

# CuppaJoe | Historic Sites Lecture Series | Melvin Johnson on Lyman Wight in Texas

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Lyman Wight, Mormon, Texas, temple, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Bandera

## SPEAKERS

Karin Peter, Melvin Johnson

### **Karin Peter** 00:29

Welcome. This is Cuppa' Joe, where we explore restoration history. And I'm your host, Karin Peter. Now here at Cuppa' Joe, we partner with the Community of Christ Historic Sites Foundation and we interview the presenters from their seasonal lecture series. Our guest today is Melvin Clarno Johnson. And Melvin was raised in Southern California at Carlsbad by the Sea, which sounds wonderful when you just read that out loud. He was educated in Utah, served 12 years active duty with the US Army, and taught history and English in Texas. His interest in Lyman Wight and his colony began with remarks in his research into the East Texas Milltown culture and forest industry about the Mormon Millers in the Central Texas Hill Country before 1860. Ron Romig and Barbara Bernauer gave quite important leads into the Zodiac Temple register and the John Pierce Holly autobiography in the then RLDS archives in Independence, Missouri. Melvin's been a member of the John Whitmer Historical Association since 1996. And two of his published works have received Best Book Awards from John Whitmer Historical Association. So, congratulations on those, Melvin. So, hi, Melvin, and thanks for being with us.

### **Melvin Johnson** 02:05

I'm glad to be here today and talk all things Lyman Wight.

### **Karin Peter** 02:10

All things Lyman Wight. Well, I'm interested in that as well. Your contribution to the 2023 spring Lecture Series is titled Lyman Wight and the Mormon Trails in Texas Dust. And then the further title, The Wild Ram and His Flock in the Texas Hill Country before 1860. Now, I read the introduction to your lecture and it says that you will explore the ren, this renegade apostle, and if our listeners get a chance to see a photograph of Lyman Wight, that fits him suitably, our renegade apostle and his polygamous colonies, adventures and journeys to Sycamore Springs and Bee Creek on the outskirts of Austin, Zodiac in Gillespie County, Mormon Mills in Burnett County, and Bandera in Bandera County. They dominated the frontier economies where their mechanical mills ran and organized villages and three county governments which I have some questions about as we get into this. So, specific scrutiny in your lecture will consider the Zodiac Temple and the Mormon Mill Cemetery. So, there's a lot in there that will send us on tangents if we're not careful. So, I'm looking forward to hearing a bit about all of

those different topics. So, let's start to unpack with the very basic. Who was Lyman Wight and why was he in Texas?

**Melvin Johnson 03:51**

Thank you for asking. Lyman Wight was born in rural Connecticut in 1796. He was certainly an offspring in the development of post war of independence America. He was basically a Whig politically, but a tyrant personally and communally and ecclesiastically. It was his way or hit the highway. A veteran, teenage veteran of the War of 1812. He was essentially a farmer, an agricultural man. By the early eight, well, late 1820s, they were living out on the river by Kirtland in the valley across the river and I can't remember the name of it. But there he was proselytized by Parley Pratt, and he was converted. He and Isaac Morley., Isaac Morley's brother-in-law, Titus Billings, and others formed a common stock property religious commune which, no, I said, Parley and I was wrong. Shame on me. I'm talking about, he was converted by Sidney Rigdon to the old Baptist community in that area. And, whereas, Sidney was certainly a communalist, his boss, Alexander Campbell was not. Anyway, under the leadership of the Rigna, Rigdonite policy, these families organized a religious agricultural commune across the river from Kirkland. When the Lamanite Mission with Parley Pratt and the others came, they were about, they numbered in the one half of the entire Campbellite group in that part of Ohio and Pennsylvania, who cross convert to early LDS congregations. And that became the foundation of Kirtland to which Joseph Smith moved in 1831 and stayed until the banking crisis of '38 and '39. Lyman Wight was a committed Smithite every bit as much as Bishop George Miller would be a decade later. They both believed in his angelic ordinations to the priesthood and to holding the keys and the various ordinances. They believed in angels, revelations, golden plates, and that Joseph was the true seer, prophet and revelator for the restoring of the gospel. He slowly moved up the church hierarchy. By the time he was in Missouri, he was a member of the High Council. He was disciplined several times for his own unique theological combinations. He was committed to faith healing. (Ahh.) So, water therapy, um, Thompsonian medicine, etc. A very strong strain in all of the restoration communities from, uh, RLDS, LDS, Wightite on, they, there was always a strong counter to the development of scientific medicine. He was the war leader in the Missouri Mormon War in 1838, 1839. He was the militia colonel that was called out by General Parks. He led the raids on and the burning down and looting of Millport in Gallatin, Gentile communities on the river there. He terrified the old settlers. His descendant, Jeremy Wight, very active LDS when he wrote his book on Lyman called Lyman Wight: Wild Ram of the Mountains, uh, argued that when Lyman began the return from Texas, uh, to Missouri that he was going to go out and join Brigham Young. Either one was possible. If he had returned to Missouri, they would have killed him. (Ahh.) And he certainly hated Brigham Young. If he had lived long enough, Karin, I believe that he would have returned to Illinois in Plano where Joseph III and his brothers were. Um, he helps ( . . . ), he's in jail with Joseph at Liberty. They all skate together and scarper down the road. He helps the saints, uh, move across the river into Illinois. And in 1841, he becomes the junior member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles. What I want to convey to the listeners is this. Lyman Wight was Joseph Smith's man. It was almost futile loyalty. Joseph was his Leige Lord. And I think Lyman would have done anything for the Prophet Joseph. Personal opinion, of course, but up to mayhem and murder, if that was required of him. Sounds very cultic and as we see the colony develop, we'll see cultic, uh, manifestations.

