

Project Statement

“The Mountain Meadows Massacre stands without a parallel amongst the crimes that stain the pages of American history. It was a crime committed without cause or justification of any kind to relieve it of its fearful character... When nearly exhausted from fatigue and thirst, [the men of the caravan] were approached by white men, with a flag of truce, and induced to surrender their arms, under the most solemn promises of protection. They were then murdered in cold blood.” William Bishop, Attorney to John D. Lee.

The Melting Pot reflects on this stain on American history from a post-Turnerian perspective. In his seminal thesis, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner reflects on the human fascination with the frontier and how expansion to the American West changed Americans’ views on their culture. In Turner’s view, the process of emigrating West created an environment where racial differences and cultural misunderstandings would become insignificant and the many races would fuse into one “Western” identity. However, the reality of life on the frontier was far different from Turner’s idealist vision, and the Mountain Meadows Massacre stands as a clear example of this disparity.

The massacre was led on September 11, 1857 by Mormon militia members dressed in native garb and with faces painted like those of Indian warriors, along with a small contingent of Paiute tribesmen who had been coerced into participating. The target of attack was the Fancher-Baker wagon train, who were emigrating from Arkansas to California. The attack quickly turned into a mass slaughter in which approximately 120 unarmed men, women and children were killed. The only survivors were seventeen children under the age of eight years old, who were taken into Mormon families and later returned to relatives in Arkansas.

In initial attempts to cover up the Mormon’s culpability, Brigham Young made several statements to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, placing the blame solely on the shoulders of the Paiute Indians. An intricate cover-up story was woven involving the Fancher-Baker wagon train poisoning a cow and a nearby spring, thus causing the deaths of several Paiutes living nearby. According to the story, the Paiutes attacked the wagon train in revenge. In this tale, it was the Mormons who tried, unsuccessfully to broker a peace between the Paiutes and the Fancher party. Although the truth was eventually uncovered, only one man, John D. Lee, was tried and executed for the brutal massacre. He was excommunicated from the Mormon church for his crimes. The other participants were never charged. Most were rewarded with coveted positions within the church for their participation.

The video shows a woman making a beef stew, which alludes to the project title, “The Melting Pot.” This term was commonly used to describe the process of fusing together different cultural and ethnic identities into one homogenous “western identity,” that was thought to occur during Western expansion. The audio is a culmination of three first-person accounts of the massacre: Sallie Baker Mitchell, one of the eighteen children who survived the massacre; John D. Lee’s confession, written in prison days before his execution; and official investigators’ reports written to President Buchanan. While listening to the three different accounts, it quickly becomes apparent that the stories do not match up. It is left up to the audience to draw their own conclusions.