

How Circleville Remembers

Looking at the Memory of the Circleville Massacre

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Abstract

In late April 1866, residents of the small Mormon settlement of Circleville slit the throats of sixteen unarmed Paiute Indians. Ashamed, or perhaps afraid of native retaliation, the perpetrators of the massacre used the cover of night to secretly bury the dead. The event, later known as the Circleville Massacre, has gained notoriety for the duplicitous behavior of Circleville residents. Today, the town of Circleville remains devoid of any official remembrance. Newspaper articles and flyers celebrating pioneer life and the founding of Circleville make no mention of the massacre, leaving many Circleville residents with little to no knowledge about their community's history. The Circleville massacre is, a century and a half later, at risk of being forgotten. With the aid of oral histories from community members, this paper will argue that the town of Circleville has specifically crafted its own narrative in an attempt to erase the history of the massacre. By applying theories of collective memory and group identification, this paper will develop a deeper understanding of how the silence surrounding the Circleville Massacre, and the conflicting memories that exist, have shaped this community's sense of its own history.

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In late April 1866, residents of the small Mormon settlement of Circleville slit the throats of sixteen unarmed Paiute Indians, including women and children.¹ Ashamed, or perhaps afraid of native retaliation, the perpetrators of the massacre used the cover of night to bury the dead secretly. This event, later known as the Circleville Massacre, has gained notoriety for the duplicitous behavior of the Circleville residents. The unarmed Paiute Indians who were murdered that night had entered the town under the Mormon's promise of friendship and non-violence. After the dust settled, the greater community of Utah eventually came to condemn the dark event.²

The Circleville Massacre stands as the largest loss of Indian life during the Black Hawk War, and the worst massacre of Native Americans ever on Utah soil.³ Subsequently, the massacre has become an important event in the history of Mormon-Native relations, and its historical context and effects are crucial for understanding the experiences of Mormon pioneers in Utah.

Despite the massacre's significance, state and local histories rarely mention the event. The town of Circleville has never made an official statement, and no historical marker condemns or commemorates the massacre. Likewise, newspaper articles celebrating pioneer life and the founding of Circleville make no mention of the event. Why has Circleville, it seems, forgotten the massacre?

By applying theories of collective memory and group identification, we can develop a deeper understanding of how the silences surrounding the massacre, and the conflicting memories that exist, have shaped this community's sense of its own history. We will see that the town of Circleville has specifically crafted its own narrative in an attempt to erase the history of the massacre. This re-identification would likely have been successful, were it not for the efforts of historians who, to this day, remain the backbone of Circleville's memory. To fully understand and analyze the state of the Circleville, a visit to the town was required.

¹ Sources differ on the exact number killed. Sixteen appears to be the medium. See Albert Winkler, "The Circleville Massacre: A Brutal Incident in Utah's Black Hawk War," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (1987): 4 – 21.

² Thomas Callister, "Bishop Thomas Callister to George A. Smith, 13 May 1866," in *George A. Smith Papers* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Journal History of the Latter-day Saints Church, Latter-day Saints Church Library Archives, 1866).

³ John Alton Peterson, *Utah's Black Hawk War* (University of Utah Press, 1998). 247.

A visitor to Circleville today will learn nothing of the Massacre, but everything about Butch Cassidy. Circleville has built its identity around the famous outlaw who was born and raised just outside of town.⁴ Butch Cassidy's Hideout, the Bunk House Motel, Butch Cassidy's Hideout Café and Motel are just a handful of examples of local businesses embracing their hometown criminal-hero. Inside the Circleville Café, one of the oldest surviving businesses in town, one will find pictures memorializing Cassidy along the counter and just about every inch of wall space. The cafe serves as a small museum to Circleville's past.

