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A FRIENDSHIP FORGED IN EXILE:
WILFORD WOODRUFF AND
THE WILLIAM ATKIN FAMILY

If you ever come to the county come and see me and I will do the same by you. I would like to go over your place once more and see how things look over the farm and pond etc. I hope you may prosper in all you do. . . . I pray God to bless you for all your kindness to all men under ground and above ground.¹

— Wilford Woodruff to William Atkin, 1888

IN 1877, Mormon pioneers William and Rachel Thompson Atkin uprooted their large family, packed up their worldly possessions, and moved from their home in St. George, Utah, to an uninhabited stretch of arable land on the east bank of the Virgin River ten miles to the southwest. One descendant suggests that William and his sons surveyed the region while working

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for the nearby communal united order in Price City during the mid-1870s and determined to relocate there.² When the Atkins first decided to homestead the area, they found the desert wilderness to be rough, inhabited by native sage and other resilient flora and fauna. No strangers to the challenges of frontier life, the Atkin parents and children constructed a limestone home on the property. William's brother and sister-in-law, Henry and Selena Atkin, as well as his sister and brother-in-law, William and Adelaide Laxton, joined them in later years, thereby pioneering a one-family village. "The place where we live is called by our name Atkinville," William described with pride in a letter to his sister-in-law who remained in Great Britain, "because we were the first that took it up when it had never been used by man that anyone knows and we have made it a beautiful place and me and the boys own it all, about 160 acres."³

As the extended Atkin family grew, so did Atkinville. In its heyday, Atkinville comprised three limestone homes, storage cellars, livestock corrals, hay and grain stockyards, a granary, and several pigpens and chicken coops. William and Rachel expanded their original limestone home to four "good rooms" downstairs, two of which were decorated with carpet and furniture. Adults and children enjoyed a fine organ in the parlor. Most of the family slept upstairs in two large bedrooms. The home also boasted a large porch, balcony deck, bowery shed, cellar, additional kitchen, and back porch. William and Rachel further improved their real estate by planting tamarisk trees near the front porch for much-needed shade. Their youngest daughter, May, planted a flower garden in front of the house. "There was the peace of isolation, the restfulness of silence, the total absence of neighbors. There was also a sense of ownership," family friend Joseph Walker recalled.

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“The day’s needed doings brought the luxury of wholesome physiological fatigue without weariness.”⁴

The physical, social, and spiritual isolation in Atkinville came with a price, however. The Atkin village had no public waterworks. The bordering Virgin River, ironically, was not always a source of pure and undefiled drinking water. During the spring, snowmelt from nearby Pine Valley Mountain caused the river to swell, providing potable water for the pioneers. In the summer, however, the Virgin River resumed its normal low level, and the nearby sulfur and mineral springs contaminated the water, making it unhealthy. As a result, drinkable water had to be shipped from clear springs to the north in St. George. A related problem was how to irrigate the Atkins’ farmland, located on a bench above the muddy Virgin River. William and his sons solved this dilemma by digging a 1.5-mile-long earthen ditch upstream from Atkinville; thereafter they dammed the slow-moving river current with brush and other objects to divert the water onto their land.⁵ They also benefited from a flowing spring located on the north portion of their acreage. Eventually, the water provided from the spring and ditch accumulated and created a shallow pond on the property, inviting a menagerie of waterfowl and animals to claim the pool as their own.

As time passed, William and Rachel dreamed of creating a park or natural sanctuary, complete with a boating and fishing pond for the benefit of their children and other pioneers seeking to escape the harsh desert of southern Utah. As parents, they wanted their children to settle nearby. “My father’s great ambition in going on the farm [Atkinville] was to keep around him. So he made everything as comfortable and our surroundings as agreeable as possible. . . . He was so successful that the place became quite a Resort and many of our friends would visit us so much

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that Sunday it was hard for us to get away from the place,” their son Joseph explained. “We would always raise an abundance of melons in their season which were always free to our friends. We also had a large fish pond with a boat on it. My mother’s table was always ready for our friends. In fact, our parents were very liberal and did all they could to make the place desirable so that we boys would be willing to stay on the farm.”⁶

In time Atkinville became a favorite picnic and recreation destination for locals. Its popularity spread throughout the region. Joseph Carpenter, editor of the local *Union and Echo*, painted a glowing picture of Atkinville: “They have planted and now have growing, numerous cottonwood trees which, within a few years, will furnish them with an abundance of fuel. . . . Mr. Wm. Atkin, of that place, informed us he proposes having a Park and pleasure grounds soon, and in connection with their boating lake, will give pleasure seekers a fine chance to spend a few days in that vicinity.”⁷ On weekends and holidays, crowds traveled over bumpy dirt roads to Atkinville, where they relaxed under the shade trees, fished and boated on the pond, and ate the contents of bulging picnic baskets. Visitors also enjoyed the Atkins’ cold lemonade and ice cream. When the pond froze in the winter, the Atkins flooded its surface to thicken the ice. Then they cut the ice into manageable blocks and stored it between insulating layers of straw in a small cave, thereby providing ice during the summer heat of southern Utah.⁸ On one occasion, the St. George First and Second Wards gathered for a grand picnic to honor their former bishops. “Ice cream was duly dispensed by Wm. Atkin jr. and was prominent among the cooling facilities of the day,” a local newspaper reported.⁹

