

GEOGRAPHICAL FIELD NOTE

MORMON COLONIAS OF CHIHUAHUA

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From my teacher, the geographer Barney Nietschmann, I learned a great deal about islands. Isolation, the preciousness of fresh water, the power of “national” identity, how innovations amend an initial cultural impress—each of these was a theme Barney stressed. Just as biogeographers recognize actual and habitat islands, cultural geographers study island peoples—or, just as readily, turn their attention toward ethnic enclaves that lie far from the sea. The Hassidic Jews of New York City’s Lower East Side and the Czech farmers of East Texas both arrived with their own geographical thought, which stamped its imprint on the land and created recognizable and distinct places. Such insular landscapes often arise from diffusion—the formation of “colonies” with a striking resemblance to an original homeland—followed by vicariance and change arising from the challenges and opportunities of contact with encircling cultures. Stasis and shift. Continuity and disequilibrium. As geographers we go into the field and ask, “Where?” “How?” and “Why?”

THE MORMON LANDSCAPE

A few years ago I wrote a book that won the J. B. Jackson Prize but dunked me into a vat of local hot water. In *Rocky Mountain Divide: Selling and Saving the West*, I explored the essentially Mormon landscapes of Utah (Wright 1993b). The problem was this: I stated the obvious fact that the agrarian “Mormon Landscape,” as surveyed by Donald W. Meinig (1965), defined by Richard Francaviglia (1970), and elaborated by Wallace Stegner (1970), no longer reflected modern Mormon geography and values (Table I). Urbanization, industrial expansion, and rural land subdivision have all but erased this classic Mormon Landscape from the world.

All that remains are a few cultural islands in the back valleys of the Wasatch Mountains, such as Sanpete County. Interestingly, Gary Peterson and Lowell Bennion also won the J. B. Jackson Prize for their fine book, *Sanpete Scenes: A Guide to Utah’s Heart* (1987). That heart of traditional Mormon Utah beats ever weaker, especially given the nearly 30 percent population growth in Utah during the 1990s and the onslaught of development triggered by second-home development and the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Olympics.

In *Rocky Mountain Divide* I wrote that this was a shame, given the philosophical roots of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). Joseph Smith’s Plat for the City of Zion arose during the Great Awakening in the 1830s as a utopian vision of small cities in which farmers were stewards obliged to a divine landlord

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