

The Missouri Old Sow Cannon, or “Foli’s Folly”

by Cheryl L. Bruno

An antique cannon nicknamed the “Old Sow” resides in the LDS Church History Museum. There’s a story behind the nickname. However, it should be noted that this isn’t the first “Old Sow” cannon in American history. Nor is the legend behind it entirely unique.

The “Old Sow”, a cannon that fired 18-pound cannon balls, was placed on a hill above Springfield, New Jersey in the time of the American Revolution. When fired, the cannon served as an alarm signaling the “Minute Men” to action.[1] Historians conjecture that its booming, a contrast to the small and piping sounds of musket and pistol, was reminiscent of an old sow.

A heavy, one-ton mortar, thought to be named “Old Sow” because of its weight, was located at Fort Ticonderoga and later used by George Washington in his siege of Boston.[2]

A 32-pound “old sow” cannon located at Sackett’s Harbor played a part in the War of 1812. The gun was designed for the ship Oneida, but being too heavy, was placed near the shore, wallowing in the mud. From its appearance there, the cannon was said to have acquired its name.[3]

These stories seem, by their very nature, to be folklore. I wondered, since there were so many of them, if an “old sow” was a particular kind of cannon, or had a certain meaning in colonial days which has been lost to us over time.

A cannon used in the 1838 Mormon War in Missouri had a romantic history which also gave it the moniker of “Old Sow.” This particular cannon was used by the Missouri citizens in a siege in which they managed to force Mormon settlers from the town of DeWitt, in Carroll County.[4] Seeing this success, a group of citizens from neighboring Caldwell County thought to try the same tactic to expel Mormons from other parts of the state.[5] To this end, W.B. Henderson took a company of men and the cannon and headed to Daviess County. Along the way, they captured two Mormon prisoners, Amasa Lyman and a Mr. Dunn; the Missourians forced their prisoners to “ride the cannon” all the way to Livingston County, where the men were released.[6] By this time, the Mormon settlers had caught wind of the plan to drive them from the state; in response, 400 Latter-day Saint militia men began a march to Daviess County.[7] To avoid capture by the much larger and quickly ad-



vancing Mormon force, the Missourians buried their cannon near the home of Mr. Marcus White, and fled. The cannon was unearthed by Mormon Apostle David Patten’s company, who brought it to the Mormon settlement of Adam-ondi-Ahman with their own prisoners, 9 non-Mormons. Along the way, Ira Glaze, a “hare-lipped” Missourian, stumbled upon the company and in turn was forced to “ride the cannon.”[8]

On Thursday, October 18, the Mormons burned the town of Gallatin, destroyed the local Post Office, and engaged in unrestrained looting of the area. Reports were made of vigilante Mormon “Danites,” “a regularly formed banditti,” prowling the country with the cannon.[9] On Saturday morning the 20th, Joseph Smith gathered 300 of his men on a ridge near Adam-ondi-Ahman; they fired off three rounds from their newly-captured cannon. At each discharge, the men waved their hats and gave the threefold Mormon “Hosanna Shout.”[10]

Despite the momentary jubilation, succeeding events did not favor the Mormons. On the 25th of October, David W. Patten, “Captain Fear-Naught,” was killed during a violent encounter with Missourians at the Battle of Crooked River.[11] Two days later, Governor Lilburn Boggs issued his infamous “Extermination Order,” giving legal color to the killing of Mormons. On October 30th, a settlement of Mormons was slaughtered at Haun’s Mill,[12] and on the last day of the month Joseph

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Smith was arrested at Far West.[13]

The Mormons at Adam-ondi-Ahman surrendered to General Parks on Saturday, November 3, 1838. The General and four companies of troops took possession of 120 guns, 20 pistols, 6 swords, and a six-pounder iron cannon.[14]

It is likely that this cannon did not earn the title of “Old Sow” until sometime later, when stories began to circulate about this difficult time in Mormon history. In a later reminiscence, eyewitness Nathan Tanner recounted the Mormon capture of the buried cannon. He described how the Missourians “scattered and threw off their sacks of bread to lighten up as they went, and old Father Brace, with his old plow horse, gathered up the sacks of bread and we helped eat it. We found plenty of honey and made a very good dinner. But in the meantime, our horses were restless and pawing, and by the by we struck on the cannon.”[15] This story was embellished as time went on. Warren Foote wrote in his autobiography that the mob buried the cannon in the road, “so that the wagons passing over it would obliterate all signs of anything being buried there. The report is, that a sow had rooted it up, so that the Mormons discovered it, and took it away with them.”[16]

