



CHAPTER 3

Immigration to Utah and Early Settlement of Spanish Fork



Although Guðmundur Guðmundsson was one of the first two missionaries to Iceland, he was not the first Latter-day Saint Icelander to reach America. Early converts Samúel Bjarnasson and his wife, Margrét Gísladóttir, along with Helga Jónsdóttir, left the Westmann Islands in 1854 for Liverpool. On January 7, 1855, they embarked on the ship *James Nesmith* and arrived in the Salt Lake Valley on September 7, 1855. According to an unsubstantiated tradition, President Brigham Young directed them to settle in Spanish Fork, feeling they would fit in well with the Danish Saints who had settled there.¹ However, Palmyra (early Spanish Fork region) and Spanish Fork Church membership records provide no evidence for any LDS Scandinavians in this locale prior to the arrival of these Icelandic Saints who were not only the first Mormon Icelanders to gather to Utah, but also the first known Icelanders to immigrate to the United States and establish a permanent settlement.²





Fire on Ice

The immigration and settlement of these first three Saints paved the way for others to follow. It is estimated that 410 Icelanders immigrated to Utah from 1854 to 1914, just prior to the outbreak of World War I,³ but this represents only a small fragment of the Scandinavian Saints who gathered during this period.⁴

In July of 1855, another Latter-day Saint Icelandic convert named Þórður Diðriksson left his native land for America. He sailed from Liverpool on the December 12, 1855 voyage of the *John J.*

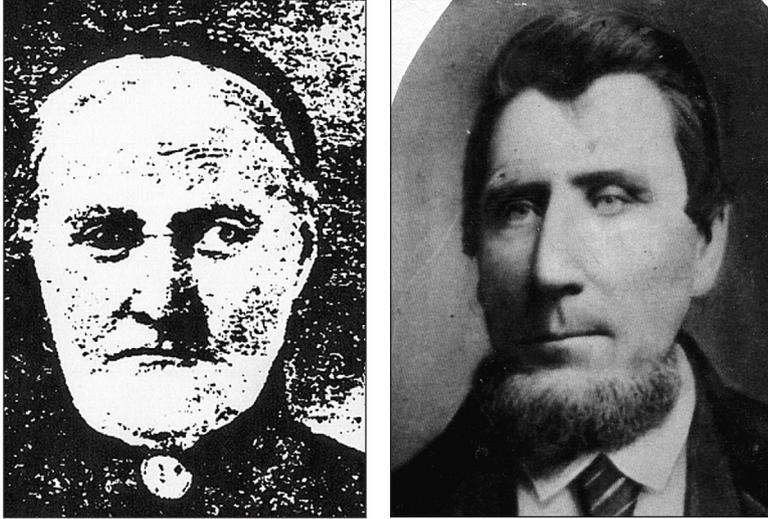


Helga Jónsdóttir was one of the first three Icelanders to immigrate to the United States. *Courtesy of the Icelandic Association of Utah*

Boyd. Concerning his voyage, he said, “The weather being so bad nearly all the passengers became seasick. I was very sick myself and so afraid I would die that I could not sleep. . . . I often heard the emigrants ask if the Icelandic was still alive and the usual answer was, ‘It won’t be long until he is gone.’”⁵ Charles R. Savage reported the following about this voyage:

Notwithstanding that our company consisted of Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, Icelanders, Italians, English, Irish, and Scotch, the rules adopted proved efficacious in maintaining a strict “entent cordiale” among us all. The Saints were at the sound of trumpet called to prayer morning and evening. Meetings were also frequently held in the Danish, English, and Italian languages during the voyage. On the whole, we





Margrét Gísladóttir and Samúel Bjarnasson were the first Icelandic couple to immigrate to the United States. *Courtesy of the Icelandic Association of Utah*

enjoyed ourselves first-rate, notwithstanding the many gales and hurricanes we experienced, from the breaking up of the fine weather. . . . Our captain got superstitious on account of the long passage, and ordered that there should be no singing on board; the mate said that all the ships that had preachers on board were always sure of a bad passage.⁶

According to one Latter-day Saint passenger, the captain had remarked to Knud Peterson, “If I hadn’t damned Mormons on board I would have been in New York six weeks ago.” Peterson replied, “If you hadn’t Mormons on board you would have been in hell six weeks ago.”⁷ The group finally reached New York, but because of economic difficulties most of these immigrants had to find employment along the way to Utah.

