

Orrin Porter Rockwell
Lehi Yesteryears
by Richard Van Wagoner

He left a name at which the world grows pale
To paint a moral and adorn a tale

We Americans like our champions faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. We Mormons like our heroes even bigger than that. As a result many of our prominent folk from the past have been granted near mythic status. Orrin Porter Rockwell, a resident of Lehi from 1858-1861, is no doubt our community's most notorious citizen of yesteryear. Depending on whose list you, read he may have killed forty to one hundred men throughout his lifetime.

Porter Rockwell was born in Belcher, Massachusetts on June 28, 1813. By 1830 the Rockwells were living one mile from Joseph Smith's family in Manchester, New York. Porter was baptized shortly after the church was organized. His 1832 marriage to Luana Beebe ended in separation ten years later. He later married a Mrs Davis, Mary Ann Neff, and Christine Olsen, but was never a polygamist. One of the American West's most enduring legends, Porter also aired fourteen children.

In 1840, Joseph Smith asked Rockwell to be one of his Nauvoo bodyguards. Porter replied, "your enemies are my enemies, Joseph". Two years later he was arrested in St. Louis and charged with the attempted murder of Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs. John C. Bennett, a former member of the LDS First Presidency claimed. "In the spring of the year, Smith offered a reward of five hundred dollars to any man who would secretly assassinate Governor Boggs". After the attempt on Bogg's life, according to Bennett, "Smith said to me, speaking of Boggs, 'The Destroying Angel' had done the work, as I predicted, but Rockwell was not the man who shot; the Angel did it."

Rockwell never denied shooting Boggs. General Patrick E. Connor reported

that Rockwell told him, “I shot through the window and thought I had killed him, but I had only wounded him; I was damned sorry that I had not killed the son of a b-----!”

After Rockwell returned to Nauvoo from a Missouri jail cell in 1842, Joseph prophesied on Christmas Day, “Orrin Porter Rockwell, so long as ye shall remain loyal and true to the faith, (you) need fear no enemy. Cut not thy hair and no bullet or blade can harm thee.” Rockwell did not cut his hair until 1855. When he did it was to provide the widow of the Prophet’s brother, Don Carlos Smith, with a wig to replace her hair lost from typhoid fever. Porter afterwards claimed that he could no longer control his drinking and swearing even though he grew his hair long again.

Porter Rockwell could not read nor write. Like his friend Joseph Smith, he suffered a life-long limp because of a childhood injury. Rockwell’s voice was high-pitched, and when he became emotional, it raised to a high falsetto, “an unnerving squeak” as some called it.

To the Eastern Press, Porter was “The Destroying Angel of Mormondom,” Chief of the Danites,” “one of the pleasantest murderers I ever met.” Stories about his “immorality” and “quick trigger” spice Mormon history. Once he reportedly dodged the rapid fire of several outlaws, then routed them with deadly accuracy. “When the smoke cleared, he shook himself like a great shaggy bear and several pistol balls of various calibers fell from the folds of his ill-fitting homespun coat, thus offering witnesses additional evidence of the fulfillment of Joseph Smith’s prophecy protecting Rockwell from harm.”

Another time a young gunslinger got the drop on Rockwell. “Say your prayers,” he demanded. Rockwell replied, “you wouldn’t try and shoot a man without a cap on your pistol, would you?” The instant the man glanced at this gun, he was blown from his saddle by Rockwell, who had a gun hidden in his pocket.

Excellent biographies of Porter Rockwell have been written by Harold Schindler and Richard L. Devey. They missed a few intriguing stories found in old Lehi newspapers however. Local historian A.B. Anderson recalled that Porter was

an early settler of Lehi and often visited here where his son Orrin made his home (the son is buried in the Lehi cemetery). Anderson wrote that the elder Rockwell “often came to Lehi riding his thoroughbred saddle horse with his dog trotting behind him. When he bought a steak for his homeward trip he also bought one for his dog. The town folks knew of Porter’s presence for it furnished the home talk of the town.”

Hyrum J. Evans, on his 81st birthday in 1945, told a “Lehi Free Press” reporter that when he was a small boy he and some friends were playing on the Jordan River bridge west of town when Porter Rockwell drove up in a buggy. The other boys recognizing the famed lawman, immediately ran off the bridge. But young Evans was mesmerized, frozen to the spot. As the horses got near they shied. Then, Evans recalled, “Porter, who had a funny sort of a rough voice, looked at me and said: ‘Get off the bridge or I’ll stir the sugar in your coffee.’ The frightened lad quickly obliged and jumped into the water and the old lawman drove off to business elsewhere.