**Karin Peter 10:30**

And there, there were others who were simply, Porter Rockwell comes to mind as another person who kind of saw Joseph Smith in that same light.

**Melvin Johnson 10:38**

Yeah, I think so. I think, um, Bill Hickman was for a while. Um, Greg Prince's ancestor, the body guard and the ( . . . ) policeman, and I can't think of his name right now. But, yeah, there were a number of individuals like that. And I believe that Brigham Young, uh, had some of these features and similarities. And I think it ties into this concept of angelic ordination. By heavens, if an angel comes down and places his hands on your head and ordains you to whatever power and principality and whatever and you have followers that believe that, you're not really worried about what anybody else thinks as to right or wrong.

**Karin Peter 11:38**

Right. Right. And we do see a strong strain of that in Restoration history. (Yes.) So, why Texas? How did he end up there?

**Melvin Johnson 11:49**

It begins in 1841. Nauvoo is growing with the British immigrant influx. You have the building of the Nauvoo House and the Nauvoo Temple, and you need lumber for it and the best area for that was up river in Wisconsin territory and up the Black River, about La Crosse, and up the Black River 30 or 40 miles in the lands of the indigenous people. So, Alpheus Hawes, excuse me, Alpheus Cutler, Peter Hawes, George Miller, Lyman Wight and others were made a temple building committee and they were sent north to organize saw mills, uh, logging, rafting and getting cut lumber down to Nauvoo. This is where I come in. My first expertise from graduate school was in southern lumber mill town culture and logging railroads, meaning that I knew everything about that kind of stuff before I began to realize there was anybody Mormon doing that out in the Texas Hill Country before the Civil War. I took a job at Texas Forestry Museum in Lufkin, Texas. Following on as the Senior Researcher for my friend John Gerland, who had gone down to the Tyrrell Library at Beaumont. We created under the old ClarisWorks, now File Maker Pro, we discovered that we could create, uh, specific databases loaded with information to which we could ask questions that we did not know the answer. So, between him and me, we probably made 400,000 entries in 47 or 48 categories. And then we started asking the database questions which do not apply to here today. But one of the things that kept coming up in the bibliographies in sources were references to Mormon millers in the Central Texas Hill Country before the Civil War. Now, I was an LDS convert at nine. I left at the age of 31. Probably more an American civilization guy than a history guy. And I had never heard of Texas Mormon millers. So, what I did on my own time was create another ClarisWorks database specifically on these Mormon millers. And all of the primary and secondary research work on polygamy on the Pedernales, the Lyman Wight polygamous colonies in antebellum Texas came from that. The entire chapter nine of that work where the Bandera County cowboys merge into the Texas culture is all primary source work out of the courthouse. So, we were able to ask either the East Texas sawmill database or my database with the Mormons questions to which we did not know the answers. Where did the Lyman Wight Mormons live in Texas? Well, Red River in the fall of 1844 and the spring of 1845, and then down to Bee Creek and Sycamore Springs in 1845 to '46. And then to Fredericksburg, Zodiac, 1847 to 1851. Then on to Marble Falls or Bernie County on Hamilton Creek, where the Mormon mills and the cemetery were located, for

two years until they couldn't pay their bills and sold out to the old Texan Nowen Smithwick. And he was one who took several Wightite families out to California before the Civil War and settled where San Bernardino and where the eventual RLDS revival would begin after the Civil War. And then from there, down to Medina and Bandera in Bandera County where they lived until Lyman Wight decided, Well, I guess Brigham's not going to bring Mormonism down to Texas, so, we're going to go back to the Midwest. And he died on the second day of the March in Dexter, San Antonio, buried the next day in Zodiac Cemetery. And, if you want, you'll be able to stand right on top of the grave during the conference. We're going to hold a sunrise service there and memorialize the number by name in the cemetery. So, we ended up creating a pattern of databases we could ask questions to which we didn't know the answers. Some of the questions were, well, I'm getting ahead of myself. Joseph says, What are you going to do when you're done with lumber mills up in Wisconsin? Lyman has Bishop George Miller with him and others and they say by letter on February 15, 1844 to Joseph, We want to go to the Republic of Texas and open a mission among the Lamanites, incorporate the slave owners so that we will have access to all their wealth and form a sanctuary for the church body politic that needs to leave Illinois. And if ever there's an indirect suggestion that people were practicing a religious theocracy, or certain marriage practices that were not fitting well with the neighborhood, maybe you need to leave the United States. This led to the formation of the Council of 50 which was to find a refuge for the saints outside of the United States. Texas was not the only one. They were going to look to California, Vancouver Island, the Willamette Valley in Oregon. But they had a pretty good fix though, too, on the Salt Lake Valley because it looked at it would become a passageway, a thoroughfare through the Pacific Ocean and then into the, back to the American Midwest.