During most of the twentieth century, Atkinville devolved into a ghost town but by the beginning of the twenty-first century

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it became the site of a master-planned active adult lifestyle community renamed SunRiver. The Atkin household and their one-family village are more often remembered today for the sanctuary they provided for Elder Wilford Woodruff of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles during the late 1880s than for the memorable parties they hosted. Like a diamond fashioned under pressure, the Woodruff and Atkin relationship was created under the weight of government harassment.

Woodruff began practicing plural marriage, or polygamy, from its beginnings in Nauvoo. Decades after mobs drove the Latter-day Saints from the borders of the United States to the Great Basin desert in 1847, the federal government attempted to eradicate Mormon polygamy during the 1870s and 1880s. As President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and likely successor to President John Taylor, Woodruff espoused his Church's position on plural marriage. As a result, he was forced underground into hiding in southern Utah, beginning in January 1885, by U.S. federal marshals roaming the streets of Salt Lake City searching for Mormon polygamists.¹¹

Between 1885 and 1887, Woodruff found regular refuge from federal prosecution with the Atkin family in Atkinville, which lay three hundred miles to the south of Utah's capital city. One week after arriving in Utah's "Dixie," the senior Apostle penned his first recorded meeting of the Atkin family in his journal, although William and Rachel had probably encountered Woodruff while he served as president of the St. George Temple years earlier. On January 26, 1885, Woodruff and Elder George Teasdale, together with bodyguard William Thompson, traveled south from St. George to Atkinville by wagon, a distance of about ten miles. "Visited Price City [Atkinville] dined with Brother Atkins visited his fish Pond and returned home," the Church leader noted.¹²

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Subsequent events make it clear that the outdoorsman–Apostle was thrilled to have discovered the Atkin family’s fishing pond and hunting grounds.

Hiding from lawmen marauding throughout the settlements of southern Utah, Woodruff remained concealed in St. George under the moniker Lewis Allen, the name of his Connecticut boyhood friend.¹³ The Apostle returned to Atkinville later that January to hunt but met with disappointment. Since his earlier visit, the Atkin children had set fire to the rushes ringing the water’s perimeter. “[They] burned them [vegetation] up all around his pond so there was no hiding places to get the wild fowl or any other purpose,” he complained in his journal.¹⁴ Fearing for his safety in St. George, Woodruff thereafter hid in Bunkerville, Nevada. But by early March, he was back hiding again in St. George. For several months only select confidants, including William and Rachel Atkin, were aware of the Apostle’s whereabouts in southern Utah. In the middle of June 1885, however, Woodruff attended local Church services. “The people were vary much asstonished [*sic*] to see me not knowing that I was in the Country,” he noted with satisfaction.¹⁵ The following week Woodruff traveled to Atkinville to go fishing (he caught sixty fish that June afternoon).¹⁶

During the blistering summer months of 1885, Woodruff instigated numerous hunting and fishing excursions to Atkinville.¹⁷ The Church leader’s journals are peppered with details of these outdoor adventures. On August 8, for example, Woodruff, his bodyguard, and two boys traveled to the Atkin homestead, where they caught one hundred chub and shot three quail and seven rabbits.¹⁸ Woodruff returned two days later and bagged three quails and one rabbit.¹⁹ Early that September the Apostle and his bodyguard returned to the pond, where they secreted themselves

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to hunt ducks. "I shot 6 ducks got 4. Thompson 2 ducks," he documented.²⁰ The following week, the two men broke bread with William and Rachel's family. "I rod[e] to Atkins pond & took dinner with Atkins. I killed 4 quail 3 ducks 2 large fowl like snips one Cole black & one snow white & one large Herron."²¹ A few days later, the duo showed up for more hunting and fishing. "We rode to Atkins Pond & spent the day. We shot 10 wild Duck 4 Rabbits & one large fat Crane & cought abot 100 fish with hooks."²² This was Woodruff's first reference to fishing with "hooks," or fly-fishing, in Atkinville.²³

Limited in his social interactions on the "underground," Woodruff forged a deep camaraderie with his protectors. One wonders what topics they discussed during his visits. What did Woodruff and Atkin whisper about as they huddled in their willow blind, waiting for ducks and other birds to come within rifle's range? What stories and doctrines did they talk about while they fished? Woodruff may have shared his thoughts about polygamy and the devastating effects its federal prosecution was having on the Church.

