

Anti-Mormon Bug and Vermin Poison

Kent P. Jackson

In May of 1858, the following poetic advertisement appeared on the pages of the *New York Times*:

GOOD ADVICE.
Of sleep devoid,
Are you annoyed
By Bugs, athirst for blood?
Do Rats and Mice
Mock each device
You try to slay the brood?
A secret hear:
Your house to clear,
Use LYON'S Dust and Pills;
The first will slay
Bugs, "right away,"
The second vermin kills.

Dépôt for LYON'S MAGNETIC POWDER and PILLS for the destruction of Insects and Vermin. 424 Broadway.¹

During the days in which this poem was advertising Lyon's Magnetic Powder and Pills, tensions were running high between the Latter-day Saints in Utah and the United States government. Believing reports that the Saints were in a state of rebellion, U.S. President James Buchanan had dispatched a force of twenty-five hundred men to quell the revolt. The resulting conflict was known as the Utah War. From the fall of 1857 to the spring of 1858, the army was held at bay by guerillas sent by Brigham Young to

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delay its progress to Utah. The soldiers spent a difficult winter in Wyoming and lost much of their supplies to Mormon raiders. Although no real combat took place, the expedition cost the U.S. government a small fortune in its quest to put down a rebellion that—as many Americans soon learned—never existed in the first place. Public opinion in the East was not favorable to either side in the conflict. While Buchanan was criticized severely for the debacle, the Latter-day Saints were held in contempt for causing it.²

Peace was finally attained when a negotiated settlement allowed the new territorial governor, Alfred Cumming, to enter the Salt Lake Valley and assume his office. Not long thereafter, the army marched into Utah peacefully to take up its position at Camp Floyd in Cedar Valley, forty miles southwest of Salt Lake City.

On 18 May, the *New York Times* reported the unconfirmed news that the conflict had ended. The headline, “THE NEWS FROM UTAH,” ran on the fifth page, perhaps indicating the tentative nature of the report as well as the country’s weariness over the impasse while the army had been wintering in Wyoming. The article announced a dispatch “that the Mormons had laid down their arms. Governor CUMMING, on invitation of BRIGHAM YOUNG, had entered Salt Lake City without an escort.” Even so, “the Army was in readiness for immediate action in case of an emergency.”³

In the same issue of the *Times* was another notice regarding the Utah War. This item, however, was not in the news section. It was another advertisement for “LYON’S MAGNETIC POWDER AND PILLS for the sure destruction of all insects and vermin, 424 Broadway.” Hoping to capitalize on the current militant anti-Mormon mood, the new advertisement—a poem like its predecessor—was in the form of a news bulletin, complete with a mock news headline:

LATE FROM UTAH.
Startling news from Utah comes—
Brigham says he’ll fight;
And with banners, trumpets, drums,
Uncle Sam—who ne’er succumbs—
Marches in his might.
Mormon fools, your time’s at hand—
No more chance have ye,
Than the insect race beneath
Lyon’s Powder, which is death
To bug, roach and flea.⁴

The *Times* continued to run dispatches about the Utah War. By the next day, it appears that much new information had arrived from the West, and the *Times* ran several articles about the affair. A large article was printed in

the first two columns on page 1, written by the *Times*' own correspondent who had accompanied the army and whose report had just arrived.⁵ A second article on Utah ran alongside it, and together they filled almost half of the front page.⁶ A third article, on page 4, denounced in strong terms the expedition and its exorbitant expense, noted by the writer to be "eight or ten millions of dollars,—and it is estimated by some that it will reach twice that amount." "A more flagrant and utterly useless waste of the public money can scarcely be conceived. The whole movement seems to have been planned in ignorance of the service to be accomplished, and with a reckless disregard of the public treasure."⁷ A fourth article, with even later arriving news from Utah, was printed on page 5.⁸

The flurry of news reports from Utah continued for several days, as new information and fresh rumors continued to arrive in the East. But as tensions eased, the articles became ever less frequent. Events in Utah ceased to be newsworthy, and the matter was lost from the American consciousness, in due time to be replaced by the much more serious conflict between the northern and southern states. The anti-Mormon Magnetic Powder and Pills advertisement was run twice more in the *New York Times*.⁹ But very soon, with peace in Utah apparently established and circumstances getting back to normal, the company abandoned its Mormon war theme and began running a new, nonpolitical advertisement—also a poem:

DEAD! DEAD!
 In wall or bed,
 LYON'S POWDER "lays" them—
 Bed-bugs, fleas,
 That mar our ease—
 LYON'S POWDER slays them.
 Roaches, ants,
 Bugs on plants,
 LYON'S FLAKES amaze them.
 Dead! Dead!
 In house and shed,
 LYON'S PILLS tremendous
 Kill the rats
 And mice, *sans* cats,
 And gloriously befriend us.

Dépôt for Lyon's Magnetic Powder and Pills for noxious insects and vermin. No. 424
 Broadway.¹⁰

Notes

1. *New York Times*, 10 May 1858, p. 5, col. 5; 12 May 1858, p. 5, col. 6; 14 May 1858, p. 5, col. 6; 15 May 1858, p. 5, col. 3.

2. See Norman F. Furniss, *The Mormon Conflict, 1850–1859* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960); Richard E. Bennett, “Utah War,” in *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 1282–84.

3. “The News from Utah,” *New York Times*, 18 May 1858, p. 5, col. 2.

4. *New York Times*, 18 May 1858, p. 5, col. 5.

5. “From the Utah Army,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1858, p. 1, cols. 1–2.

6. “Mr. Frederick Loba and the Mormons—Highly Interesting Details,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1858, p. 1, cols. 2–3.

7. “The Mormon War,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1858, p. 4, col. 3.

8. “Further News from Utah,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1858, p. 5, col. 1.

9. *New York Times*, 20 May 1858, p. 5, col. 6; 22 May 1858, p. 5, col. 6.

10. *New York Times*, 24 May 1858, p. 5, col. 5; 26 May 1858, p. 5, col. 6; 28 May 1858, p. 5, col. 6; 29 May 1858, p. 5, col. 6.