

# *Prologue:* The Train Ride

**O**n an early Monday morning in September 1897, Joseph F. Merrill sat in a train crossing the dusty plains of Wyoming, ambling toward his native home of Utah. As he traveled west, he must have noticed the rich greens of the East giving way to the grasslands of the central states and then gradually turning into the brown sage scrub and alkali deserts of the West. Merrill was returning home after nearly six years, on and off, in pursuit of higher education in the great institutions of the eastern United States. He had been raised in a frontier polygamist family and was considered backward by the majority of the world, but Merrill's educational odyssey was sparked by his father, Marriner Merrill, an Apostle in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and one of the more well-known polygamists in the newly minted state of Utah. Beginning his higher education at the University of Utah, the younger Merrill then moved to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where he obtained a master's degree in chemistry. He then traveled farther east to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he aspired to be the first native Utahn to obtain a PhD. For nearly three years, he worked furiously to complete coursework and

then a thesis, never returning home, spending his summers obtaining further training at the University of Chicago. It was only shortly before he boarded the train home to Utah that he had confided to his fiancée in Utah, Laura Hyde, the hopelessness of his quest: he would most likely return home without the long-sought-after degree. He tried to be philosophical, writing to Laura that the knowledge he had gained was the *real* treasure, telling her that the degree meant little to him in the end. According to his later recollections, as the train sped to its destination his mind wandered back to the beginning of his studies at the University of Utah. It was there, outside his insular upbringing in Cache Valley, that Joseph first perceived the tension sometimes found between the spiritual and the scholarly.

Joseph later wrote, “I was a student at the university during 1887–89. This was a period of intense feeling between the Mormons and Gentiles. Most of the Church leaders were living ‘on the underground’ and were continually hunted by ‘deputy marshalls.’ To escape inhuman persecution the [Saints] had forsaken their comfortable homes in lovely Nauvoo forty years before and in the midst of innumerable hardships and unbelievable sufferings they had fled to the Rocky Mountain wilderness.” He continued, explaining that “because of persistent struggles with unfriendly natural conditions they had established themselves in these peaceful vales where they wanted, above all, to feel free to worship their God ‘according to the dictates of their own conscience.’”<sup>1</sup>

When Joseph arrived at the University of Utah, antagonism between the Saints and their enemies was again on the rise. “In the later [1880s] old persecutions were returning and bitterness was increasing,” he recalled. “Our people strongly felt they had the right to live in peace in a land they had reclaimed and made habitable. We at the University felt we were between ‘the devil and the deep blue sea,’” he later wrote. “The Gentiles regarded us as a Mormon institution. The Mormons looked on us as an ‘infidel factory.’ Hence we did not enjoy the whole support of either faction.”<sup>2</sup>

Faced with the alternatives of leaving the University of Utah and his love of learning to return to a rural life, or playing the apostate against his native faith, Merrill chose yet another alternative: disengagement. “I was

going to Utah with my mind convinced that it would be well for me to avoid public activity in Church service . . . I resolved in my public capacity to be neutral toward both factions. I must exhibit no partisanship to that extent I might endanger the good work of the university.”<sup>3</sup> He was passionate about both his scientific research and his faith, though at this point in his life he seems to have felt more comfortable in the realm of the natural than the supernatural. As a member of a religion devoted to the principle of personal revelation, Merrill professed to have experienced only one moment in which he felt the voice of God speak, notably on the night before he departed home for the University of Utah.

So, sitting on the train and secure in his predestined course, Merrill turned his attention toward a Salt Lake City newspaper, glancing down on a public notice of new officers called within the Church. He immediately noticed the name of Richard R. Lyman, a close friend from Merrill’s time at the University of Michigan. The article announced Lyman as the new president of the Young Men’s Association in the Salt Lake Stake. Merrill thought, “Congratulations, Richard.” Immediately, the words “You are to be his first counselor” entered his thoughts. He later noted that these words came into his mind, but they did not originate there. “These last words were not read from the paper or audibly spoken in my ears,” he recalled. “They were forcibly impressed upon my consciousness as if they had been uttered in thunderous tones.” Merrill shook. “Is not this strange?” were the next words formed in his astonished mind.<sup>4</sup>

When Merrill arrived home the following day, he resolved that, however difficult it might be, he would walk the line between “the devil and the deep blue sea.” For the next fifty years, he demonstrated his commitment by constantly working to build bridges between the world of academia and the world of faith. From a struggling student in Baltimore with doubts about his life, his faith, and his own potential, he grew to become a fiery advocate for the causes he espoused. “Joseph F. Merrill is a man, who, if duty demanded it, would walk through fire,” spoke one of his scientific and later apostolic cohorts.<sup>5</sup> Seemingly always determined to choose the more difficult path, Merrill returned to Johns Hopkins two years after the experience on the train and received his PhD in 1899.<sup>6</sup> He spent the next thirty years of his life fighting battles with his collegiate

colleagues and in the Utah State Legislature to create the School of Mines and Engineering at the University of Utah. During this time, determined that his children would not follow his own path of solely secular education, he launched a unique program of religious education. With the help of others, Merrill created the first seminary, a program that later became the signature educational program of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. More than anyone, Merrill is responsible for the distinctive Latter-day Saint program of supplemental religious education now operating in dozens of countries and serving nearly a million students.