**Karin Peter 19:53**

So, I was familiar with the Vancouver Island part of that. I have seen, um, the text of the letters written between Stephen Douglas, the representative of the crown in Great Britain, and Brigham Young. That whole, that whole side of it when they were trying to figure out where to go and ended up marching down through the southwest part of the United States. (Yes.) Fascinating.

**Melvin Johnson 20:23**

It is. And the Council of the 50 was excited. So, they instructed Joseph Smith, who had instructed them to instruct him, that they should send an ambassador down to President Sam Houston. And for anybody who is interested in early Tech sana Mormona research, find the letters of T. J. Rusk and Sam Houston in 1844 between them and the ambassador down, it would have been, oh, it would have been Lucien Woodworth, the Pagan Prophet, they called him. We can't find those letters in Austin and they've got to be there somewhere, early Texas of Republic letters. Anyway, Lucien Woodworth goes down to Sam Houston that spring. They have a good meeting. Sam loves the idea of bloodthirsty armed Mormons that he can put out on the Northwest Frontier to protect the main villages. And there are no cities in Texas. I mean, (Right.) if you got 700 or 800 people, you've got something. But he wanted an armed barrier to the northwest between the Mexicans and the indigenous peoples. And they thought that was a great idea. He says, But I need to talk to the Texas Congress this December of 1844. Lucien repairs back to Nauvoo, which is in turmoil with Tom Ford and the arrest warrants and the militia. The Prophet and his brother are murdered. In August, Brigham Young and the Council of the Twelve come to power and there's a tradeoff. Lyman Wight, the junior member of the Twelve, says, I will support you in the Twelve. I want that mission Joseph gave me with blessing, anointing and a seer

stone. I want that Texas mission. Brigham Young was very good at dissembling when he's trying to work what he was getting, so he said, Sure, you do that. Now, you guys go back up to Wisconsin for the winter. And they did. Mormon Cooley, uh, just South La Crosse the old Mormon graveyard as part of the newer graveyards there. And the following spring, about 140 members go off down the river on flat boat, flat boats headed to the Republic. Brigham Young and the Council have had a change of mind. They send Sam Bendt, senior member of the Council of 50, in which Lyman Wight was the third senior member. And notice that they're sending a Council of 50 member and not a member of the new, uh, (Uh huh.) Presidency. And say, Come on, join us. Join Brigham Young. Join the rest. We're going west. We want you with us. And Lyman Wight directs his clerk to write Brigham Young and say, We're going to Texas. We wish you the best ( . . . ) for later, which was just distinctive a bureaucratic move as I've ever seen, saying, Yeah, but no. We're going south.

**Karin Peter 24:08**

Yeah. So, for him, he had this, this, uh, sanctified commission that he was trying to fulfill. Yeah, it wasn't just being ornery. He really felt like he had been ordained to do this.

**Melvin Johnson 24:20**

And let me point out to the most resistant to Brigham Young, uh, Wight and Bishop George Miller. And when Bishop Miller, who had opposed everybody incomplete, including Lyman Wight eventually, Miller was six years the strong right arm of James Jesse Strang (Ah.) because both Miller and Wight believed in Joseph's angelic ordination and Miller believed in Strang's angelic ordination. And this is why my young, uh, Latter Day Saint historians at the CHL are so concerned with the Cutlerite ordinances and whatever going out. You know, we have, what, eight or nine people left and they're dying out. They're my age. Um, and they say, We got to record this and I said, you don't get it. With angelic ordination, it means that God can let priesthood ordinations, whatever, die out. And when he's ready, he can send angels (Um hmm.) to reinstitute them. And my young friends go, Well, we'll never have them. I said, not in our lifetime. The, the power of angelic ordinations, the authority of that to Wight and Miller trumped everything.

**Karin Peter 26:00**

Yeah. Yeah. And, and part of it was that nature, is the nature of the zealot, right? They (Yeah.) are commissioned and they're, they're all in on that and there isn't room for other processes when you, when you are a zealot.

**Melvin Johnson 26:16**

We're beginning to see that in the Phil Da, Phil Davis, uh, procession out of the Snufferites now, the monogamous Joseph Smith Mormons that will eventually schism and, I think, form their own church. But you see these kind of patterns. And it's very, what do I say, restoration-esque? All of the pan-Mormon sects do it. (Yeah.) Uh, Joseph Smith III and Frederick Smith could be very hard headed on what they believed, uh, singular authority or whatever that was by the younger Smith. It is what it is.

**Karin Peter 27:06**

Yeah. And part of that is frontier mentality as well. And when, we forget that when we start talking about anything that happened in this time period in the United States.

**Melvin Johnson** 27:15

That's a, that's a good insight. Our younger members in the various denominations have no idea of what the John Wayne myth means in our history and culture. And when you and I say, Well, that was very John Wayne-esque, they take neg, negatively, and, oh, no, no, we're not being negative. We're talking about strong pioneer frontier leaders because you're not fighting just indigenous people who are more scared of you than you have them. You're fighting the weather. You're fighting sickness. You're fighting, are the crops going to come in this year? It was a much more authori, authoritarian, misogynistic leadership. (Yeah.) Could it have been different? I have no idea. Yeah.