The older of the two café waitresses answered only "The what?" when questioned about the massacre. After hearing of its history, the waitress confessed that in her five years in town she had never even heard of this grave event. A second waitress, Katie, is the young daughter of Circleville's Mormon Bishop. She appeared to be in her late twenties and, despite having been born and raised in Circleville, had also never heard of the massacre. Elderly café customers enjoying their breakfast in the corner professed likewise. In a café adorned with the history of Circleville, memory of the massacre was absent.⁵

Acting on a recommendation from the waitresses, I headed south about a mile to the Butch Cassidy Hideout, where I found Kelly, a middle aged women in a purple Butch Cassidy T-shirt, stowed away in the corner pouring over Linda King Newell's *A History of Paiute County*. Kelly, who had moved to Circleville some years ago, told me that she had heard about the massacre from her customers. The Hideout serves a hangout for Circleville's "old-timers." Retirees often gather in the café, hiding from their Bishop to sip coffee and reminisce about the past. Kelly had learned all that she knew about massacre from them. "I heard that it was outsiders who did it," she says, "but I don't really know anything about it."⁶

Kelly, like many others in Circleville, has only heard of the massacre from the elderly population. This tells us that the memory is surviving there as a vague oral tradition, or oral history. Now, oral histories contain the

⁴ Butch Cassidy was born in ten days before the massacre, on April 13, 1866, in Beaver Utah. As a child, Butch was raised by his parents on a ranch just outside of Circleville. Cassidy is famous for train and bank robberies, and has become a mythic symbol of the great American west.

⁵ Katie Robinson, interview by the author, Circleville, Utah, 20 November 2013.

⁶ Kelly (last name omitted at subject's request), interview by the author, Circleville, Utah, 20 November 2013.

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“memories of people, communities, and participants.”⁷ They are individualized, “sensitive and unstable.”⁸ A person’s oral history is, quite literally, their memory, and memories are easily altered by emotion, time, interpretation, and collaboration from others. And it is important to reaffirm the obvious, and note that the oral histories of Circleville are memories of an event long past. They have survived and been distributed over one hundred and fifty years, or at least five generations. Moreover, each successive generation of memory has been subject to individual interpretation. One person may “hear” the memory differently, or incorrectly, and then that memory is thus falsely distributed. This misinterpretation has led to the division of a Circleville Memory that is altered and incorrect.

Such is the case with Terry Larkin. Terry is a loquacious Circleville resident who moved into the town about ten years ago. Eager to speak with anyone, about anything, Terry was more than willing to share his knowledge on the massacre with me. “They say they killed them in the basement.” He shares. “I think ... that the Indians were sneaking in through the basement and stealing grain. They [the Circleville settlers] were mad at that so they captured them and slit the Indians’ throats.”⁹ Terry did not share how he had come to his particular version of events, but his memory of the massacre reflects just how sensitive collective memory is to outside influence. Parts of Terry’s memory were correct. The event happened in Circleville, a basement was involved, and Indians were killed by having their throats slit. Other parts of Terry’s account, however, were false. As primary sources maintain, the Paiutes murdered at Circleville were not stealing grain, they were captured outside of the settlement and held captive by the residents. It is possible that Terry’s incorrect memory reflects the convergence of two or more memories. The massacre occurred during the Black Hawk War when Native raids on Mormon settlements were common, so it is not a stretch to assume that some Indians did steal grain and food from settlement communities. Terry may have combined stories about Indian massacres to form his own creation of the event. Alternatively, he may have fell victim to an incorrect oral history, a misinformed vein of historical memory that is being maintained and distributed. Regardless of the cause, Terry’s memories

⁷ Oral History Association, “Oral History Defined,” Oral History Association, <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/>.

⁸ Joan Tumblety, “Working with memory as a subject,” in *Memory and History, Understanding Memory as a Source and Subject* (Routledge, 2013), 2.

⁹ Terry Larkin, telephone interview with the author, 11 October 2013.

represent one of the many problems affecting the continuation of Circleville's memory.