From 1928 to 1933, he served as the commissioner of the Church Educational System and presided over the radical transformation of the Latter-day Saint educational system from a network of schools to a web of institutions devoted to providing religious training to young members of the Church. Facing the onslaught of the Great Depression, from 1930 to 1933 Merrill twisted arms, threatened, and cajoled his way into transferring nearly every Church school to state control. In keeping the schools from outright closure, he saved thousands of jobs and laid the groundwork for the current Utah system of higher education. At the same time, Merrill fought off a serious threat to the remaining system of religious education that arose from the Utah State Board of Education. Merrill launched himself with all his energy into a struggle to save the system he had initiated and to ensure its continued legal status.

Merrill's scientific and administrative accomplishments created an impressive legacy, but to this he added a third accomplishment of spiritual bridge building. In a time when the entire country was embroiled in the furious battles about the teaching of evolution and duels between the advocates of scripture and the learned scientists of the age, Merrill walked a narrow path between the two worlds. "I am convinced that religion is as reasonable as science, that religious truths and scientific truths nowhere are in conflict, that there is one great unifying purpose extending throughout all of creation; that we are living in a wonderful, though at the present time deeply mysterious world; and that there is an all-wise, all-powerful Creator back of it all," he wrote to the first teacher in the Church's program of university-level institutes of religion.<sup>7</sup> As camps gathered on the side of religious fundamentalism and the side of scien-

tific dogmatism, Merrill joined the ranks of a unique class of individual, the scientist-apostle. During Merrill's era, the ranks of leadership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints contained a number of men—James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, and Richard R. Lyman, among others—who held the apostolic office but were also well-respected in the scientific community. In his time, Merrill felt comfortable drawing from both worlds in his preaching. In his apostolic addresses, he was just as likely to quote from a scientific study as he was to quote from scripture.

Throughout his life, Merrill encouraged others to find their own ways to connect faith and reason. “We need in the Church a group of scholars learned in history, science, and philosophy, scholars of standing and ability,” he declared in an address at a Church-owned school.<sup>8</sup> Applying principles of rigor and study to the realm of faith, he recruited the first Latter-day Saint scholars in the field of religion, sponsoring their studies at divinity schools and then placing them in important offices in the Church Educational System. In doing so, he created a group of scholars who were not quite priests and rabbis but were their own unique brand of secular teachers with spiritual inclinations. This corps of religious educators and their work sent ripples throughout the Latter-day Saint faith, fostering generations of biblical studies, apologetics, and, in some cases, critics of Church practice and doctrine.

Called as a mission president in 1933 but never having served as a missionary himself, Merrill cast aside old methods of proselytizing in favor of newer approaches. “Our missionary methods are very inefficient. They are largely inherited. We have not changed our methods to keep up with the changing times,” he wrote apologetically to an interested investigator.<sup>9</sup> As president of the European Mission, the largest and most vital Church mission during the 1930s, Merrill launched an initiative to use the latest methods of media and distribution to bring the Latter-day Saint message to the masses. He pushed the developments of new missionary materials that used the latest technologies in audio and visual presentation to forward the work of the Church. He handpicked one missionary, Gordon B. Hinckley, to spearhead this media effort and thereby launched a career that would play a vital role in the rise of the modern Church.

As the years passed, Merrill grew more secure in his faith, even while he struggled to cope with the tragedies of his life. He was widowed twice, lost a son, and finally saw his youngest daughter consumed by cancer. In confronting these challenges, he worked to overcome death and disease by combining the principles of scientific nutrition and the health codes of the Church. Writing of the death of his beloved first wife from cancer, he recorded, “Had we understood and observed well the principles of nutrition I think she might still be with me.”<sup>10</sup> Later, when the namesake daughter of this wife was diagnosed with the same disease, he launched a determined course of treatment, drawing from both science and scripture. When he failed, he became more reconciled to his own helplessness in such cases and closer to accepting the mysterious fortunes and misfortunes of mortality.

Yet he remained ever the scientist until the end of his life. He even submitted to the Physical Research Society of Boston a study of his enigmatic theophany on the train to Utah in September 1897. Joseph F. Merrill always saw science and religion as two oft-intersecting paths to the same destination. He was fond of quoting a couplet learned in his youth: “Truth is truth wherever found, on heathen or on Christian ground.”<sup>11</sup> The only book Merrill produced during his ministry as an Apostle was entitled *The Truth Seeker and Mormonism*. It contained more scientific explanations of the beauty and order of the natural world than it did theological arguments. Determined to walk a path “between the devil and the deep blue sea” in finding a harmony between the truths of the natural and the supernatural, Joseph F. Merrill serves as a guide for any seeker of truth.

## Notes

1. Joseph F. Merrill, “The Lord Overrides,” *Improvement Era*, July 1934, 413. Merrill may have been using quotation marks around “deputy marshalls” to refer to undeputized people in the community who were helping the federal marshals.
2. Merrill, “The Lord Overrides,” 413.
3. Merrill, “The Lord Overrides,” 413.
4. Merrill, “The Lord Overrides,” 413.
5. Richard R. Lyman, “Dr. Joseph F. Merrill,” *Improvement Era*, November 1931, 9–10.

6. Alice Louise Reynolds, "Dr. Joseph Francis Merrill," *Relief Society Magazine*, November 1931, 604.
7. Ward H. Magleby, "1926—Another Beginning, Moscow, Idaho," *Impact*, Winter 1968, 22–23.
8. Joseph F. Merrill, "Brigham Young University: Past, Present, and Future," *Deseret News*, 20 December 1930.
9. Joseph F. Merrill to C. R. Irving, 12 March 1935, Joseph F. Merrill Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.
10. Joseph F. Merrill Journal, 9 June 1923, Merrill Papers, box 1, folder 1.
11. Joseph F. Merrill, address (Salt Lake Tabernacle, 27 February 1927), printed in *Deseret News*, 5 March 1927.