Þórður worked for several months in the sweltering heat of St. Louis before finally arriving in Salt Lake with the Daniel McArthur Company in the fall of 1856. He then settled in Spanish Fork, where his family was known for their kindness and hospitality, which included assisting other Icelandic immigrants who arrived in Spanish Fork in the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁸

In 1857 eleven Icelandic Latter-day Saints gathered together to America. According to an article from the *Morgenstjernen*, two of the eleven “apostatized on the way, but the other nine arrived [in Utah], after one and a half years stay in the States.”⁹ Concerning their journey, Icelandic convert Magnús Bjarnasson wrote the following:

We were now in (1857) eleven “Mormons” on the island (Westmann) and we all secured passage on the schooner “Al-dolfina” and sailed for England June 7th, 1857.¹⁰ After a voyage of three weeks we arrived in Liverpool, England, where we remained another three week, but on the 18th of July 1857, we sailed from Liverpool, by freightship “Wyoming” and after spending seven weeks on the Atlantic Ocean, we arrived at Philadelphia, U. S. America, whence we traveled by railroad to St. Louis, Missouri. After spending three days in that city, we boarded a river steamer and sailed up the Mississippi River to Burlington, Iowa, whence we traveled fifty miles inland to the little town of Fairfield . . . where we lived one and a half years, during which we made preparations to journey to Utah. We left Fairfield May 16th, 1859, and arrived in Salt Lake City, Aug. 29th, 1859. We spent about three months in the city, after which we moved to Spanish Fork, Utah County, where we became permanent settlers.¹¹

One of these Icelanders who settled in Spanish Fork was Vigdís Björnsdóttir. In a letter to her homeland, Vigdís wrote, “By Gods grace I am well and have remained so since I came to these valleys, which was early in September in the year 1859, and was well greeted by my brethren, Þórður and Samúel, who came here before me. Nevertheless, after my arrival I lay sick for three months and had good nurses, particularly Þórður and his wife Helga. After that my health has been tolerable.”¹²

Early History of Spanish Fork

Yet neither Vigdís nor the previous Icelanders who had assisted her were the first white people to view the Spanish Fork area. This region had been inhabited by Native Americans for centuries before the white Latter-day Saint settlers, who came in the mid-nineteenth century. Before the coming of Mormons, two Catholic priests and their small Spanish company passed through the territory in search of a direct route that would connect Santa Fe, New Mexico, with Monterey, California. Although they did not reach their destination because they lacked sufficient provisions, they were the first white people to journey by the river that became known as the Spanish Fork River, named after their early expedition. One historian writes, “The first white men ever to look upon the present site of Spanish Fork were two Franciscan Friars, Father Sylvestre Velez de Escalante and Father Francisco Atanasio de Dominguez, who, on September 23, 1776, came through Spanish Fork canyon and camped on the river near the present site of the city.”¹³

In his treatment of Spanish Fork history, Edward Tullidge describes an important council which took place when the Latter-day Saints entered this region to settle permanently:



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When the pioneers came into the valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847, a large number of the Ute Indian nation were encamped in Spanish Fork canyon. As soon as the news reached them of the arrival of the band of pioneers, the Indians held a council to determine what course they would pursue in relation to the whites, whom the young and impatient braves were disposed to look upon as invaders of their country. . . . But Sowiette, who was the great executive chief, or head of the nation, advised the braves to let the Mormon pioneers alone, and pursue a policy of peace toward them, saying perhaps they had, like the Ute nation, been driven from place to place, and had come to the Rocky Mountains for security.¹⁴

