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## **The Saints on Celluloid: The Making of the Movie "Brigham Young"**

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Twentieth Century-Fox has been described as the film studio with a passion for America's past. And the American epic that induced film producer Darryl F. Zanuck to spend more than \$2,500,000 was the story of the Mormons. Under his hand that story became the motion picture Brigham Young, which in later years he fondly called "my favorite film."<sup>(1)</sup>

By 1940, Zanuck had brought the infant Twentieth Century-Fox studio from obscurity at its founding in 1935 to prominence as one of the top film studios boasting the commercially successful stars Alice Faye, Don Ameche, Henry Fonda, and Zanuck's own discovery, Tyrone Power. But Zanuck did not build his studio on stars--M-G-M had them--but on successful stories. "Star power is valueless no matter how big the personalities," he said, "unless the subject matter in the story stands the test."<sup>(2)</sup>

The idea for Brigham Young originated not with the film producer himself but with popular novelist Louis Bromfield. Selected to be on a panel of judges for the 1938-39 Harper Prize Contest, Bromfield thumbed through a thick unwieldy manuscript while on a trip west. Owing to contest rules, the manuscript was unsigned and Bromfield was unaware hours later that he had finished reading an epic story of the Mormons, *Children of God*, by fellow novelist Vardis Fisher.<sup>(3)</sup> Having worked previously with Zanuck, a close friend, on the screenplay for *The Rains Came* (1939) the excited Bromfield called the cigar-smoking mogul at his home and persuaded him to purchase the screen rights to the still unsigned manuscript.

In adding Brigham Young to his successful screen biographies, Stanley and Livingston, Alexander Graham Bell, and Jesse James, Zanuck sent Bromfield on an eight-month fact-finding mission throughout the intermountain west gathering information from Mormon pioneer descendants and the Mormon Church archives in Salt Lake City. A look through Bromfield's research files, still in the Story Research Department at Fox, reveals hundreds of pages of sermons, speeches, excerpts from pioneer diaries, photographs, and correspondence with Mormon leaders and historians dealing with early Church history.

So taken was Bromfield by his research that he had enough material for two motion pictures and was either unable or unwilling to cut it down. At this point, the able Fox scriptwriter Lamar Trotti was called in to fashion Bromfield's mountain of material into a dramatic screenplay. But even Trotti had his problems. Early drafts of the final

script are weighted down by sermons, dramatic emphasis on Church doctrine, and intricacies of Mormon history which would have made it interesting for Mormons but not for the general public. What did finally emerge was not necessarily a biography of Brigham Young, but a story of the Mormon founding, the murder of Joseph Smith, the difficult trek west to the Salt Lake Valley, and the challenges encountered there.

"We must never have the feeling that these people are fanatics," Zanuck later impressed on his associate producer Kenneth Macgowan. "We must treat their faith with respect and omit anything that would make them look ridiculous."<sup>(4)</sup> Yet, "fanatic" had often been the precise word used in describing the relatively new American sect.

Gradually having acquired the attributes of a subculture itself, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had fought the same kind of battle against stereotyping by the rest of society as had Blacks, Jews, Italians, and other groups less readily integrated into the mainstream of American culture. The religious zeal and aggressiveness demonstrated by the Latter-day Saints together with their clannish but successful administration of economic and political affairs raised the suspicions of their already inquisitive neighbors.

Polygamy, mystic revelations to modern prophets, golden bibles and scheming missionaries adding continually to their harem of wives constituted the bulk of what the world ever heard of the Mormons in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So often had this imagery appeared in the expose literature of the day that it was no surprise when these stereotypes, particularly of polygamy, were utilized early in the development of motion pictures. These impressions, advanced in more than a score of films from 1905 to 1936, made an indelible impression on society as only the cinema can. One Danish film, *A Victim of the Mormons* (1911), tells the story of a young Mormon missionary in Copenhagen who lures the fiancée of a close friend to elope with him to Utah. There, with the abandoned lover in pursuit, the missionary keeps the heroine locked in his basement after her "baptism" in the Salt Lake Temple. Shortly, however, (the film is only three reels in length) she is rescued by her one-and-only.

This film received such a broad viewing and was so detrimental to the Mormon image that Utah Governor William Spry fought a long--eventually victorious--struggle against further showings.<sup>(5)</sup>

Five years later in 1917 the film *A Mormon Maid* was released nationally. The innocent-daughter-catching-the-eye-of-powerful- Mormon-leader formula was again treated but at greater length than ever before. In its five reels (approximately sixty-five minutes), one encounters Celestial Marriage, Blood Atonement and the sinister dealings of the Avenging Angels or Danites. *A Mormon Maid*, produced in the United States, enjoyed wide coverage and popularity, much to the distress of Mormon Church officials.