We can better understand Woodruff's and Atkin's friendship from their personal correspondence. On August 18, 1885, Woodruff, still hiding in St. George, received the first of many letters from William in Atkinville. Between 1885 and 1894, the two exchanged dozens of letters—fifty-nine of which were preserved by Atkin descendants.²⁴

As time wore on, the pressures of confinement and loneliness amplified Woodruff's loneliness and frustration. In late September 1885, for example, his dear friend William Squires passed away in St. George. Following the burial services, the Apostle mourned, "So my friends drop off and leave me, but my turn will Come."²⁵ To overcome his grief and get some exercise, Woodruff

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rode to Atkinville. "I have lain Still so long I am under the Necessity of having 1 days exercise in a week for my health," he explained, "so to day Brother Thompson took me over to Atkins pond 8 miles. I took a boat went into the rushes & watched for ducks. Brother Thompson fished. We caught 6 ducks, 1 Rabbit, & a string of Chubs. We killed 2 Hawk & a Turkey buzzard."²⁶

Woodruff continued to defend plural marriage, but he found its prohibition to be a great trial for himself and the Latter-day Saints. One of his greatest challenges was his prolonged separation from his beloved first wife of forty-eight years, Phebe. In mid-October 1885, Woodruff learned that she had fallen and injured herself in Salt Lake City. Exiled in southern Utah, the Apostle was unable to assist or comfort his wife. He spent the balance of October overseeing proxy ordinance work in the St. George Temple as well as hunting and fishing in the surrounding Dixie wilderness, including Atkinville.²⁷ But on November 1, Woodruff received an urgent letter calling him home to Salt Lake City to attend to pressing family and Church business. Despite the risk of potential arrest by federal marshals, he left his southern sanctuary the next day and traveled north by buggy, arriving at his Salt Lake home, where he "found Mrs Woodruff quite poorly."²⁸ After giving his wife a priesthood blessing, the President of the Quorum of the Twelve turned his attentions to pressing ecclesiastical matters, including the excommunication of Elder Albert Carrington for adultery.²⁹

During November 1885, the personal, legal, and ecclesiastical storm battering Woodruff continued to rage—the biggest blow being Phebe's passing. He described his wife's final hours to the Atkin family in a letter: "On the evening of the [November] 9th I had an engagement to ride several miles out of the City to have an interview with presidents Taylor & Cannon but before I left I felt

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impressed to go & visit my wife I did, so at about 6 o'clock I saw she was fading. I laid My Hands upon her and blessed her and I anointed her for her burial kissed her bid her good by and sent my love to my friends in the spirit world. In two hours afterward she was dead."³⁰ The presence of federal marshals at his wife's funeral prevented Woodruff from attending. The Atkins, in turn, responded to Woodruff's letter, expressing their condolences over Phebe's death. "Brother Atkin I highly prize the kind feelings you and others manifest in my welfare & safety," Woodruff wrote back days later: "I am happy to be able to inform you that I have had a happy time with my Wives & Children with the exception of the Death & burial of my first wife and I have felt resoned to that knowg that She is far better off to be at rest than to live any longer in the midst of Living & Afflictions & pesecutn. She has worried about me Ever Since I left home & I would rather pass through the remained of all my afflictions alone than to have her share it any longer with me I remain your Brother in the Gospel of Christ."³¹

Woodruff's words convey the tenderness and depth of affection he had for his wife and the emotional intimacy he shared with the Atkin family.

Neither Phebe's death nor Woodruff's altered living arrangements stemmed the tide of legal pressure on the Apostle. The day after the funeral, Marshal Ireland stationed himself in front of Woodruff's Salt Lake City home, prompting the Apostle's immediate evacuation. For the next six months, Woodruff moved secretly throughout the Salt Lake Valley, staying with trusted friends. He also began living with Emma, his second wife of thirty-two years. By this time, Emma and Woodruff had six surviving children living in Salt Lake City: Emma Manella (twenty-five), Asahel (twenty-two), Clara (seventeen), Owen (thirteen),

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Winnifred (nine), and Mary Alice (six). Of these six children, only Mary Alice would ever visit Atkinville. However, all the Woodruff children knew of the Atkins and contributed short lines in their father's correspondence with the Atkin family.

Hoping to help their Apostle, William and Rachel invited Woodruff to flee northern Utah and hide with their family in Atkinville during December 1885. Woodruff declined their offer for the moment: "I am doing the best I know how and then have to trust in God. I don't know that I would be any safer in St. George than I would be at present." He then disclosed:

If the Edmonds Bill becomes a law it looks as though they would search hard through the Temple District of course. . . . If they get crowdng me to[o] hard perhaps it might be better for me to leave the Country than to go to prison or hide in the R. [*sic*] I have got much to[o] old to go to prison or hid in the Mountains for in Either Case I could not benefit the people. The Nation seems Determin to do all in their power to Destroy the Church & Kingdom of God from off the Earth. They never will have power to accomplish that but they may have power to Distress the Saints until Zion is Clensed and the Nations ripe for the sickle which is ripening very fast.