Chapman Duncan wrote, “The Mormons went down to Millport through the mob. Three hundred men buried their cannon and left. They started after burying their cannon in the road, and got corn and scattered over it. An old sow, in rooting after the corn, bared the end of the cannon. So the brethren, as they called it, raised the dead. We placed the cannon on as high as elevation as was and went to firing it. By this time Joseph the Prophet had come out. After the shooting he made a very mild speech.”[17]

Daniel D. McArthur recalled, “The mob hid the cannon in the road, thinking by riding their horses over it they might deceive somebody, but when the Mormon boys found that the mob had fled in every direction, some through the corn fields and some never stopping to untie their holsters, but cut them loose and got out of sight as best they could, concluded that it was best to look about and see what was left after the flight. They soon found some cannon balls and shortly a keg of powder and then the cannon [stock] wagon and harness, and of course, they expected the barrel next, and while

looking for it there was an old sow walking about. She went to the middle of the road and went to digging the ground up hog fashion. Low and behold there lay the old barrel. Of course, the boys had some little shouting over it when they found it.”[18]

After the Mormons were expelled from Missouri and established themselves in Nauvoo, Illinois, they acquired several cannons. As far as I have been able to ascertain, no contemporary accounts link these cannons with the one that was surrendered to General Parks at Adam-ondi-Ahman. The Nauvoo Legion received three antiquated cannons from the State of Illinois, and these were recalled by Governor Thomas Ford sometime before the repeal of the Nauvoo Charter in January 1845. [19]

Also in 1845, four cannons in poor condition were obtained from New Orleans. Brigham Young asked Wandle Mace to repair them. He did so in the basement of the unfinished Nauvoo Temple.[20] By 4 June 1845 gunsmith Theodore Turley had manufactured 15 cannons.[21] Some of the cannons that the Saints owned in Nauvoo made their way across the plains. On 22 June 1847 the “Artillery Company” led by C. C. Rich started across the plains with two cannons and the Temple bell. [22] On the 25th of July 1847, a Sunday, the first sermon was preached in the Salt Lake Valley by George A. Smith, standing on top of a cannon.[23]

Once the Saints were established in Utah, the “Old Sow” cannon folklore began to resurface. In December 1850, a group of settlers were sent south to form a community in Iron County. In their possession was a cannon, later thought to have been the “Old Sow” of Missouri fame, which was brought across the plains. Frank Hamilton wrote: “The Old Sow Cannon was in the Vanguard, with Captain Jacob Hoeffeins in command of the artillery division of the Iron County Militia. As they came over the Beaver Ridge and could see the Valley of the Little Salt Lake, they fired off the Old Sow Cannon three times as a salute to their home. Its echoes answered from hill to hill, and wandering Indians wondered what had happened.”[24] “On January 16, 1851... Iron County was organized and the first election was held for county officials and a representative was elected to the Legislature of the State of Deseret. The firing of the sow cannon signaled the closing of the polls.”[25] This cannon was

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used in the Morrisite Battle at Uintah at the mouth of Weber Canyon in 1862.[26] The “Old Sow” was used at Lagoon and fired on the 4th and 24th of July celebrations. After it disappeared for a while, a cannon was dug up from the south bank of Lagoon Pond and brought to town. It was mounted on wheels and displayed in 1947 on the City Hall Grounds in Farmington as an historic monument by the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers.[27] To the astonishment of the community, their “Old Sow” was identified as a rare 12 pounder Tredegar Iron Napoleon Confederate Civil War cannon manufactured in Richmond, Virginia in 1864.[28]

In 1913 an “Old Sow” cannon was enumerated as one of the weapons located in the Relic Hall of the Deseret Museum. It was said to have been used in the war of 1812 and later sold by the government as scrap iron and purchased by James Lawson, a Mormon blacksmith in Nauvoo. Instead of using the iron in his business, he turned the cannon over to the Nauvoo Legion. After one engagement, the story goes, the defenders were driven off and the gun left on the field. A number of the Mormon women not wishing to see it fall into the hands of the mob sunk a hole and buried the old standby for preservation. Legend says that later it was uncovered by a sow and her pigs which were rooting around the spot where it was buried and was thus nicknamed the Old Sow. It was unearthed under the direction of Major Egan and sunk in the Missouri river to be later taken up and brought out to Utah with President Brigham Young and the Pioneers.[29]

I have not traced the provenance, but I assume that this is the cannon which can currently be seen in the LDS Church Museum under the label of “Old Sow.”

