were no doubt alike, timorous and fearful. The Navajos saw no need to be friendly with any people of whom they were not afraid. Especially should they refuse any obligation of friendship to any tribe or nation on whom they could enrich themselves by plunder. Haughty and vain in their declaration that they had no fear of white men who had failed miserably for generations to conquer them, they spurned and rejected these offers of peace. Hamblin and his companions toiled on from camp to camp till they knew by the sullenness and frowns of the Navajos that their lives were in danger if they went on. They looked for a protected place to stop for the night, resolved if they could to get back to the river and return home. The dry unrelenting breath of desert beat against their tanned faces, and the smell of sheep came to them from hills that had been grazed bare. Distantly to the south the gray monotony of desert was relieved by a blue dome of the San Francisco Mountains, but in all other directions they saw the heat legions dancing above the dull stretch, and mocking images of mirage where the skyline melted away. Writing of it in later years Jacob Hamblin said, "The very heavens seemed to be brass above us. With dark visages and never a word to indicate their intention, the Navajos hemmed the company up against a bluff, compelling them to climb to a little tableland above, where they kept vigil till morning. While they prepared in the morning to move, a young Navajo approached George A. Smith, and in a gesture of friendship asked to take his gun. It had become an aphorism that the Indian who is trusted will not betray the trust, and with this in mind young Smith, trusting and generous, handed over the gun. With the weapon in his hand, and without a word of warning, the Navajo turned the gun on its owner and shot him near the heart.