This catalytic decision allowed the Saints to settle throughout the Great Basin region in what became known in 1850 as Utah Territory. It was about this same time that an early Salt Lake City merchant named Enoch Reese staked a claim on four hundred acres of land in the Spanish Fork river bottoms, where he built his home. Soon, other white Latter-day Saint settlers followed, and in the spring of 1851 they labored together to bring water from the river for irrigation. A branch of the Church was organized in Spanish Fork, with Stephen Markham serving as the first Spanish Fork branch president.¹⁵

The Town of Spanish Fork Established

The following summer it was decided that there were enough squatters settled near the Spanish Fork River that a town should be formed. The town site was located about three miles west of the modern city of Spanish Fork and was named Palmyra, after the town where the earliest events of Latter-day

Saint Church history occurred.¹⁶ Concerning the establishment of this early settlement, President George A. Smith reported to a British Latter-day Saint periodical: “I have sought out the location for the city of Palmyra, on the Spanish Fork, Utah County. . . . The public square commands a view of all the settlements of Utah Valley . . . and is one of the most delightful spots in the mountains. . . . It is sixty miles from Great Salt Lake City, and now contains sixty families. Stephen Marcham presides.”¹⁷

Although the Palmyra town site was laid out, the area lacked sufficient building materials, so a number of these early pioneer Saints lived in shelters built in the ground called dugouts. Concerning such dwellings, one early settler named George A. Hicks described them as follows:

The dug-outs were places dug in the ground, usually four or five feet deep, with steps leading down into the room from one end, and a roof usually made of willows and mud. The dugouts were quite warm and comfortable during the winter, there being a fire-place in the opposite end of the entrance. They were generally without windows, so in order to get light, the door must be left open, or the open fire depended upon for illumination.¹⁸

Though quite primitive, these dugouts provided needed protection from the elements, yet soon there would be other obstacles to deal with—such as local Native Americans.

The Walker War

In the summer of 1853, soon after the town of Palmyra was established, a skirmish between the Latter-day Saint white settlers and the Ute Indians broke out in the nearby town of Springville. Although the unrest lasted only a year, it served



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as additional motivation for the Saints to erect forts in Utah. The need for the protection of forts was already apparent to President Brigham Young, who was also at this time serving as the superintendent of Indian Affairs for Utah Territory. Just months before the conflict broke out, Young had taken a spring tour of the Territory and felt strongly impressed to warn the Saints to erect forts in the event of a possible encounter with the local Native Americans. Though warned, the local men of Palmyra paid more attention to their farming than to the fort, and when the Walker War (named after Ute Chief Wakara) broke out, the Palmyra settlers in the Spanish Fork region suffered from Indian attacks.¹⁹

The Walker War ended August 12, 1854, and during the fall of this same year Fort Saint Luke was built at the mouth of Spanish Fork Canyon. The following year, immigrants (including the first Icelanders to gather to the United States) swelled the local population and pushed beyond the boundaries of the town of Palmyra.²⁰ During this same year, the Utah territorial legislature granted a charter to the newly created city of Spanish Fork.²¹

The Melding of Two Communities

The following February, Governor Brigham Young recommended that the city of Palmyra merge with the city of Spanish Fork.²² One historian noted that this decision had a significant impact on the local region, as four hundred Palmyra citizens moved to Spanish Fork. Further, “because of this influx in population the city survey had to be increased, the Spanish Fork City Charter was amended to include all the area in the Palmyra Charter. . . . The abandonment of Palmyra also contributed to the ending of the bitter feuding that had gone on



between the two communities, the disputes mostly involving the pasturage of cattle.”²³

The need to meet the incoming immigrants also seemed to help weld the community together. One immigrant, Priscilla Merriman Evans, wrote of how the assimilation experience for her and her husband, Thomas, was eased when they entered Spanish Fork in 1856. They were welcomed by local presiding Church officer Stephen Markham and his large family of eleven, who were then living in a dugout. Evans described their very modest living conditions: “It was a very large room built half under ground, with the fireplace in one end, and a dirt floor. Lumber was very scarce and three bedsteads were constructed from poles and rawhide, cut in strips and laced back and forth making a nice springy bed. From the children they had ‘trundle beds,’ and . . . those little beds could be rolled under their mothers bedsteads to utilize space.”²⁴