On a more personal note, Woodruff concluded by thanking the Atkins for their continued kindness. "Remember me kindly to all your family and Especially that little Grand Daughter [Nellie]. All my family are as well as usual," he wrote. "I attend no parties or public gathering. Can not [be] seen openly go no where ownly in the Night but it is like a prisoners life but better than to be in the pen[itentiary] for obeying the Lord For He is as unpopu- lar to day as He was in Jerrusalem."³²

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Woodruff continued hiding with his wife Emma in northern Utah during the first half of 1886. But when he learned that Marshal Brooks and his deputies were hot on his trail that July, Woodruff and several Church leaders immediately fled to the safety of St. George.³³ Weeks later, however, the presiding apostle covertly ventured back to Salt Lake City to be with his family. But after enduring prisonlike conditions in the valley for a season, Woodruff decided to again find sanctuary in southern Utah. This time he determined to have his wife Emma and seven-year-old daughter Mary Alice join him on the polygamy underground. Their other five children remained with relatives in the Salt Lake Valley. The Woodruff's party concealed themselves at the Thomas Cottam home that November. The apostle's present exile was made more bearable with his wife and daughter nearby. Eager to host their friend and Church leader, William and Rachel invited the Woodruffs to Atkinville at the end of November 1886. The men hunted migrating ducks and geese while the women busied themselves with meal preparation.³⁴ Two days later, Wilford and Emma Woodruff determined to move to the safety of Atkinville.³⁵ They made Atkinville their home on the underground during the end of November and early December 1886.

The Apostle sought sanctuary at the Atkin family village, where his personal safety was almost guaranteed and where chances to enjoy his favorite outdoor hobbies were plentiful.³⁶ To begin with, the Atkins' isolated homestead virtually ensured Woodruff's security from federal marshals. As President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Woodruff was one of the most wanted federal fugitives of his time. With lawmen regularly raiding St. George residences in search of polygamists, the Apostle required a secure hiding place. Atkinville provided it, with nearly a dozen miles of barren desert as a comfortable buffer for anyone

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hiding there. The wagon roads leading to Atkinville from both St. George to the north and Bunkerville, Nevada, to the south were easily surveyed for approaching teams or horses by Atkin family members. Furthermore, the rugged Arizona Strip, where a man or woman familiar with the land could remain hidden for prolonged periods, lay several miles south of Atkinville.

Woodruff entrusted the Atkin family with his safety. According to *The Story of Atkinville*, upon seeing the approaching federal marshals, William Thompson's son Will rode his horse back to the home to warn Woodruff and the Atkin family. This started a chain reaction. Nellie Atkin ran to the hilltop east of the house, where she scanned the roads for approaching riders. When she spotted the buggy of marshals (McGeary and Armstrong) in the distance, she alerted the family. The older Atkin family members then rushed to secrete Woodruff, along with blankets, foodstuffs, water, reading material, and his fishing pole, in a special boat, which they pushed into heavy cattails and rushes that lined the nearby pond's perimeter. Once the coast was clear, William Atkin walked to the pond and signaled with a duck call. When asked if he thought the federal marshals could spot him in the pond from the nearby bluff, Woodruff quipped that "there were plenty of places to hide where neither the marshals from the hill, the devil from below nor the Lord from above could see the boat."³⁷

Atkinville continued to provide the aging Apostle with his favorite outdoor sporting activities, which helped pass the tedium of exile. He relished opportunities to fish regularly in the Atkinville pond and hunt in the vicinity as the surrounding Virgin River Basin and tributaries were home to a variety of animals. The Atkins' man-made pond was stocked with fish from the Virgin River. Although William had planned to import carp for his pond, he was unable to stock them while Woodruff was visiting.

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After two weeks of hiding in Atkinville, the Woodruffs moved back to St. George, where they again hid with the Cottam family.³⁸ A few days before Christmas 1886, the Woodruffs and Thompsons returned to Atkinville and shot several ducks, quails, and rabbits for their holiday meal.³⁹ Despite sharing the joy of the Christmas season in Dixie with his wife and daughter, Woodruff craved personal and religious freedom. That New Year's Eve he bitterly recorded in his journal, "I spent this whole year in Exile, and had not the privilege of Attending one public Meeting or Conference And have been deprived of officiating in any of the ordinances of the Church in a Public Meeting."⁴⁰ But the following morning, Woodruff, together with his wife and daughter, celebrated the New Year in Atkinville.⁴¹

In early January 1887, the exiled Apostle learned that the U.S. government had passed the Edmunds-Tucker Bill, which legislated that privately conducted marriages were now felonies, that plural wives were obligated to bear witness against their polygamist husbands, and that the offspring of polygamist unions faced disinheritance. Moreover, he was disheartened to hear that Utah women could no longer vote, that polygamist men could not serve on juries or in public positions, that the Church was no longer a recognized corporation, and that the federal government was seeking to seize major Church assets.⁴² At this juncture, Woodruff determined that his wife and daughter should return to the comforts and family responsibilities of Salt Lake City while he remained in hiding alone in southern Utah.⁴³ The Woodruff family spent the next week together in Atkinville before saying good-bye.⁴⁴