The folklore behind the “Old Sow” cannon has captured the imagination of former Mayor of Chillicothe, Missouri, Jeff Foli. On November 30, 2000, Mayor Foli asked LDS General Authority Hugh Pinnock to return Salt Lake City’s “Old Sow” cannon to Missouri. There, he claimed, it rightfully belonged. After some research, the LDS Church privately contacted Foli, denying that this piece was the “Old Sow” cannon featured in 1838 Missouri history.[30] For 13 years, Foli has continued his crusade to recover the cannon. As a “speaker for the dead” Chillicothe settlers, he claims that the attack on Haun’s Mill was precipitated by the Mormons’ theft of

the Missourians’ cannon. Foli believes that Mormons and Missourians will not be able to achieve reconciliation until the mascot is returned.

Footnotes:

- [1] Marker, erected 1896 in Union County, NJ. <http://www.hmdb.org/Marker.asp?Marker=7359>
- [2] Daniel J. Meissner, The Formation and Evolution of the American Army during the Revolutionary War, <http://academic.mu.edu/meissnerd/us-rev-army.html>
- [3] The Oneida History, <http://www.dlumberyard.com/oneida-history.html>
- [4] Vinson Knight to William Cooper, February 3, 1839. Typescript, HBLL, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/VKnight.html>
- [5] Amasa Lyman, statement, Missouri Fifth Circuit Court Document containing the correspondence, orders, &c., in relation to the disturbances with the Mormons; and the evidence given before the Hon. Austin A. King, judge of the Fifth Judicial Circuit of the State of Missouri (Fayette, Mo.: Printed at the Office of the Boon’s Lick democrat, 1841), 83-84, <http://www.farwesthistory.com/spy.htm>
- [6] “Robert Lauderdale,” The History of Caldwell and Livingston Counties, Missouri (St. Louis: National Historical Company, 1886), 1014-1015, http://openlibrary.org/books/OL22882320M/History_of_Caldwell_and_Livingston_counties_Missouri; Incidents in the Life of Nathan Tanner, Written by Himself on the Occasion of the Tanner Family Reunion Held in Payson in 1895, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~larsenbrown/Histories/nathantanner.txt>
- [7] Letter from the Honorable Austin A. King, Richmond, MO to Governor Boggs, Jefferson City, MO Oct 24, 1838, http://sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/findingaids/fulltext/rg005_01-B01_F32-47.asp?rid=f44_f01-02&ref=js; John Corrill, A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints, manuscript, 1839, 67-68, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/john-corrill-brief-history-manuscript-circa-1838-1839?dm=image-and-text&zm=zoom-inner&tm=expanded&p=99&s=undefined&sm=none>
- [8] The History of Caldwell and Livingston Counties, Missouri (St. Louis: National Historical Company, 1886), 1014-1015, 128. http://openlibrary.org/books/OL22882320M/History_of_Caldwell_and_Livingston_counties_Missouri; Daniel McArthur Autobiography, typescript, BYU-S, p. 37. <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/DMcArthur.html>; Thomas J. Martin