By the end of the first decade of the establishment of the city of Spanish Fork (1855–65), the population had increased to 1,069. “The inhabitants were of English, Scotch, Welsh, and Scandinavian descent, and they came from the Eastern United States, Eastern Canada, England, Iceland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden.”²⁵ Thus the early Icelandic immigrants came to a city that was small by modern standards, but that was truly an international melting pot. However, just as Thomas and Priscilla Evans had been aided by the Markhams, so Þórður Diðriksson’s family was helpful to Vigdís Björnsdóttir and other Icelanders who faced a sudden transition into the American settlement of Spanish Fork, Utah.²⁶

Notes

1. Kate B. Carter, “The Gospel in Iceland,” *Improvement Era* 54, no. 2 (February 1951): 88–89, explains, “Upon their arrival in

Salt Lake City they were directed to Spanish Fork where a group of Danish converts had established homes. It was the opinion of President Young that inasmuch as the Danish government was then ruling over Iceland, these two groups would join and live peacefully together. Margrét and Samúel immediately left for their future home, but Helga remained in Salt Lake City until later in the same year.” See also Carter, “The First Icelandic Settlement in America,” *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 7:482–83.

2. “Palmyra Branch Record of Members, 1853–1855,” Utah Valley Regional Family History Center, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, lists 371 adult Church members and 122 children who had not yet been baptized. Historian Ron Barney, *One Side By Himself: The Life and Times of Lewis Barney, 1808–1894* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2001), 150, notes, “three-fourths of the ward were American born. Almost 10 percent were native Utahns. One-fifth of the community were from Great Britain, most from England. Three percent were Canadians.” Yet there is no mention of any Scandinavians during this early Palmyra, Utah, period. LDS Church Membership Record for Spanish Fork (1852–91), Utah Valley Regional Family History Center, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, also does not evidence Scandinavian names prior to the arrival of the Icelanders. Andrew Jenson, *History of the Scandinavian Mission* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1927), 72, indicates that the first large company of Scandinavians to immigrate to Utah (September 30, 1853) “were counseled by Brigham Young to settle in different parts of the Territory with people of other nationalities, so as to become useful in developing the resources of the new country. Most of them located in Sanpete Valley, whither other companies from Scandinavia subsequently followed them yearly.” Jenson further notes, “That valley has ever since been known as a stronghold for Scandinavians in Utah.”



CHAPTER 3: IMMIGRATION AND EARLY SETTLEMENT

One local Spanish Fork Saint who lived in the town since its early beginnings (1852) indicated that it was not until 1856 that “there were a large number of Scandinavians [who] came to Spanish Fork.” He adds, “They made an excellent class of citizens, being as a rule, honest, peaceable and industrious” (see George A. Hicks, “A History of Spanish Fork,” transcribed by Roxanne Merrill, 1999, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, 24). The Spanish Fork Ward, Utah Stake Manuscript History and Historical Reports, Church Archives, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, contains this entry for 1856: “Among the new settlers who located in Spanish Fork was Elder Svend Larson who had figured so prominently in the Scandinavian Mission before he left his native land (Norway). Quite a number of Scandinavian settlers also located in Spanish Fork that year and following years. Brother Svend Larson was the First Elder who presided over Scandinavian meetings which were commenced in Spanish Fork that year.” Brother Larson subsequently moved to Mount Pleasant, Sanpete County, and Jens Hanson, who located in Spanish Fork at the time of the move (1858), was appointed to preside over the Scandinavian meetings in Spanish Fork, April 29, 1860, by Bishop John L. Butler. William G. Hartley, *My Best for the Kingdom: History and Autobiography of John Lowe Butler, a Mormon Frontiersman* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1993), 278, suggests that these first three Icelanders who settled in Spanish Fork in 1855 may have been met by John Lowe Butler, who had been laboring at Fort Bridger during the summer of 1855. Butler became not only a neighbor to these Icelandic Saints but later served as their bishop. The LDS Church Membership Record for Spanish Fork (1852–91) discloses that the first time Icelandic names occur in the record is not until early 1861, which then evidences various kinds of Church donations, which include several references to Samúel Bjarnason and other early Icelandic Saints who followed.

