

Porter Rockwell the “Destroying Angel”

Orrin Porter Rockwell

by Lawrence Cummins

Listening to the Prophet Joseph Smith tell the story of the angel and the hidden plates, young Porter Rockwell’s adventurous nature was stirred. The Smiths and Rockwells, frontier neighbors in Manchester, New York, often visited each other.

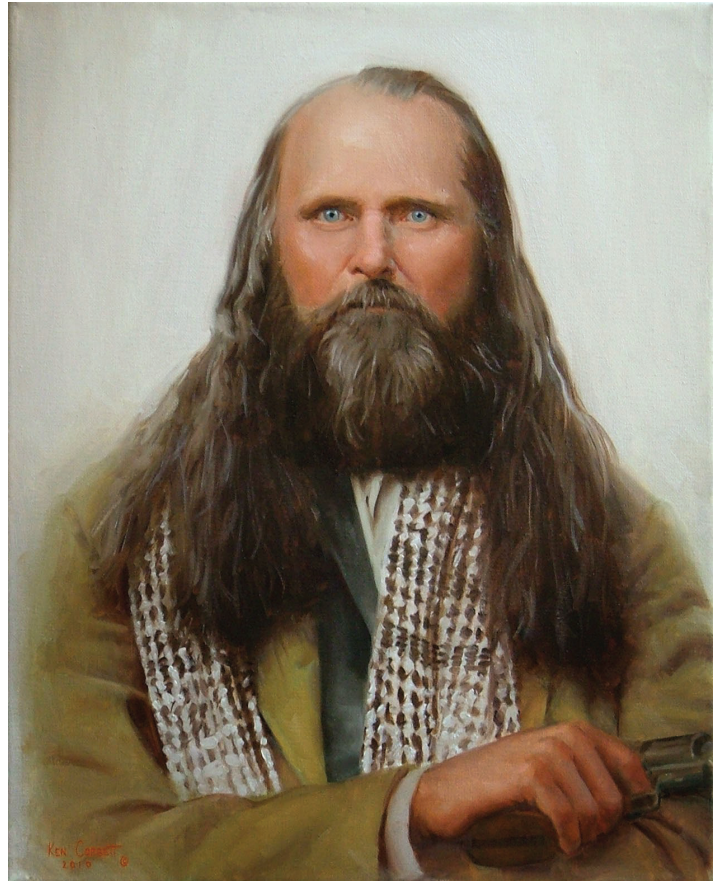
Although Porter was eight years younger than the Prophet, a bond of friendship between the two was quickly formed. Later, when Joseph needed money to publish *The Book of Mormon*, Porter picked berries by moonlight—after his chores were done—and sold them. When there were no berries to pick, he gathered wood and hauled it to town to sell. The money he earned was given to the Prophet.

The two families remained loyal to each other, and when the Smiths moved to Fayette, New York, the Rockwells followed. Sixteen-year-old Porter was probably the youngest member of the first group to be baptized into the Church, after it was organized in 1830.

When the Fayette Branch of the Church moved to Kirtland, Ohio, Porter went with them. However, his stay there was short. Porter was sent with the first group of Saints to Jackson County, Missouri, the intended central gathering place for members of the Church. The elders often met at Porter’s home to discuss ways of protecting the Saints from the lawless Missouri mobs who were persecuting them.

While he was in Missouri, Porter became a crack marksman with a gun. And he made several trips to Liberty Jail to take food and comfort to Joseph Smith and his counselors when they had been illegally jailed.

Porter volunteered to remain in Missouri until all the Saints had made their way to Illinois. Because of his fearlessness, a number of unfounded charges were made against him, and he became a hunted man. In defense of his faithful and valiant friend, the Prophet Joseph said, “Orrin Porter Rockwell, who is now a fellow-wanderer with myself [is] an exile from his home, because of the murderous deeds, and infernal, fiendish dispositions ... and unrelenting hand of the Missourians. He is an innocent and a noble boy. May God Almighty deliver him from the hands of his pursuers. ... Let the blessings of salvation and honor be his portion.” (*History of the Church*, 5:125.)



When the former Governor of Missouri, Lilburn Boggs, was shot, Porter Rockwell was charged with the crime. Without any evidence of his guilt, Porter was taken prisoner and kept in an unheated dungeon without any bedding for over nine months. He was given food that even the dogs refused to eat. Without his natural stamina, Porter never would have survived the ordeal.