After three months together in Utah's Dixie, the Woodruff family separated. "I parted this Morning with my wife Emma & last born child Alice," Woodruff lamented. "So I am left alone

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on[c]e more.”⁴⁵ Fortunately, he was surrounded by dear friends such as the families of William Atkin, William Thompson, James Bleak, Thomas Cottam, and John McAllister. Moreover, Atkinville and its hunting and fishing grounds continued to be one of the Apostle’s favorite places to visit during this trying time.⁴⁶ In fact, when Marshal Armstrong arrived in St. George in search of Woodruff in late February 1887, the Apostle packed his bags and moved to the safety of Atkinville. “We got 8 ducks,” he noted that first day back in hiding with the Atkins.⁴⁷

The Atkin family village provided a much needed sanctuary for Woodruff from February 1887 until June of that year, and he became an honorary Atkin family member during this time. William and Rachel’s family even constructed an extra stone bedroom for his comfort, which was thereafter known as the Wilford Woodruff room. Tellingly, the Atkin children affectionately referred to him as “Grandpa Woodruff.” Rather than acting self-important and distancing himself from the daily rigors of pioneer life in Atkinville, Woodruff served the Atkins both spiritually and temporally. That spring the Apostle regularly attended family sacrament services in the Atkin home. “I held a meeting with the Atkins family. I had the seconded Lecture in the Doctrines & Covenants read and I made remarks upon it. . . . We partook of the Sacrament,” he noted after one of these weekly gatherings.⁴⁸ Woodruff also ordained four of the Atkin boys to more advanced priesthood offices, participated in a family baptismal service, and gathered for Atkin family councils.⁴⁹

As an “adopted” family member, Woodruff also provided fresh fowl and fish for the Atkin dinner table. Perhaps hunting, fishing, and farming were the Apostle’s way of doing what he could to reciprocate the Atkins’ kindness.⁵⁰ The senior Apostle welcomed the opportunity to contribute his physical talents. That

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March, Woodruff ventured south to the Arizona Strip to help out with the Atkins' sheep herd. "We rode in a Buggy 10 M * 4 on Horsback over vary steep Mountains & Hills vary rocky & rugh to Atkins spring in Arizona whare He is keeping his sheep herd," he noted with satisfaction in his journal.⁵¹ Weeks later Woodruff returned to the Atkins' sheep pastures in Arizona to help save fifteen motherless lambs, but he could not pass up the opportunity to shoot three ducks.⁵² Later that May, Woodruff also helped shear the Atkins' sheep. "I tied up wool & swept the platform. Brother Atkin kept the shears sharp," he recorded in his journal.⁵³ Years later, while serving as Church President, Woodruff referred to this shearing episode in a letter to William Atkin: "I would like to see your flock of sheep. You did not say what Number you will have to get along with the shearing without me this year."⁵⁴

Due to President Taylor's declining health in the Salt Lake Valley, Atkinville became almost a satellite headquarters for the Church during this time. William Thompson brought the Church's mail to Woodruff in Atkinville, where Woodruff wrote an enormous amount of official ecclesiastical correspondence and letters to various friends, family members, and civic authorities. From the Atkins' home, he addressed many of the questions and concerns plaguing the Church and its leadership during those tumultuous times. Woodruff shuttled regularly between Atkinville and neighboring St. George to administer Church business. In late March 1887, Woodruff traveled to St. George to meet with Elder Heber J. Grant.⁵⁵ During their discussion, Grant talked to Woodruff about prophetic succession within the Church. From Atkinville, Woodruff later wrote a strongly worded letter to his junior Apostle filled with reasons why there should be no exception to the precedence of the senior Apostle becoming the next Church President.⁵⁶ An Atkin family saying borrows a phrase

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from Isaiah 11:3: “Out of Mormon Dixie went forth the law of the church and the word of the Lord from Atkinville.”⁵⁷

In early June 1887, Woodruff traveled to the St. George Temple, where he received confidential word of President Taylor’s failing health. “I was informed that President Taylor was in a Critical Condition. Legs bloated full. Could not turn in bed. Liable to leave us any day. [Neither] his family nor the public are aware of it. Should he drop off suddenly it will be a heavy Blow to Israel. He is calm and Composed.”⁵⁸ The next morning the Apostle wrote, “I did not rest well. To much deep thinking to Sleep.”⁵⁹ Woodruff briefly returned to Atkinville to retrieve some of his personal items before moving back to the Cottam home in St. George, where he remained until the beginning of July, although he still visited the Atkins several times.⁶⁰ Woodruff made his last visit to Atkinville on July 12, 1887, when he collected the remainder of his belongings and said farewell.⁶¹