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- Statement, 22 Oct 1838, Mormon War Papers at the Missouri State Archives, http://sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/findingaids/fulltext/rg005_01-B01_F32-47.asp?rid=f38_f05-06&ref=js; Warren Foote Autobiography, typescript, BYU-S, p.25, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/WFoote.html>; Manuscript History of the Church, Vol. 2, 838. <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1?p=292>
- [9] Letter from Thomas C. Burch, Richmond, MO to Governor Boggs, Jefferson City, MO, Oct 23rd 1838, Mormon War Papers at the Missouri State Archives, http://sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/findingaids/fulltext/rg005_01-B01_F32-47.asp?rid=f41_f01-02&ref=js
- [10] Daniel McArthur Autobiography, typescript, BYU-S, p. 19. <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/DMcArthur.html>
- [11] Stephen C. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), 141-142.
- [12] LeSueur, 162-168.
- [13] Baugh, Alexander L. “A Call to Arms: The 1838 Mormon Defense of Northern Missouri.” PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1996, see <http://josephsmithpapers.org/place/far-west-missouri>
- [14] *Daily Missouri Republican*, St. Louis, Vol. 15 (Tuesday, November 20, 1838) No. 1699. See also Daniel McArthur Autobiography, typescript, BYU-S <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/DMcArthur.html>
- [15] *Incidents in the Life of Nathan Tanner*, Written by Himself on the Occasion of the Tanner Family Reunion Held in Payson in 1895, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~larsenbrown/Histories/nathantanner.txt>
- [16] Warren Foote Autobiography, typescript, HBLL, p.25, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/WFoote.html>
- [17] Chapman Duncan Autobiography, typescript, HBLL, p.37, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/CDuncan.html>
- [18] Daniel D. McArthur Autobiography, typescript, HBLL, pp. 6-7, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/DMcArthur.html>
- [19] *Church Historians’ Excerpts from Ford’s History of Illinois*, *History of the Church Vol VII*, Ch 1, http://www.boap.org/LDS/History/History_of_the_Church/Vol_VII
- [20] Wandle Mace Autobiography, typescript, HBLL, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/WMace.html>
- [21] *Journal of William Huntington*, typescript, HBLL, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/WHuntington.html>
- [22] *Diary of Patty Sessions, 1847*, in Kenneth L. Holmes, ed., *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1840-1849* (Glendale, CA: Arthur Clark Co., 1983), 165 <http://books.google.com/books?id=9i9ajDTZ9XAC&pg=PA165&lp-g=PA165&dq=%22charles+c.+rich%22+artillery+company&source=bl&ots=4Ozgc8csT&sig=5tc2R8qCjVZJSb26b-XJ4HlhXN8&hl=en&sa=X&ei=BTSUUcisNMmwiQK50oD4CQ&ved=0CDY-Q6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=%22charles%20c.%20rich%22%20artillery%20company&f=true>
- [23] Wilford Woodruff’s *Journal*, 3:235-36 (July 25, 1847) quoted in David R. Crockett, *150 Years Ago Today*, <http://heritage.uen.org/resources/Wca6be5da9544.htm>
- [24] Frank Hamilton, *Parowan History Page*, http://www.fold3.com/page/1970_parowan_history_page/
- [25] Cannon Plaque, *Parowan History Page*, http://www.fold3.com/page/1970_parowan_history_page/
- [26] *Utah State History Markers and Monuments Database*, http://history.utah.gov/apps/markers/detailed_results.php?markerid=1017
- [27] Lagoon History Project, “Old Sow Cannon,” <http://lagoonhistory.com/project/old-sow-cannon>
- [28] Bob Mickelson, “Did ‘Old Sow’ Go to Slaughterhouse?” in *The Davis Clipper*, Sept. 13, 2004, http://davisclipper.com/view/full_story/135262/article-Did-Old-Sow-go-to-slaughterhouse ; *Utah Historical Markers*, *Civil War Cannon*, http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMGY1W_Civil_War_Cannon
- [29] Sterling B. Talmage, “Relic Hall of the Deseret Museum,” in *The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* (Salt Lake: Deseret News Press, 1913), Vol 4:7 (July, 1913) pp. 137-139. <http://books.google.com/books?id=5rc3AQAIAAJ&pg=RA1-PA137&lp-g=RA1-PA137&dq=sow+cannon+war+of+1812&source=bl&ots=78uofO496b&sig=ZjCbjtxfWleI-jToRcZcEPJpUmKA&hl=en&sa=X&ei=eRCUUFYHqjNiwLPzIDICg&ved=0CFAQ6AEwBjgU#v=onepage&q=sow%20cannon%20war%20of%201812&f=false> ; see also *Deseret News*, June 13, 1908, and July 22, 1931; *Improvement Era*, March 1961, pp. 6, 7, 182. http://archive.org/stream/improvementera6403unse/improvementera6403unse_djvu.txt.
- [30] Jeffery Curtis Foli, “Why 1838 Chillocothe Missouri Militia Killed Mormons at Haun’s Mill,” Part 1 <http://www.topix.com/forum/city/chillicothe-mo/TAQ432CKQUEN0ECSA> ; Part 2 <http://www.topix.com/forum/city/chillicothe-mo/TTDT944VIHCC3K-RMH>