One day a Sheriff Reynolds came to the jail and offered Porter a large sum of money if Porter would take him to Joseph Smith so that the Prophet could be captured. “I will see you damned first,” responded Porter.

After Porter’s release from jail, he walked most of the way to Nauvoo, Illinois. He arrived at Joseph Smith’s house on Christmas Day in 1843, as the Prophet and his friends were having a supper party. “During the festivities,” Joseph recounted later, “a man with his hair long and falling over his shoulders, and apparently drunk, came in and acted like a Missourian. I requested the captain of the police to put him out of doors. A scuffle ensued, and ... to my great surprise and joy untold, I discovered it was my long-tried, warm, but cruelly per-

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secuted friend, Orrin Porter Rockwell.” (History of the Church, 6:134–135.)

It is believed by those who knew Porter Rockwell best that it was on this occasion that the Prophet Joseph promised Porter that if he remained faithful to the Church and didn’t cut his hair, he would never suffer death from a bullet. From then on, Porter wore his long hair braided and tucked into a bob at the back of his neck.

The sight of Joseph and Porter riding together out to the Prophet’s farm was not uncommon. And when Joseph went to Washington, D.C., to see if government authorities could help right the wrongs suffered by the Saints at the hands of the Missouri mobs, Porter went with him.

It may have been supposed that Porter was only a bodyguard to the Prophet Joseph. However, frequent mention was made of his attendance at council meetings with Joseph Smith and other Church leaders. And when Joseph decided to leave Nauvoo and go west to help lessen the persecution of the Saints, Porter and only two others went with him. Afterward, when the Prophet learned that his departure was thought by many to be an act of cowardice, he said, “If my life is of no value to my friends it is of none to myself.” Turning to Porter, he asked, “What shall I do?” Rockwell replied, “You are the oldest and ought to know best; and as you make your bed, I will lie with you.” (History of the Church, 6:549.)

After Joseph and Hyrum were killed in Carthage Jail, Porter went west with the first party of pioneers. He believed that the Prophet Joseph would have wanted him to do that. His services as a scout and game hunter

were invaluable.

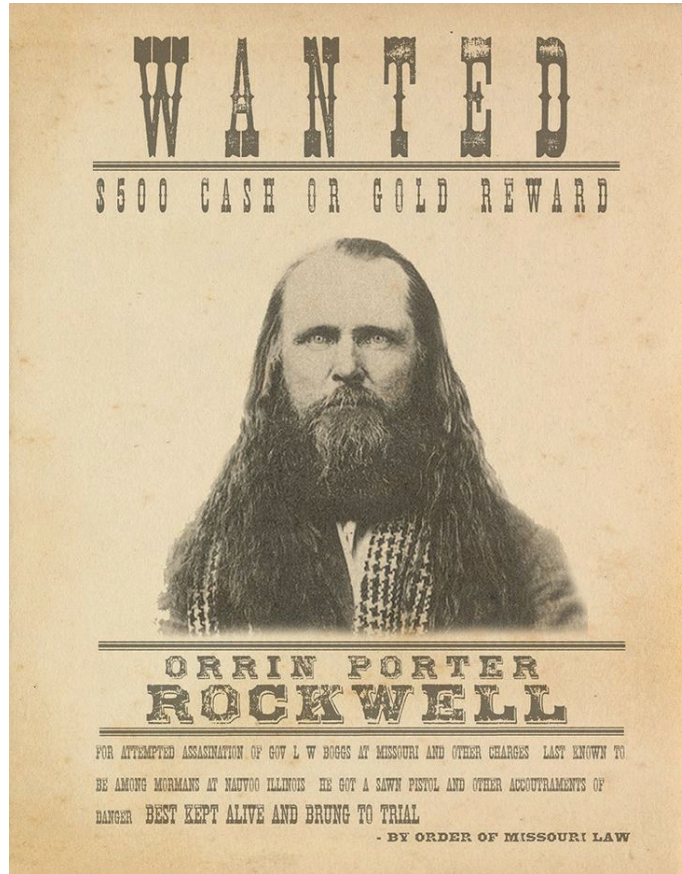
In 1849 Porter Rockwell was appointed deputy marshal of Great Salt Lake City, and he was a peace officer in Utah until his death. When pursuing lawbreakers, Porter was relentless, and his endurance was legendary. He would follow a trail at a gallop in his buckboard where others would walk their horses, searching for clues.