**Karin Peter** 28:10

Yeah. Yeah, that's one of those things we'll never know. Could have been different, right? That's just what it was at that period of time in American history and that's why Mormonism is so fascinating when we are willing to put it back into its context, (Yes.), Historical context. So, they go to Texas. Lyman takes a group with him because he feels this, uh, angelic, sacred, ordained task that Joseph Smith had given him and so he's going to fulfill it. And he takes the group with him who can help him with that, Miller included. They, they end up near Austin, and you said it was a Sycamore Springs and Bee Creek. So, why there? Was that a huge lumbar area?

**Melvin Johnson** 28:56

Um, it was acceptable for what they were doing there. Bishop Miller will not join them for another three years. (Ah, okay.) He, he's out in winter quarters in '47 quarreling with President Young. And then when he leaves President Young, he comes down the river in '47. Takes a year and a half. He's joining his son, John F. Miller, in the Wight community. (Okay.) They are in Sycamore Springs, which is northeast of downtown Austin. They are busily building part of the capital, uh, the city jail, trying to keep their women away from the non-Mormon men. And then when they complete those projects in the winter, in spring of '46, they swing around to the southeast. Excuse me, southwest portion of the city, right across the, uh, Pedernales River. And when you come in on the bus from the Austin airport, you will drive right over the bridge and over the river and if you look down to your right, you'll have a gigantic mountain on the right called Mount Bonnell, but look down to the right on the West Bank and that's Bee Creek.

**Karin Peter** 30:25

Ah.

**Melvin Johnson** 30:29

I was startled when I found it. It was very exciting.

**Karin Peter** 30:32

So, why bee Creek? What was, why did they go to the southwest from the northeast area?

**Melvin Johnson** 30:38

Well, you always require, to get a water mill, you need locomotive power and you need, uh, lumber stands close by in the, this is where my lumber town mill town experience comes in, if you're using animals for transporting cut trees to the mill, it becomes less cost effective when you're more than two

miles from the mill to the stands. So, in the old days before the logging railroad train, you would keep moving your mill when you cut out your circumference of two to three miles. They knew they were going to cut it out. And they knew they needed to find a place. And, so, they sent out a search party in the spring of '47 and they found up the Pedernales River three miles from Fredericksburg a mile and a half from Fort Martin Scott, a brand new institution which rested halfway between Fredericksburg and Zodiac. And there, they set up an agricultural lumber milling community, communitarian run by a common property, ecclesiastical group of builders with Lyman Wight chief elder. A very, very FLDS, very, uh, Warren Jeffs rule and just that tight. Everything was held either in the name of Wight or in the name of two or three others in the community. (Um hmm.) It must have been a Johnson or a Goodale, and I don't remember the name. It would have been Johnson that held the ownership of the grist mill in the community. But they immediately took over the economy of the county, and they dominated the county government for two or three years, which upset the Texas German immigrants who had been there, what two years longer than the Mormons, very much so. But for four years on the north bank of the Pedernales, they had 36 shanties. And I had found four imaginations of what that looked like and I will share that during the plenary system, uh (Oh, wonderful) talk. Uh, yeah, they're very, very amazing from what I think is very realistic. I mean, dirty, small, shanty, to very, uh, Midwestern romanticism. You've seen the picture of the angel of manifest destiny going west. Well, they're somewhere on the backside of the angel of manif, and it looks nothing like that, of course. (Yeah.) But they were making good progress. When Bishop Miller got down there, they made him the Branch President down in Grape Creek, a little farming community of Wightites eight miles away. We're hoping that one of those descendants is going to present at Fredericksburg. That would be very exciting. They built a storehouse and then they transformed the storehouse much to Heman Conomon Smith's upset. No, it wasn't a temple. It was only a storehouse. And we should take a quick break here and note, and I think Ron Romig will pick up, and others, on this down the line, on the descendants out of the Wightites. You're going to have the Smiths who are historians Heman C., uh, Spencer, Heman C., Heman Hale, their cousin Inez Smith and others coming down the line, and on the other, your friend, the Wights. There have been Wights in the leading quorums of the RLDS and the CoC from the beginning. (Yeah. Yeah.) So, for a very small community, very large ramifications down the line. The Zodiac Temple was, indeed, the first Mormon, not first LDS, first Mormon temple built west of the Mississippi in the year 1849 and, and operated until they left in 1851. Richard C. Bennett, Dr. Bennett from BYU, agrees with me that the closest you're going to get to the Joseph Smith ordinances in the upper room, uh, the Nauvoo house, uh, are going to be those of February 1844 to the Wightites and 1849 and 1851. What is fortunate for us, is, and thank heavens for Ron Romig and Ber, Barbara Bernauer from archives, RLDS in Independence. I was sitting in Layton, Utah in 1996 and I had these databases and all this information. I had to assimilate it. I had a narrative, but I had no idea what the important part, important parts were. And I got a letter from a guy, our old friend that I did not know at the time, Bill Shepherd. Bill Shepherd, somehow, who I'd never met the Strangite High Priest, found out that I was searching Wightiteism and he had found a certificate of on, authentication for the Zodiac Temple registrar, registered and I went, What is this? Uh, Bill wrote a little net, note said, Hi, I'm Bill. That is so Bill. And he said, I heard you're doing this. You might like this and talk to David ( . . ), too, while you're in Salt Lake since he wrote some wonderful stuff. And I went, Temple? I had no idea there was a temple. So, we, my wife let me go on a research trip to Missouri, which was really nice of her. And she's one of those wonderful spouses who have historians as their mate, nods until her eyes glaze and then I go get her a, a glass of wine. He wrote a, he did a wonderful paper on Newell and Lydia ( . . . ) at Florence that was a powerhouse.