James T. Harwood, noted Lehi artist of the past, tells another colorful story about Rockwell. While Porter was dismounting in front of a downtown Lehi saloon, another notorious local legend, Bill Hickman, and a group of his henchmen attempted to intimidate Porter out of his horse. “Touch that horse and I’ll bust your thigh open,” Porter squeaked. The two engaged in a staring match for several long seconds before Hickman blinked and walked away. “A very bloody affair was looked for,” noted Harwood, but the bystanders saw no shootout that day.

One of the most interesting local stories about Porter involved a shooting in an up-town saloon. There were at least eight grogshops on State Street from 1871-72. Hastily built shacks near the railroad depot, the site was a wild whiskey row. These watering holes--devoid of polished walnut, Tiffany Lamps, and brass railing--were patronized by rough railroaders, teamsters, and miners--men comfortable with dangerous, dimly lit, smoke-filled places.

Local historian A.B. Anderson noted that “a wayward son (David Dibble) of a high church official, who had been under Rockwell’s supervision for a time,

sodden and wavering, he entered a saloon, where Rockwell sat in conversation, and attempted, what others failed in doing to satisfy a grudge, fired point blank at the unsuspecting officer. With the disturbance quelled, Porter said, “What shall I do with him? Kill him?”

James T. Harwood, relating the same incident, noted that the event occurred in 1871, when he was twelve. Dibble “emptied every chamber of his six shooter at Porter, “ Harwood wrote, “and the balls splattered all around him, but not one touched him.” He added an interesting note, the stuff legends are made of, when he said, “Porter was unarmed at the time, or there would have been but one gunshot heard.”

The account of another Lehi man, John T. Loveridge, added that “Mr. Rockwell and one of the Dibble boys were having an argument. Young Dibble jumped out of the door. As he made for the door Mr. Rockwell jumped into the corner behind the door. Dibble pulled his gun and fired three shots into the corner where Porter stood, but he wasn’t hit. Dibble then started running across the street. Porter came to the window and fired one shot at the fleeing Dibble. The shot hit just between his feet.”

In his later years, when he wasn’t dodging bullets, or attempting to his parched throat, Rockwell carried mail across country, operated his Hot Springs Brewery Hotel, and a Pony Express/Overland Mail Station at the Point of the Mountains, raised horses in Skull Valley, fought Indians, served Utah Territory as a “Deputy for Life,” and worked as a scout and guide.

On September 30, 1877 the “Salt Lake Tribune” reported “Another one of ‘our best society’, O.P. Rockwell, was jugged yesterday. This man has been one of the chief murderers of the Mormon Church, opening his career of blood in Nauvoo, under the regime of the Prophet. He was indicted a day or two ago by the grand jury of the First District Court, for participation in the horrible atrocious murder of the Aiken party, in 1858, on the Sevier.

After a week in jail he was released on \$15,000 bail posted by friends. Trial

date was set for October, 1878. Lawyers attempting to prepare his defense met with frustration; his answer to every question they asked him was “Wheat! Wheat!”, a personal response which had several meanings including “bullshit.”

Before he could be brought to trial, however, Rockwell died on June 8, 1878 at the age of sixty-five. He had attended the theater the previous evening with this daughter, and after the performance walked the few blocks to the Colorado Stables, where he often slept to be close to his animals. After a fretful night of chills and nausea, he vomited violently and frequently. Recovering, he rose up in his bed and attempted to put on his boots, then fell suddenly back on his bed, dead.

At the time of his death, Rockwell had been a member of the church longer than any other Mormon. Joseph F. Smith eulogized, “He had his little faults, but Rockwell’s life on earth, taken altogether, was one worth 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.” The anti-Mormon “Salt Lake Tribune” dryly commented that this eulogy was “fitting tribute of one outlaw to the memory of another.”

Rockwell’s epitaph in the Salt Lake City Cemetery reads, “he was brave and loyal to his faith, true to the prophet Jos. Smith, a promise made him by the prophet thro obedience it was fulfilled.”