Detractors make much of the fact that Rockwell could neither read nor write. Yet he was remarkably successful in a number of business enterprises. It should be remembered, too, that illiteracy was not uncommon in the nineteenth century.

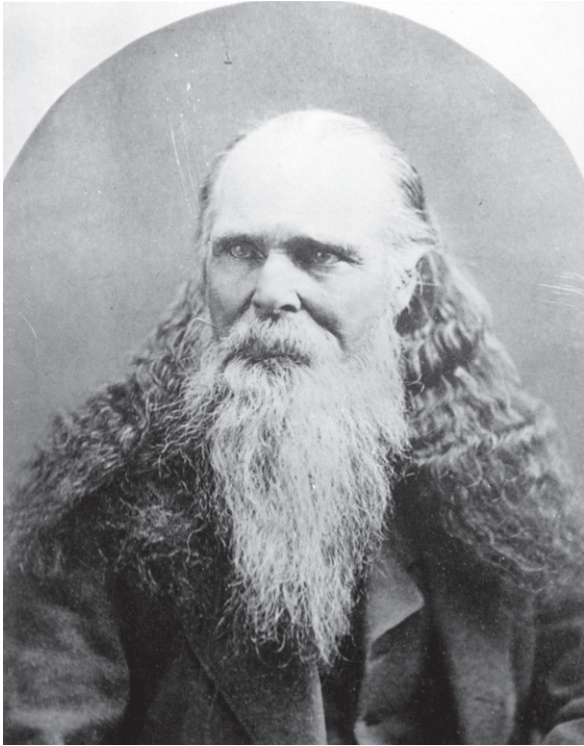
Porter remained loyal to his family and friends, and he was generous to others who needed his help. A touching act of Porter’s charity, recorded in a letter, was the gift of his shorn hair to the widow of Don Carlos Smith, the brother of Joseph Smith. The woman had lost her hair when she had typhoid fever, and Porter’s hair was used to

make her a wig. When Porter’s hair regrew, he wore it in a bob again.

Porter traveled thousands of miles on horseback in service to the Church as a scout, guide, and expert in solving problems with Indians. When he died during the summer of 1878, he had been a member of the Church longer than anyone else then living. At his funeral service, Elder Joseph F. Smith of the Council of the Twelve said, “He had his little faults, but Porter’s life on earth, taken altogether, was one worthy of example, and reflected honor upon the Church. Through all his trials he had never once forgotten his obligations to his brethren and his God.”



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Authority Who Went to Prison on the Prophet’s Orders: 7 Unbelievable Facts About Porter Rockwell

by Danielle B. Wagner

A notorious gunslinger, wanted man, and devout Church member, Orrin Porter Rockwell led a life of paradox. His lethal accuracy with a shotgun and policy to “always shoot first . . . that way they know you’re armed” made his time as a lawman controversial at best. Charged with murder or attempted murder on three occasions, Porter was acquitted twice and died before the last charge could come to courts. Despite his rough-and-tumble attitude, Porter Rockwell remained unshakably faithful to the Church and its leaders until his death in June 1878, serving as a body guard to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. The incongruities and myths surrounding Rockwell’s life have drawn the fascination of Mormons and non-Mormons alike. But here are a few curious tidbits you might not have known about Orrin Porter Rockwell.

1. He was known as the “Destroying Angel”

Porter Rockwell killed more outlaws than Wyatt Earp, Doc Holladay, Tom Horn, and Bat Masterson combined, earning him the menacing title, the “Destroying Angel.” Rockwell’s hawk-like vision was so acute he could spot landmarks along the trail days before his fellow pioneers. His accuracy was so deadly he once shot a bank robber attempting to escape on horseback in the pitch-black of night. It didn’t take long for Rockwell’s legendary abilities to draw the attention, and sometimes even the competition, of outlaws all throughout the Wild West.

2. He assisted in Joseph Smith’s attempted jail break from Liberty Jail

Porter Rockwell and Joseph Smith grew up on neighboring farms in Palmyra, New York. Despite their eight years difference in age, both men had a noticeable limp that cemented their close friendship—Joseph’s resulted from a childhood surgery and Rockwell’s resulted from an improperly set bone that left one leg two inches shorter than the other.

When Joseph became imprisoned at Liberty Jail, Rockwell served as his personal messenger and smuggler, sneaking two augers into the jail that the prophet used to chisel a hole through the four-foot wall. When Joseph Smith was finally released from Liberty Jail, he had progressed so far in his digging that only a few inches stood between the inmates and freedom. Rockwell remained close to Joseph until the end of the Prophet’s life, saying when he learned of Joseph’s death, “They killed the only friend I ever had.”