Um, so I went there and I walked in. Barbara Bernauer was the first one I met. She was so friendly and kind. She says, You're gonna' find us different, but we don't bite and we're nice people. I guess she thought I was acting LDS or something. And she led me into Ron Romig's little office there at the back that he had 30 years ago. She said, Ron, this is Mel Johnson. He's out of Salt Lake. Well, that was close enough. And he wants to talk to you. And Ron said, Sure. I said, What do you know about the Zodiac Temple? He said, I've been waiting for many years for somebody to ask me. (Ah!) He got up from behind his desk, walked around, turned right. Remember how that went? (Oh, yeah.) into that little room on the left second door with the vault. And I thought, They've got it behind vaulted doors. He reached up on the top of the vault and took down this old, old register. And in it were all of the ordinations, blessings, adoptions, sealings, marriages with sealers, proxies. Uh, everybody involved in the process from the beginning to the end. All of them. All of them. And later when I was talking to Michael Scott Van Wagenen, who wrote that wonderful The Army of God and the Republic of Texas books, said I always thought there was something like that. And we got jumped on. We got jumped on hard. Well, you had the RLDS historians dismiss saying, No, no, that wasn't a temple. There wasn't anything like that. It was a storehouse. And some of the LDS, uh, historians wanted to poopoo it because it wasn't St. George as the first temple. And I've been fortunate. This is a quick aside. I lived two blocks, while I was going to college, from the St. George Temple. I studied on the grounds many hours in, under the shade of the trees. I lived on Mormon Mill Road in Marble Falls, Texas. I've had some of the most incredible research opportunities that a person could ever have. So, we went through all of this and digging and digging and writing and writing. And then, finally, at the San Antonio MHA, Mormon History Association Conference, uh, Richard C. Bennett stood up and said, Mel Johnson and Mike Van Wagenen got it right. The first Mormon temple west of the Mississippi was at Zodiac. I really appreciated that and all of the fine LDS historians since then have been so open and collegial and warm to the rest of the restoration denominational historians. And I think the Zodiac Temple experience had a little bit to do with that. (Yeah.) I hope so.

**Karin Peter** 42:01

So, there's a couple of things I want to, I want to ask about. First, it sounds as, as you kind of narrated what happened there in Texas, everything from the communal kind of all things held in common, storehouse slash temple ordinances, all of this even, even kind of overtaking the Civic government in an area (Um hmm.) is, he's really replicating everything that happened that, that he knew of in Nauvoo. He's actually going down that same path. So, it makes sense that whatever ordinances took place in that temple would be the ones that were instituted by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo when it was in the upper floor of the Red Brick Store.

**Melvin Johnson** 42:44

You're absolutely correct, I believe. Not only as to the pattern of government. They learned in Missouri you need to control your county where the other side is going to get you. (Yeah.) They did it at Winter Quarters. They did it in Iowa. They did it in Zodiac. They did it in Burnet County. They did it in Utah, in Nevada, Arizona.

**Karin Peter** 43:09

Yeah. (Yeah.) They did learn that lesson well.



**Melvin Johnson** 43:12

And, then, as Richard Bennett said, and I agree with him, Look at what Joseph Smith was doing in 1844 February when Lyman Wight receives his three wives in sealing (Um hmm.) All much younger women, of course. (Um hmm.) Uh, and compare them to the Zodiac Temple register. Richard says, You want to know what Joseph's latest development in the ordinances, compare the two and you've got it. What happened in Nauvoo with the building and the ordinances in the following year into 1846 were much more developed in something else.

**Karin Peter** 44:00

Right. Right. But then by then Brigham Young's leadership had taken over (Yes.) Absolutely. And he was an organizer and an administrator. So, I want to go back to the Zodiac Temple registry because when I first read about your lecture, that stood out to me. Number one, I didn't know about it. But, also, um, and we talked earlier, we're both from the West Coast, and so we might see the word Zodiac temple registry and it doesn't really set off any bells. But I'm aware for a lot of people, ( . . . ) they see Zodiac Temple registry, that sounds very, um, I had mentioned, uh, creepy and, uh, cultish, but that's not really what it is. It just, it's very mysterious. It's very fantasy novel-ish. So, tell us why we react that way maybe. And why, why it would have been called the Zodiac.