3. Research list in author's possession compiled in the spring of 2000 by Bliss Anderson, a member of the Icelandic Association of Utah. This list reveals that 208 out of 410 of the Icelanders who immigrated to Utah were from the Westmann Islands, located just twelve miles from the southwestern coast of Iceland. The Westmann Islands are a group of fourteen islands, of which only one (Heimaey) is inhabited. In the summer of 2000, a monument was erected on this inhabited island to commemorate those Icelanders who had immigrated to Utah. This island represents less than 1 percent of the total landmass of Iceland, which is nearly 40,000 square miles, slightly smaller than England (see Allred, *The Icelanders of Utah*, 2, 13, 16). Icelandic Mission president Loftur Bjarnason wrote in an article entitled "Traveling in Iceland," *Millennial Star*, May 12, 1904, 302, that the uninhabited islands were used mainly for sheep and that the largest island (Heimaey) had a population of only eight hundred people. He added, "About two-thirds of those that have embraced the gospel from this country [during a fifty year period from 1854 to 1904] have come from this place, and indeed we feel the same spirit of goodwill toward our people that has ever existed here." Although his estimate is a little high, it is impressive that nearly half of the total number of Icelandic immigrants to Utah were from this small island and that one-fourth of the total number of inhabitants of Heimaey were converted. It should also be pointed out that although not all of those who gathered were Latter-day Saints at the time of embarkment, many later joined the Church in Spanish Fork. Further, some of those who gathered to Utah left the Church and chose instead to return to the Lutheran Church, the prominent religious denomination in Iceland. In any case, most of the total number remained active Latter-day Saints.

4. William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957), 107, states, "Altogether, of the 46,497 converts which Scandinavia yielded between 1850 and 1905, 50 percent

were Danish, slightly less than 36 percent were Swedish, and not quite 14 percent were Norwegian. Of the 22,653 of these ‘members of record’ who emigrated, 56 percent were Danish, a little over 32 percent were Swedish, 11 percent were Norwegian, and a fraction Icelandic.”

5. Carter, “The First Icelandic Settlement in America,” 7:485.

6. Letter from Charles R. Savage to John Taylor, *Millennial Star*, March 29, 1856, 206.

7. *Autobiography of Peter Gottfredson*, Church Archives, 8–9.

8. *Autobiographical Sketch of Theodur Didrickson*, Church Archives, 7. See also “The Life of Einer Erickson,” 21–23, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, wherein Erickson notes on his arrival in Spanish Fork, on July 18, 1878, “I was gladly received by my Family at Elder Theodur Dedicsons home.”

9. “Erindringer Fra Missionen I Skandinavien,” *Morgenstjernen*, September 15, 1884, 276, trans. Timothy Keller; see also Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 1857.

10. The most common route for Latter-day Saint emigrants to take from their homeland was to embark from Reykjavík and voyage to Granton, Scotland, where they either traveled by sail or rail to Liverpool and joined other European Latter-day Saint converts who crossed the Atlantic together to Zion.

11. This is a narrative included in the Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 1857, which apparently came from a letter Magnús Bjarnasson submitted to assistant Church historian Andrew Jensen in 1926. According to the *Deseret News*, March 2, 1926, the Manuscript History of the Iceland Mission was among “the last mission histories to be compiled.” Although these early Latter-day Saint Icelandic immigrants settled in Spanish Fork, Guðmundur Guðmundsson dwelt for a time in Salt Lake City, as there were greater opportunities for him to practice his craft of goldsmithing there. Guðmundur’s family

also migrated to other Utah locations, which included South Weber, Farmington, Lehi, and Draper. The Guðmundsson family lived for a year in Sacramento, California (1868–69), because one of the sons of Marie Garff needed medical treatment. For more information on Guðmundur's family migrations, see Fred E. Woods, "Fire on Ice: The Conversion and Life of Guðmundur Guðmundsson," *Brigham Young University Studies* 39, no. 2 (2000): 56–72.