3. He never cut his hair or beard

After a nine-month stint in Missouri awaiting trial for the attempted assassination of Governor Lilburn Boggs (the same Governor Boggs who signed the Mormon extermination order), Porter Rockwell showed up at Joseph Smith’s house in Nauvoo on Christmas night, shaggy and skeletal. Joseph Smith ordered the gruff-looking ruffian out only to find it was his childhood friend, Porter Rockwell. After hearing Rockwell’s story, Joseph Smith made a Samson-like prophecy: as long as Rockwell did not cut his hair and remained

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faithful to the Gospel, his enemies could never touch him. Rockwell lived by the prophet’s promise, cutting his hair only once to make a wig for Joseph’s widowed sister-in-law recovering from typhoid fever. And until his dying day, the prophecy held true for Rockwell who escaped dozens of showdowns with notable marksmen without a scratch. On one such occasion, sharp-shooter Loren Dibble unloaded both his guns at Rockwell on Lehi Main Street in broad daylight without even ruffling Rockwell’s composure.

(Rockwell always professed his innocence in the Governor Boggs’ assassination attempt, using as his evidence, “I’ve never shot at anybody. If I shoot, they get shot. He’s still alive, isn’t he?”)

4. He went to jail on the prophet’s orders

Though a trail blazer for the pioneer’s moving west, Rockwell returned to Nauvoo on an unusual mission for Brigham Young: to shift persecution from the poverty stricken Saints left behind to himself. Rockwell was to accomplish this feat by getting arrested for the murder of Frank Worrell, a man Rockwell shot in self-defense while serving as a deputy.

Despite his previous harrowing imprisonment and acquittal, Rockwell obeyed the prophet’s wishes to their fullest. In a stunt crazy enough to capture everyone’s attention, Rockwell barricaded himself in an old boardinghouse after chasing an old enemy through Nauvoo’s streets while firing his pistols above the man’s head. The plan worked: the Saints remained peacefully in Nauvoo until the spring and Rockwell was acquitted.

5. He was involved in the mysterious Aiken brother murders

While Rockwell insisted he “never killed anyone who didn’t need killing,” several murky incidences clouded his reputation as a deputy and later as a sheriff in Utah. Among these cases was the mysterious murder of the Aiken brothers. Charged by Brigham Young with the duty to slow down Johnson’s army using any non-violent means necessary, Rockwell spent a number of nights on the plains knocking out wheel pins and scattering horses. But as the encroaching army neared its target, tensions rose to a furious pitch.

The Aiken brothers arrived in Utah on friendly terms with the army and with the intent to set up a gambling house and brothel for the soldiers. Afraid the Aiken brothers knew too much about Mormon preparations against the army, Brigham Young charged Rockwell to escort four of the brothers back to California. Two of the brothers reappeared in Nephi days later, blood-smearred and tattered. Apparently, their two brothers had been killed somewhere in the desert between Nevada and Utah. The two remaining brothers were later killed as they attempted to return to Salt Lake. Some blamed the deaths on Indians, others condemned Porter Rockwell, but the truth is, the murder of the Aiken brothers remains a mystery to this day.

6. He shot Brigham Young’s nephew

After stealing a horse from outside the bishop’s house, Lot Huntington—nephew to Brigham Young—fled to Camp Floyd where he met up with two other petty outlaws. An expert tracker, Rockwell followed the trail all the way to a Pony Express station in Tooele, arriving in the middle of the night. At sunup, the situation quickly escalated into a standoff. The outcome: Lot Huntington tried taking on Porter Rockwell and ended up shot clean through the heart.

7. He was a faithful Mormon to the end of his life

Despite his no-nonsense demeanor and shady past, Porter Rockwell was a faithful member of the Church until the day he died. He was one of the first members of the Church, baptized in the June of 1830 just a few months after the Church was organized.

Later in his life, he was ordained as a member of the Seventy and held the position throughout his life. Amidst the slander and accusations stirred up by his sudden death on June 9, 1878, President Joseph F. Smith praised Porter Rockwell in his eulogy, saying, “They say he was a murderer; if he was he was the friend of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, and he was faithful to them, and to his covenants, and he has gone to Heaven . . . clothed with immortality and eternal life, and crowned with all glory which belongs to a departed saint.”