Although Woodruff never returned to Atkinville, the family village remained a place of refuge for other LDS polygamists. Notable Church members who hid in Atkinville include George Q. Cannon, David H. Cannon, James Andrus, Casper Bryner, William Thompson, James Bleak, and John D. T. McAllister.⁶² Woodruff, then living in Salt Lake City, once enclosed several letters for brethren hiding in Atkinville in a letter to William Atkin. “I received a Letter from Brother McAllister and I judged He was at your Home And perhaps several other Brethren and so I have written several Letters and enclosed direct to you which I wish you to Distribute when you have a Chance as they may be with you and if they are not send them when you have a Chance,” the Apostle wrote. “It seems that you was not inspired any to soon to build that stone room that I occupied as it may accommodate a Number of men.”⁶³

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Paradoxically, Atkinville became and remained a safe house for polygamists like Woodruff because William and Rachel did not practice plural marriage themselves. The Atkins apparently felt that they were building the kingdom of God in their own way by providing a refuge for others in the practice. Rachel's sentiments about polygamy and William's potential involvement have long been retold by family members:

Rachel spent long hours cooking for [the polygamists] while they fished and hunted, and since she felt that she was assisting in promoting the work of the Lord here on earth and was innately a most hospitable person, she accepted the extra work with little if any murmuring or complaining.

However, the tradition continues, she felt that her hospitality and forbearance had been stretched to the breaking point one day, when some of these harassed brethren, hearing that the U.S. marshals were in St. George, decided to do some "fishing" at Atkinville. William was immediately dispatched to the garden for vegetables and two of the boys were sent to rob the rooster of three or four fat pullets from his harem to furnish fried chicken for the visiting Mormon polygamists.

While Rachel was in her very warm kitchen preparing dinner, she overheard the brethren telling William of the trials that following God's laws entailed when they were in conflict with those made by man. Now and then Rachel thought she detected a sour note in the recital. Later she heard one of them tell William that it was not fair that he, her William, who had not complied with the law of patriarchal marriage, should be allowed to prosper and live in peace and comfort with his family while they were sacrificing so much for the Lord's cause.

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When he went on, with the support of the other brethren, to urge her William to take another wife, her Irish temper flared, there was a crash of breaking china and before those bewildered elders realized what was happening she stood in the doorway, the personification of outraged womanhood, and with the sizzling chicken behind her, proceeded to roast those meddling men in no uncertain terms. In brief, according to family tradition, she told them that she had heretofore been willing to give them the hospitality and protection of her home, but if they could not hold their meddling tongues they would no longer be welcome. As for William, he could get another wife if he wanted but, and she used the age old threat, as soon as No. 2 stepped foot over her threshold, she, Rachel, would step out and go back to England where he would never see or hear from her again. She meant it and William knew she did.⁶⁴

Although we know Rachel's position on the practice of plural marriage, how did William feel? Did he experience any resentment towards his wife? What pressures did he feel and how did this affect their relationship? These questions are unanswerable. The fact remains that, despite ecclesiastical pressures and formal pronouncements by Church leaders, William and Rachel did not enter into polygamy, even while aiding its practitioners.⁶⁵ The Atkins were not alone in their decision; the percentage of practicing polygamous adults varied by Mormon community. During the decade that Woodruff and other polygamists made Atkinville their sanctuary, according to historian Larry Logue, nearly 40 percent of worthy St. George households were involved in plural marriage.⁶⁶ At any rate, Atkinville retained its status as an open sanctuary for many of these polygamists on the underground.

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During the polygamy raids of the 1870s and 1880s, the majority of the Saints stood with their prophet, John Taylor, in defying the federal government. The William and Rachel Atkin family, including the children, was honored and delighted to have Woodruff as their guest, despite his fugitive status. “All of us children knew [Woodruff] was in the home and we, as well as our parents were proud to have our home selected for this purpose, since conditions seemed to require his keeping in seclusion for the time,” son Henry recalled. “The situation was explained to us and we were told never to mention the fact of his being here, for fear harm might come to this beloved successor of President Brigham Young [and John Taylor]. We would have stood almost any torture before we would have exposed President Wilford Woodruff, or have had anything happen to him through our carelessness.”⁶⁷ Likewise, son Hyrum reminisced, “We kids, Nellie, May and I could look some of the officers, who came looking for President Woodruff, in the eyes and say we didn’t know anything about the man. So the officers would go away.”⁶⁸ Family friend Joseph Walker added, “It was certainly no small honor, even as it was a heavy responsibility, to have such an eminent man’s safety and welfare entrusted to this family. . . . [Woodruff’s] residency there lent luster and added importance to the place far beyond anything else that could have happened to the village.”⁶⁹ Atkin descendants have often repeated these sentiments with pride.