I next spoke with Louis and Paul Morgan, longtime residents of Circleville, and members of the community's aging population. Paul was born and raised in town, and Louis moved in from Panguitch almost fifty-three years ago. Together, they tell me that the massacre is not spoken about much. "No one talks about it" Louis states. "I've lived here for fifty years and I've only heard of it twice." The Morgan family professes that the memory of the massacre is not important to the small rural community. "I do not think that people care much," says Paul "It happened, and then all the people left." Paul was referring to Circleville's 1866 abandonment. According to the family, the people who actually committed the murders did not resettle in Circleville; they left afterward and never returned. "[We] didn't murder them," says Paul, "The people who [did the] murders were from Sanpete. That is why no one talked about it."¹⁰ Paul and Louis, like other Circleville residents, may be trying to distance their community from the massacre. Alleging that those who resettled Circleville in 1874 were not the people that committed the murders allows for a positive image of communal identity to develop. Memory theory tells us when individuals are pressed to reassess memories of traumatic events; they instinctively seek to maintain a positive group image. Their "need for self-esteem provides a motivation for individuals to evaluate their own group more favorably..."¹¹

Other community members in Circleville confirm the belief that outsiders committed the murders. Dale Peterson, a Circleville native now living in California, reiterated this to me during a telephone interview. "All of the people involved in the killings left Circleville and returned north when ordered by the church leaders to abandon the area because of the Black Hawk War." "The town was never settled again by any of the people that had been in Circleville at the time of the killings". The "Circleville people

¹⁰ There is not currently a list that details who the original settlers were, where they resettled, or which of the settlers participated in the massacre. Most of the data pertaining to who, when, and where has come from family genealogical studies.

¹¹ Esra Cuhadar and Bruce Dayton, "The Social Psychology of Identity and inter-group Conflict: from Theory to Practice," *International Studies Perspective* 12(2001): 274. See also Baljunder Sahdra and Michael Ross, "Group Identification and Historical Memory," *Personality Social Psychology Bulletin* 33, no. 3 (2007): 384.

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telling the story of the killings had no first-hand knowledge as they were all new move-ins with only stories to go on.”¹²

Peterson’s comments illustrate an interesting point concerning the sustainment of Circleville’s memory. In the minds of modern-day Circleville residents, because their ancestors did not commit the murders, the story is not their own. Memory of the massacre does not belong to Circleville. It is as if the massacre happened in some other Circleville, far away from today’s quiet town. As a result, the Circleville community has actively created a positive self-image by intentionally removing the history of the massacre from their personal and collective narratives. Circleville’s resettlement provided an opportunity to remove the community from any connection to the massacre. The absence of the murders removed the history of the event from Circleville and ensured that future generations would not learn of the massacre.

Of the few Circleville residents who know of the massacre, most have read professional and amateur histories. During my visit to Circleville, residents repeatedly asked me “Have you read Albert Winkler’s article?” Albert Winkler is a BYU librarian who in 1987 wrote an article about the massacre for the *Utah Historical Quarterly*. It seems that Winkler is very much a part of how the citizens of Circleville conceptualize their memory of the massacre, as Louis and Paul Morgan produced a frayed photocopy of Winkler’s article, Dale Peterson suggested that Winkler’s article was “the best there was”, and the local town offices also had a copy on hand. Winkler’s importance in Circleville is also evidence that at least a portion of the community is struggling to remember and fighting the urge to forget.

The people of Circleville are very proud of their town’s pioneer past. Old barns and cabins, dating back to Circleville’s settlement and resettlement, dot the landscape. Their businesses highlight their founding and history as a frontier settlement. However, as we know, they celebrate a selective historical narrative. On their town website, which highlights their connection to Butch Cassidy, they have removed all references to anything related to 1866. No massacre, no abandonment. Additionally, the Circleville Wikipedia page makes no mention of the murders.¹³ Moreover,

¹² Dale Peterson, e-mail message to the author, 21 November 2013.