**Melvin Johnson** 44:55

Um, one, it's something the Latter Day Saints out in Utah have had to face forever. No, it's not secret. It's sacred. And of course nobody buys that. So, when you look at what Lyman Wight is doing, same thing, though a major difference. You or I, as non-members could have attended a baptism for the dead or a sealing. We'd go in and our street clothes, uh, button down bibs and stand in the back corner. They only wore their garments when they were upstairs doing things. The rest of the time, they were not John Wayne in garments chasing Comanches and being chased by Comanches. Uh, different working man approach. It seems a cultic because of the word Zodiac and the, uh, cattle brand register for Wight down in Bandera County Aries, a r i e s for the ram on the Zodiac. That comes from William Clayton being William Clayton. Everything is bright and new in the world of Joseph Smith in the restoration and all of our 12 Apostles have to be set off as something special. So, Parley Pratt is the archer. Willie, uh, Wight is the wild ram of the mountains. And he goes down the line, uh, tagging any other kin, too, with all of this. It's mythmaking. (Yeah.) It's folklore making. Also, we need to understand, and let me put a blurb out to a fellow historian Manual Prado, P r a d o. He is writing some of the most amazing Mormonism and 19th century folklore, witchcraft and sorcery of the century. Read Mike Quinn, and then take it to the next level. The stuff is amazing. And like Mike and Manny both point out, don't get upset by dowsing rods, parchments, amulets, searching for treasure, finding water. Niety-five percent of rural America believed in folk magic. Western Europe believed in folk magic. And when you get into Russia, etc., now maybe you're getting a bit creepy and occultic. But what is magic in the Western mind? Nothing more than a way to understand and master the supernatural and make it work for you. Christian prayer, Christian baptism, other Christian acts, we are trying to interpret and interact with the supernatural. And talking about folklore folk magic, isn't that what happened when Adam and Eve got booted out of the Garden of Eden for eating an apple and listening to a serpent. And now you have an angel with a flaming sword placed at the gate. It's one of the reasons why I liked the streaming episodes of Silo. They reversed it. You're kicked out of the silo into the garden (Ah.) which is twist, is a twist. Uh, John Burton, the slave of Parowan 1797-1865, slave and servant of the same Mormon family

for 50 years. At the time of his death, his half-sister to who he was incredibly close, was probably his own blood and flesh, still his owner, but said the whole gospel is we don't need to listen to the serpent. We don't need to eat of the fruit and boil down our religion is the wisest advice I've ever heard. It really is. So, I don't want you out there who hear this to think Oogie Boogie Woogie strange stuff out of Zodiac. These are people living in a sacred community in sanctified time trying to make their world work for them the same way as you and I are doing, Karin, trying to understand and what we are.

**Karin Peter 50:31**

Um hmm. And so it's really helpful to put that in context. The, the Western Europe connection cannot be understated whether it's out of the British Isles and Celtic traditions or whether it's out of Western Europe magic traditions in Germany and, and other places. All the immigrants brought all that with them. And we still live in the remnants of that today.

**Melvin Johnson 50:53**

Yes. (We still do.) Well, we still have all these people. Crystals and new age and this and that and everything else. (Yeah, absolutely.) How many of our friends still go by their nickname of Gypsy Rose?

**Karin Peter 51:10**

I've, I, I don't know how many times I look up and see what fingernail polish should a Taurus wear. I mean, there's just all those kinds of fun things that are still part of our society and part of our culture. So, now I want to get back to where we, which, where we are here in Texas. So, one of the things you brought up was the Mormon Mill Cemetery. So, was there more to that?

**Melvin Johnson 51:33**

Sure. By 1851, the Germans have taken back the government in Gillespie County, but they're not persecuting the Mormons. There's a flood and the flood wipes out the arable lands and builds, and buries the marble millstones in the river. So, it's time to move on. They move three counties up to Burnet B u r n e t. It's not Burnett and people get upset when you say it. It's Burnet learnit (It's Burnet. Okay.) dernit. And they settle on Hamilton Creek a few miles from Fort Croghan, another outlet for their mills. And we will see the Lyman Wight desk on display in the Fort Croghan Museum. (Hey.) It's amazing. There they build and we will be able to see the millpond, uh, the shale waterfall, some of the old, uh, rings and rods in the rocks of where the mill stood. And then across the creek and up the bluff, on top of, set in a U of cedars is one of the finest examples of 19th century pre-Civil War cemeteries in the American West, west of the Mississippi. It's small. It holds 14 graves, 14 out of 95 people in two years. That seems like a high number to me. (Yeah.) But anyway, it's made out of limestone. And you have three steps up to the top of the wall and three steps down into, and I've never seen that before, one on the north side and one on the south side. When I took Kenny Mays and Mark Christiansen from the Desert News, they had that Thursday History Matters thing with photography forever. And Kenny looked around. His eyes were the size of saucers. And he said, This makes the whole trip worthwhile. I remember the first time I saw it. Just the breeze, a few crow. I knew there was some cattle down the slope behind. I could hear it. But there was this little amphitheater with the cedar and then the cemetery. And you walk into it and you talk about sanctified sacred space. And I have to thank Marley Porter, a noted Texas architect, for getting in contact with the owners who did not want us come in there at all. And he said, Look, you know, and I know and Mel knows that you can't keep us out of

historical pioneer cemeteries. We're coming, so how do you want us to do it? ( . . . ) and a pastor from Fredericksburg has given us his van and his small school bus to truck us up from the falls to the Colorado Museum and back in two loads. That's the central Texas I know. That's the way the people are. (Yep.) And, I tell you, whoever does the northern tour, and I'm not knocking the southern tour, going down to Bandera is amazing. You're going to see a gunfight, uh, recreation out in the road. You're gonna' go to the hanging tree and learn about atrocities from the Civil War. You're gonna' see that incredible museum at Frontier Times. But the opportunity to see the Mormon Mill Cemetery is a once in a lifetime thing.