For nearly a decade, Woodruff corresponded regularly with the William and Rachel Atkin family. The Apostle-turned-Church-President made frequent references to the special times he shared with the Atkin family in his letters. “I want you to give my love and Blessing to all your Sons & daughters. [Mary] Alice enquired particularly about May and Nellie & sent Love to all. I expect the ducks on its part & the quails will be glad I am shut

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up in Salt Lake County,” Woodruff wrote on one occasion.⁷⁰ In January 1889, Woodruff acknowledged, “I don’t think the Ducks or fish in your pond are looking for any more trouble from me. Yet I would like to Look at them some more.”⁷¹ As Church President he wrote to William Atkin:

Now Brother Wm I am not going to address you alone and Leave Sister Atkin out who has cooked for me for a year as I tell you we have got to Acknowledge our Wives or we will be in a bad fix. I have Eat at your table for something like a year with Sister [Atkin] At the Head to serve us and I think we would have been bad off without her so I must acknowledge her as the Lady of the Home who has done me & my family many kindnesses. I cannot forget the many kindnesses & hours of Comfort I have received in that Stone Room built for my benefit and I would like to spend a few more hours there if I had a Chance.⁷²

Consumed with official duties in Salt Lake City, however, Woodruff never returned to Atkinville.

The relationship between Wilford Woodruff and the William and Rachel Atkin family was a friendship forged in exile. The senior Apostle found sanctuary from the law in Atkinville and called Atkinville his home and his sporting grounds. He also considered the Atkin children to be his adopted grandchildren and protectors. While hiding in the deserts of Utah, to paraphrase Thomas G. Alexander, Woodruff was not fed by ravens like Elijah of old (see 1 Kings 17:2–6) but rather by a family who loved him dearly—the household of William and Rachel Atkin.⁷³

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NOTES

1. Lewis Allen (Wilford Woodruff) to William Atkin, April 4, 1888, Woodruff–Atkin Correspondence, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
2. Levi Atkin, “This is the History of My Husband’s Grandfather Henry Atkin,” manuscript (photocopy), 2, copy in author’s possession.
3. Grace Atkin Woodbury and Angus Munn Woodbury, *The Story of Atkinville: A One-Family Village* (Salt Lake City: privately printed, 1957), 6–7, 44.
4. Woodbury and Woodbury, *Story of Atkinville*, 7–9, 13.
5. Elwood Mead, *Report of Irrigation Investigations in Utah*, Bulletin No. 124 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), 223. Portions of the Atkinville ditch could still be seen in 2000.
6. Joseph T. Atkin, “Notes on the Life of Joseph T. Atkin,” manuscript (photocopy), 3, copy in author’s possession.
7. Joseph Carpenter, “Our Surroundings,” *Union and Echo* (St. George, Utah), March 1883.
8. Woodbury and Woodbury, *Story of Atkinville*, 14.
9. Joseph Carpenter, *Union* (St. George, UT), June 25, 1896.
10. For the best treatment of Wilford Woodruff’s life, see Thomas G. Alexander, *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991).
11. Historical studies discussing Mormon polygamy on the “underground” are “On the Underground,” in Gustave O. Larson, *The “Americanization” of Utah for Statehood* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1971), 155–63; Francis M. Gibbons, “The Underground,” in *Wilford Woodruff: Wondrous Worker, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 324–42; Stephan Cresswell, “The U.S. Department of Justice in Utah Territory, 1870–1890,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 218–19; Andrew Karl Larson, “Hare and Hounds: The Polygamy Raid,” in *“I Was Called to Dixie”: The Virgin River Basin, Unique Experiences in Mormon Pioneering* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1961), 624–37; and Tracey E. Panek, “Search and Seizure in

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- Utah: Recounting the Antipolygamy Raids,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 316–34.
12. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898 Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983–85), 8:300–301, January 26, 1885.
 13. Thomas G. Alexander, “An Apostle in Exile: Wilford Woodruff and the St. George Connection,” 13, paper presented at the Juanita Brooks Lecture Series, St. George, Utah, 1994, Dixie State College, St. George, Utah, copy in the author’s possession.
 14. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:301, January 31, 1885.
 15. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:319, June 14, 1885.
 16. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:321, June 19, 1885.
 17. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:322, June 29, 1885.
 18. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:328, August 8, 1885.
 19. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:328, August 10, 1885.
 20. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:332, September 5, 1885.
 21. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:332, September 12, 1885.
 22. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:333, September 19, 1885.
 23. Woodruff became acquainted with fly-fishing while serving a mission in the British Isles, and it became a favorite pastime for him.
 24. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:329, August 18, 1885. While the family preserved fifty-nine letters from Wilford Woodruff to William Atkin, family members and other historians have been unable to locate the correspondence from William Atkin to Wilford Woodruff. Regardless, one can gain insight into the letter’s contents by Woodruff’s response and allusion to William’s letters.
 25. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:335, September 27, 1885. Woodruff’s “turn” did not come for another thirteen years.
 26. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:335, September 28, 1885.
 27. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:339, October 17, 1885.
 28. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:342, November 5, 1885.