12. Letter of Vigdís Björnsdóttir from Spanish Fork to an anonymous friend in the Westmann Islands, August 28, 1866, National Library of Iceland, Archives Department, Reykjavík, Iceland. Catalogue # Lbs. 2679, 8vo, 1; see also the published version of this letter in Finnur Sigmundsson, ed., *Vesturfara skrifa heim: frá íslenskum mormónum í Utah* (Reykjavík, Iceland: Setberg, 1975), 40–43. By this time Þórður Diðriksson was married to Helga Jónsdóttir, who had immigrated to Spanish Fork with Samúel and Margrét Bjarnason in 1855. The Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 1857, notes that no known groups of Icelandic Saints emigrated from Iceland between 1858–72, nor were any missionaries sent to Iceland until the arrival of Magnús Bjarnasson and Loftur Johnson [Loftur Jónsson] in 1873. They had emigrated with the 1857 group.

13. Elisha Warner, *The History of Spanish Fork* (Spanish Fork, UT: The Press Publishing Company, 1930), 25–27.

14. Warner, *The History of Spanish Fork*, 28–29.

15. Warner, *The History of Spanish Fork*, 31–33. The title "branch president" is an LDS term referring to an ecclesiastical officer who presides over a small congregation.

16. Warner, *The History of Spanish Fork*, 34.

17. Letter written from Salt Lake City by George A. Smith to Samuel W. Richards, December 26, 1852, "Prosperity of the Settlements—Location of a large sugar manufactory," *Millennial Star*, April 30, 1853, 286.

18. Warner, *The History of Spanish Fork*, 38.

19. Warner, *The History of Spanish Fork*, 39–40. For background on the Walker War, see Howard A. Christy, “The Walker War: Defense and Conciliation as Strategy,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 47 (Fall 1979): 395–420.

20. Warner, *The History of Spanish Fork*, 45, 54.

21. Richard N. Holzapfel, *A History of Utah County* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1999), 67, notes that the city charter was granted January 17, 1855.

22. Concerning the early history of Spanish Fork, see Edward W. Tullidge, “History of Spanish Fork,” *Tullidge’s Quarterly* 3, nos. 2–3 (April–July 1884):137–70, 300–2; Ronald O. Barney, *One Side by Himself: The Life and Times of Lewis Barney, 1808–1894* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press), 2001, 148–87; William G. Hartley, *My Best for the Kingdom: History and Autobiography of John Lowe Butler, a Mormon Frontiersman* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1993), 255–82; George A. Hicks, “A History of Spanish Fork,” transcribed by Roxanne Merrill, 1999, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

23. La Nora P. Allred, *Spanish Fork: City on the Rio De Aguas Calientes* (Spanish Fork, UT: J-Mart Publishing, 1981), 17.

24. Allred, *Spanish Fork*, 18.

25. Allred, *Spanish Fork*, 21. Concerning where the various groups of Spanish Fork immigrants lived, Allred, *The Icelanders of Utah*, 20, presents specific divisions: “The Welch [Welsh] congregated in the northwest section of town; the English in the southwest, and the Danish in the northeast. The Icelanders when they came settled in the southeast, a section which up to that time had found little favor with other residents because of its poorer, rocky soil.” Concerning the general demographics for several decades which followed, Andrew Jenson, *Encyclopedic History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1941), 824, adds,



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“The population of Spanish Fork was . . . 2,304 in 1880; 3,327 in 1900, and 4,509 in 1930.”

26. A note inserted apparently by an E. Iver in the “Autobiographical Sketch of Thordur Didricksson,” Church Archives, 7, points out that “the Dedrickson home was noted for its generous hospitality and there many of the emigrants were taken in and kept like family members until they could get settled.”