**Karin Peter 55:55**

Alright listeners. If you live in the area or are traveling to that area, this is something you might want to check out. So, Mel, you talked a little bit about how you came upon kind of this story from your own research, your own, uh, postgraduate re, research, but were there other reasons you wanted to tell this story?

**Melvin Johnson 56:19**

No. I, I'm a historian. I know that,. (And we tell stories.) and it grabbed me. It grabbed me. And it's, I grew up with Will Bagley. We were in the same ward together. We went to seminary together. And I'll rat him out now that he's passed on. He graduated from seminary and I did not, LDS. But Will told me what Dale Morgan told him. The more I learned, the more I need to know. And that's what this was. Once I realized, because I'd done my graduate work on Texas German immigration to the hill country, so, like, here was the rest of the story. And I have given presentations and lectures at the museums and other venues in Central Texas on the Texas Germans and the Wightites down there. And sometimes they got along and sometimes I didn't. Texas Germans were unionists. Texas Mormons were secessionist (Uh huh.) and, uh, filled out Confederate State troop militias in the hill country. Mormons, I think, I can't prove it yet. I need the muster rolls. But I think there were Mormons in the Confederate State troop that ambushed a German unionist group that was heading down to the Rio and across the river so they could go to Louisiana and enlist in the Union armies. The Confederates ambushed the Germans on the Nueces and killed 67 of 78 of them including butchering 11 prisoners of war. That was a part of Central Texas. The Wightites never during their time, I mean, they would go after natives who stole their horses. And I had records they killed two or three. Suffered none themselves. But the Wightites were one of the most gentle communities in the West. They did not want to interfere with anybody. They didn't want to be interfered with, uh, as well. Almost no record of violence at all with the Wightites in all of the counties where they were. And when Lyman Wight died, a newspaper obituary said, We have had the honor of having one of the finest, uh, colonist leaders that Texas has ever had creating four communities, three county governments, etc. (Wow.) It's a super story.

**Karin Peter 59:23**

Yeah, completely opposite of the experience in Missouri and Nauvoo.

**Melvin Johnson 59:27**

Yes. The violence was not there.

**Karin Peter 59:29**

Yeah. So, you shared a little bit about different people who were really helpful to you in researching this. Were there, were there challenges to so, finding some of your research in this, um, ( . . . ) other than not, someone not wanting you to visit the cemetery?

**Melvin Johnson 59:47**

I had far more help, and let me say that, too, from Strangite, people don't understand there's still Strangites out there, three bunches of 'em. I had more help from Strangites, Wightite descendants, Latter Day Saints in Salt Lake than I ever had any opposition on the book. There was a couple of, you know, reviewers said, Well, why are you doing this? Why are you talking about that? That wasn't really a temple. And that was a gentleman from BYU and I ignored him because he was wrong and I knew the evidence would stand for itself. I want to put a shout out to Ron Rom, Ron Romig, Barbara Bernauer and Bill Shepherd. Those three, with, maybe, uh, Billy Whiting, were the, those four. And then Alex Baugh from BYU in cleaning off the bridge that links the various denominations together and making sure that the story of all the denominations were honored and assist it. (Yeah.) I've had people send me stuff. I've sent people stuff. There has been, there's been so very little resistance and so much comaraderie among the historia, really.

**Karin Peter 1:01:31**

Yeah. I think that's been one of the interesting aspects about the various restoration traditions is that the history department, the historians have led the way in what in Community of Christ we would call unity in diversity, but the whole idea of coming together for a common purpose and supporting one another.

**Melvin Johnson 1:01:52**

And I think, yes, you can say that the RLDS historians Richard Howard, Alma Blair, Paul Edwards, Bill Russell, they turned an entire church leadership and membership on its head. (Um hmm.) Joseph was a polygamist. This has nothing do, to do with converting Indian polygamists in the subcontinent of India. We need to look at our own history. (Yeah.) And Community of Christ has paid a price for that in numbers and in monies, but so proud that Community of Christ and its leadership, took the high road all the way through. And if you don't agree, peace be unto you and good luck.

**Karin Peter 1:02:47**

Yeah. Well said. Thank you, Melvin. You, you are an historian. Telling the story is important to you. But what was something new that you learned in this research that has caught your attention?

**Melvin Johnson 1:03:04**

About myself that ( . . . )

**Karin Peter 1:03:06**

Just in anything in the whole process.

**Melvin Johnson 1:03:09**

I made friends I never would have met. I met Vicki ( . . . ). And Bill Shepard and John Hajicek and Alex Baugh and Richard Bennett and dozens of others. Jason Smith, who I love, down in Oklahoma. And oh, just so many. I have been enriched as a human being by knowing these people because, uh, we were not trying to hide things from each other. We were sharing and we all wanted to get to the restoration of all things which is to use, uh, John Burton's metaphors, to get back into the Garden of Eden into fellowship in humanity with one another and with our God whoever he/she may be or not be, but that we can put aside the nonsense, (Yeah.) the self-imposed on others nonsense. Searching Wightiteism has made me a better person--without a doubt, without a doubt.