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29. Lewis Allen (Wilford Woodruff) to William Atkin, December 13, 1885, Woodruff–Atkin Correspondence.
30. Allen to Atkin, December 13, 1885, Woodruff–Atkin Correspondence.
31. Allen to Atkin, December 13, 1885, Woodruff–Atkin Correspondence.
32. Allen to Atkin, December 28, 1885, Woodruff–Atkin Correspondence.
33. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:397, July 20, 1886.
34. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:410, November 20, 1886.
35. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:410, November 22, 1886.
36. See Phil Murdock and Fred E. Woods, "I Dreamed of Ketching Fish': The Outdoor Life of Wilford Woodruff," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 4 (1997): 6–47; and James B. Allen and Herbert H. Frost, "Wilford Woodruff, Sportsman," *BYU Studies* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 113–17.
37. Woodbury and Woodbury, *Story of Atkinville*, 27.
38. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:411, December 4, 1886.
39. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:413, December 18, 1886.
40. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:416, December 31, 1886.
41. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:419, January 1, 1887.
42. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 133.
43. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:421, January 15, 1887.
44. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:421–22, January 17, 18, and 23, 1887.
45. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:423, January 28, 1887.
46. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:425–26, February 14 and 19, 1887.
47. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:427, February 26, 1887.
48. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:438, May 22, 1887.
49. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:434–35, 437, 440, April 17 and 24, 1887; May 8 and 29, 1887; June 3, 1887.
50. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:440, June 3, 1887.
51. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:428, March 9, 1887.
52. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:436, May 3, 1887.
53. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:438, May 17, 1887.

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54. Woodruff to Atkin, April 26, 1890, Woodruff–Atkin Correspondence.
55. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:430, March 20, 1887.
56. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:431, March 28, 1887.
57. Woodbury and Woodbury, *Story of Atkinville*, 26.
58. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:441, June 8, 1887.
59. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:441, June 8, 1887.
60. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:444–45, July 2, 8, and 9, 1887.
61. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 8:446, July 12, 1887.
62. Woodbury and Woodbury, *Story of Atkinville*, 32; see Woodruff to Atkin, April 23, 1888, Woodruff–Atkin Correspondence.
63. Woodruff to Atkin, April 4, 1888, Woodruff–Atkin Correspondence.
64. Woodbury and Woodbury, *Story of Atkinville*, 33. Grace Woodbury shared another variation during an Atkin family reunion. She recounted, “One day after the church authorities had called a meeting of some of the prominent townsmen and asked them to take another wife, Grandpa [William] came home and told Grandma [Rachel] about it. She carefully threw a few kitchen utensils around and then said, ‘Now bring the hussy home if you want to.’ He didn’t and they lived happily ever after.” See “The Atkin Reunion of March 23 & 24, 1951,” manuscript, (photocopy), 2, copy in author’s possession.
65. There was pressure on Mormon men and women to enter into polygamy during this era. On many occasions, Church leaders stressed the need for worthy male members to take additional wives. In 1875 the Atkins’ beloved apostle Woodruff stated: “We have many bishops and elders who have but one wife. They are abundantly qualified to enter the higher law and take more, but their wives will not let them. Any man who will permit a woman to lead him and bind him down is but little account in the church and Kingdom of God.” Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 490. On April 26, 1884, Atkin family friend Charles L. Walker attended a special St. George priesthood meeting and listened to President John Taylor, and apostles George Q. Cannon, and Moses Thatcher speak on a variety of subjects. “Pres. George Q Cannon said He did not feel like holding up his

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- hand to sustain anyone as a presiding officer over any portion of the people who had not entered into the Patriarchal order of Marriage,” he noted. William Atkin likely was in attendance. Andrew Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1980), 2:629.
66. Larry Logue, “A Time of Marriage: Monogamy and Polygamy in a Utah Town,” *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 10. See also Larry Logue, “St. George and Nineteenth-Century Polygamy,” unpublished paper presented at the Juanita Brooks Lecture Series, St. George, Utah, January 23, 1990), Dixie State College, St. George, Utah, copy in author’s possession.
 67. “Life of Henry Thomas Atkin,” 5. See also Mabel Jarvis, “Henry T. Atkin Interview,” *Washington County News*, July 8, 1937.
 68. Hyrum Atkin, “Hyrum Atkin, 1954,” manuscript (photocopy), 1, copy in possession of author.
 69. Woodbury and Woodbury, *Story of Atkinville*, 26.
 70. Woodruff to Atkin, August 7, 1887, Woodruff–Atkin Correspondence.
 71. Woodruff to Atkin, January 30, 1889, Woodruff–Atkin Correspondence.
 72. Woodruff to Atkin, April 26, 1890, Woodruff–Atkin Correspondence.
 73. See Alexander, “Apostle in Exile,” 17.