¹³ "Circleville, Utah," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circleville,_Utah.

a quick Google-search of “Circleville, Utah” provides similar results—nothing about the massacre appears.

An early example of Circleville’s historical revisionism appears in a local newspaper called the Piute County News. In 1947, this paper ran an editorial titled “A Brief Resume of the History of Circleville,” which detailed the town’s history, highlighting prominent families. While the article hints that Circleville had suffered at the hands of Indian hostilities, it conspicuously avoids the massacre. It does not even mention that the town was abandoned.¹⁴ The whole tumultuous period surrounding the massacre is missing.

It is thus no longer curious that, for a town whose sign reads “Established 1864 and Again 1874,” that no one can answer why it was abandoned in the first place. No one knows because the history of Circleville was rewritten without the massacre. This revisionist biography represents Circleville’s attempt to maintain a positive self-image through the distribution of a selective narrative. By removing memory of the massacre from its public history, Circleville has recreated its identity in a positive light.

Memory and forgetfulness are intrinsic elements in the development of communities. Communities (or nations) must “remember to forget” so to speak. Citing Benedict Anderson, “all profound changes in the consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesia. Out of such oblivions . . . spring narratives.”¹⁵ Anderson is arguing that traumatic memories logically influence communities to forget elements of their past and create a new a sense of self; shaping their histories into remembrances of positive events. Studies of group identity with traumatic memories reiterate this, by suggesting that communities like Circleville tend to develop “historical blind spots” in order to maintain their positive self-image.¹⁶ Memory theorists believe that humans possess an innate “desire to maintain a high-level of person and group esteem.”¹⁷ This suggests that Circleville’s insistence on broadcasting a history related to Butch Cassidy instead of the massacre is, rather than

¹⁴ Letitia G. Thompson, “A Brief Resume of the History of Circleville,” *Piute County News*, 20 June 20, 1947 1947.

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991). 204.

¹⁶ Sahdra and Ross, “Group Identification and Historical Memory,” 384.

¹⁷ Cuhadar and Dayton, “The Social Psychology of Identity and inter-group Conflict: from Theory to Practice,” 274.

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peculiar, quite reasonable. Circleville wants to remember their community in a good light.

Why is Circleville of today forgetting the massacre? It is not easily examined why Circleville residents would actively try to distance themselves from this. Surely, they should not fear contemporary backlash over the incident. Our society today would not connect the town of Circleville to a murdering bunch of ranchers or condemn the town because of its past. Circleville might be able to bring in additional revenue and attract tourists with the massacre, much like the tourism that surrounds the Mountain Meadows in Southern Utah.¹⁸ The site of the massacre there has signs, walking paths, and memorials that undoubtedly bring in historically-minded tourists. Were Circleville to embrace their history, they might see a similar result, especially given their proximity to Southern Utah's National and State Parks.

It seems less likely that the Circleville residents of today are intentionally reinventing their history, and more likely that they are now the victims of previous generations' decisions. They forget not out of choice, but out of circumstance; the knowledge of the massacre was not passed down. A viscous cycle of progressive forgetfulness is evident in the town. Maybe Circleville removed their memories because they did not want to associate their town with killings, or maybe because they were embarrassed that such an event had occurred on their soil. Maybe the historical whitewashing occurred during Utah's bid for statehood. Maybe they sanitized their history to appear better in the eyes of the greater United States.

That being said, memory of the massacre is fading. The older generation of Circleville is beginning to die, and with them, their memories. The Paul and Louis families of Circleville are serving as the maintainers of the memory, and quite soon, they will be gone. The younger populations, the waitresses and the Bishops daughters, do not have and thus will not pass on, their memories of the massacre. Before long, the massacre may only live on inside the pages of history.

¹⁸ The Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857 occurred when a group of settlers heading to California were ambushed and executed by a group of Mormons.

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