**Karin Peter** 1:04:37

I think just the, the ending part that you told of the story about after Lyman Wight's death that he was really honored by the community around him that they had been a gentle people considering how you described him when we started out, his own personal journey was an amazing journey, as well. So, has there been anything from this story that you know is just going to stay with you for the rest of your life, just, just something in particular that you heard or learned or studied and went, Ah, I'll never forget that?

**Melvin Johnson** 1:05:10

Yeah, two events. Ron Romig walking into the ballroom and reaching up on top of the shelf and brushing that off. And then reaching over and brushing off the other thing and says, What do you know about the autobiography of John Pierce Hawley? (Ah.) Nothing. Uh, I read it that night and I called Will Bagley on the phone the next morning because he was busily involved with his corpus blood of the prophets, which would be another eight years before it was published. And I said, Do you have John Hawley's story of the Mountain Meadow Massacre. And he went, Who is John Hawley. He said, Send it to me. And I did, of course. And then Bill Shepard and I running around down on the sh, uh, beach of the Pedernales River, right below where the temple would have been, looking for indigenous artifacts, 8 and 9000 years old. We were getting awls and needles and spear points. And the first time I stood in Mormon Mill Cemetery and Kenny and Mark and I were all crying at the peacefulness and the sacredness of it. And I never would have been there at Community of Christ at conference when Christine Elise Blythe walked up to get an award for best article of the year. She had her baby, her new baby over her shoulder. I don't know if you were there, but she walked up and my wife said, How are any of us going to top that? (Well, nobody's going to at that point.) Well, I've had so many special experiences and I have truly enjoyed this one.

**Karin Peter** 1:07:17

Well, I appreciate you sharing that with us. We get to learn not only about Lyman Wight and his colony, but we get to know you a little bit better as a Mormon historian. So, you, you left the LDS church, you said, at age 31. How is this whole topic of studying, of religion, of the history of a religious people shaped you? Would you consider yourself a, a disciple? (Oh, no.) How do you describe yourself?

**Melvin Johnson** 1:07:45

I'm in the silo. I want to get through that door, clean the window and get into the garden. I am finding my way right along with everyone else. I find peace in high Anglican liturgy in services. But is it the end all and be all? No. It's but a path, but a ceremony. I enjoy singing in Church of Christ meetings,

acapella. That is a unique, anybody out there who has not done that, do it. (Oh, yeah.) You will have an insight into a people that you will not have otherwise. Um, Karin, we're all doing the best we can. And as long as we keep doing that and keep offering that to others, and that we need to remember that when we forgive others, when we forgive ourselves, we're able to forgive others to find empathy for others. So, if anything, the study of Wightiteism has done over the 30 years, I have more empathy for my brother and sister, far more than I did 30 years ago.

**Karin Peter** 1:09:21

Yeah. Thank you. Those are, those are wise words from a lifelong historian for our listeners. So, we're gonna' bring our episode to a close, Melvin. Do you have any last thoughts you want to share on this topic before we wrap it up?

**Melvin Johnson** 1:09:39

Yes. To those of you who are within the sound of my voice, I sound like a World War II announcer, pay attention to Sister Peters' podcasts. They're important. Pay attention to what Historic Sites Foundation is doing with theirs. To all of you active LDS and anybody else interested in Mormona and Texana, and let me tell you, Mormons in Texas are more excited about their history than most Texans are, and they are thrilled about their history, (Yeah, they are.) so if you have an interest in Texana and Mormona, go on to the JWVHA website, check out the conference material. This may be the most exciting conference we've had since Lou Midgley, of all people, stood up 30 years ago and said, Why don't you RLDS be what you say you are instead of what you're not? That was the first one I attended. (Yeah, that's pivotal.) You remember that? Were you there that?

**Karin Peter** 1:11:06

No, but that, that was a pivotal, uh, moment of learning for the church.

**Melvin Johnson** 1:11:11

Yeah, keep, stop telling us what you're not. And I could see Grant McMurray sitting in the back and his eyes went like that. And Lou was 100%, right. (Yeah.) If you have any interest, to those of you in sound of my voice, you will find Restoration and pan-Mormon history in all of the other denominations is exciting as the one in your own. This is fun. It teaches us how to be better beings or better angels, a way to it. Thank you so much.

**Karin Peter** 1:11:56

Thank you, Melvin. The, uh, learn and tell your story is the lesson I think, for today. And, so, uh, Joelle Wight, if you're listening, we're, we have lots to chat about now that I know some of your, um, ancestral history. And our thanks to Melvin Clarno Johnson for joining us today. And for our listeners, we incur, encourage you to, uh, go to the [historicsitesfoundation.org](https://historicsitesfoundation.org) website where this lecture and the others from their spring series will be archived. Again, that's [historicsitesfoundation.org](https://historicsitesfoundation.org). This is Cuppa' Joe, part of the Project Zion Podcast. I'm Karin Peter, and thank you so much for listening.