Heroes and Heroines:

Orrin Porter Rockwell

By Lawrence Cummins

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Listening to the Prophet Joseph Smith tell the story of the angel and the hidden plates, young Porter Rockwell's adventurous nature was stirred. The Smiths and Rockwells, frontier neighbors in Manchester, New York, often visited each other. Although Porter was eight years younger than the Prophet, a bond of friendship between the two was quickly formed. Later, when Joseph needed money to publish The Book of Mormon, Porter picked berries by moonlight—after his chores were done—and sold them. When there were no berries to pick, he gathered wood and hauled it to town to sell. The money he earned was given to the Prophet.

The two families remained loyal to each other, and when the Smiths moved to Fayette, New York, the Rockwells followed. Sixteen-year-old Porter was probably the youngest member of the first group to be baptized into the Church, after it was organized in 1830. When the Fayette Branch of the Church moved to Kirtland, Ohio, Porter went with them. However, his stay there was short. Porter was sent with the first group of Saints to Jackson County, Missouri, the intended central gathering place for members of the Church. The elders often met at Porter's home to discuss ways of protecting the Saints from the lawless Missouri mobs who were persecuting them.

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

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

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

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

After Porter’s release from jail, he walked most of the way to Nauvoo, Illinois. He arrived at Joseph Smith’s house on Christmas Day in 1843, as the Prophet and his friends were having a supper party. “During the festivities,” Joseph recounted later, “a man with his hair long and falling over his shoulders, and apparently drunk, came in and acted like a Missourian. I requested the captain of the police to put him out of doors. A scuffle ensued, and … to my great surprise and joy untold, I discovered it was my long-tried, warm, but cruelly persecuted friend, Orrin Porter Rockwell.” (History of the Church, 6:134–135.)

It is believed by those who knew Porter Rockwell best that it was on this occasion that the Prophet Joseph promised Porter that if he remained faithful to the Church and didn’t cut his hair, he would never suffer death from a bullet. From then on, Porter wore his long hair braided and tucked into a bob at the back of his neck. The sight of Joseph and Porter riding together out to the Prophet’s farm was not uncommon. And when Joseph went to Washington, D.C., to see if government authorities could help right the wrongs suffered by the Saints at the hands of the Missouri mobs, Porter went with him.

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

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

In 1849 Porter Rockwell was appointed deputy marshall of Great Salt Lake City, and he was a peace officer in Utah until his death. When pursuing lawbreakers, Porter was relentless, and his endurance was legendary. He would follow a trail at a gallop in his buckboard where others would walk their horses, searching for clues. Detractors make much of the fact that Rockwell could neither read nor write. Yet he was remarkably successful in a number of business enterprises. It should be remembered, too, that illiteracy was not uncommon in the nineteenth century. Porter remained loyal to his family and friends, and he was generous to others who needed his help. A touching act of Porter’s charity, recorded in a letter, was the gift of his shorn hair to the widow of Don Carlos Smith, the brother of Joseph Smith. The woman had lost her hair when she had typhoid fever, and Porter’s hair was used to make her a wig. When Porter’s hair regrew, he wore it in a bob again.

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

[illustrations] Illustrated by Paul Mann