During the 1930s, however, portrayals of Mormons in feature films were sparse as the new Hays and later Breen regulatory codes included severe restrictions against the treatment of polygamy on the screen, to the disappointment of producers at virtually every major studio.<sup>(6)</sup> The enthusiastic public reception to Vardis Fisher's *Children of*

*God* suggested to both the worlds of literature and film that there was much interest in the drama of the Mormon story. Winning the coveted Harper Prize, Fisher's saga of the Mormon Church began in New York with the founding prophet Joseph Smith, through the Brigham Young period and concluded with the death of John Taylor, the last Mormon leader prior to the 1890 Manifesto ending the practice of polygamy. While substantial emphasis was still given to plural marriage, Fisher, once a Mormon himself, stressed that the Latter-day Saints were endowed with the virtues of stability, industry, and common sense.

### Hollywood and Vine Meets Temple Square

From the early idea and research stages all the way up through production and final editing, Zanuck, associate producer Kenneth Macgowan, and other Fox production officials maintained close contact with Church authorities. Wanting full cooperation and official sanction from the Mormon hierarchy, Zanuck found both in Church President Heber J. Grant. The Church in the late 1930s was desperately in need of something to improve its overall public image. The distorted view the world held of the Mormons was a matter of pressing concern to the Mormon prophet, and the aging but businesslike Grant emphasized better public relations with the traditionally skeptical world outside of Utah.

President Grant took particular interest in seeing that Brigham Young was produced without any major difficulty from the Church. "This film will be a friendmaker," he remarked.<sup>(7)</sup> During the shooting stages, eighty-year-old George D. Pyper, Church Sunday School president and historical advisor for the film, paid such attention to detail and accuracy that the Fox crew became very frustrated. Wisely juxtaposing the Church's goals with those of the studio, President Grant told Fox executives, "Don't pay too much attention to that brother. We've got to have box office in this picture."<sup>(8)</sup>

Although very pragmatic in his support for the project, the Mormon leader was still concerned with historical and theological accuracy. "I hope we shall not appear to you to be over anxious," said Grant in a letter to Macgowan, "and we have no disposition to be oversensitive, but we are tremendously concerned that this picture shall be a true picture, and, while we are not, any of us, playwrights, or dramatists, or Movie technicians, we can appreciate the war which must constantly go on in one preparing a picture, between the highly dramatic and the sober fact."<sup>(9)</sup>

The balance between the "highly dramatic" aimed at by Zanuck and the "sober fact" desired by Grant was recalled by Vincent Price--chosen by Zanuck out of 25 actors to portray Joseph Smith-- in a letter written thirty-two years later to his writer. "He [Grant] wrote me several interesting letters," remembers Price. "He felt that the picture might have been about Joseph Smith instead of Brigham but of course realized that the great appeal to the public (and of course to the producers) was the difficult trek and the miracle of the gulls, etc."<sup>(10)</sup>

Gearing the film to the public required a believable treatment of the Mormon story. While Brigham Young conveyed much of the Church's beliefs, the primary emphasis given by director Henry Hathaway was towards more real and concrete ends. "Henry Hathaway," said Price, "avoided any 'religious' feeling and made it a believable story of strong men and women fighting for their faith. He was particularly vehement on this score with the part of Joseph. There was to be no hint of the standard Christ image--rather, he felt Joseph was the interpreter of God's word and as such should not wear a halo."(11)

A major point of controversy and eventual compromise between the movie studio and the Church concerned the source material from which the film came. Although *Children of God* was well received by the gentile world, it caused considerable hostility among the saints. Besides taking certain liberties with historical fact for the sake of novelistic flair, Fisher's book violated a Mormon taboo that a believer (which Fisher once was) write from the perspective of an outsider.

Apostle John A. Widtsoe--who served as chief critical liaison with the studio--wrote in a letter to Kenneth Macgowan that Fisher's sense of history could scarcely be "held to be genuine either directly or indirectly in the face of accepted historical proof to the contrary. The mixture of facts and fancy, of sober knowledge and imagination, of attempts at fairness and acceptance of exploded myth, leaves with the reader a complete misunderstanding of motives, events and accomplishments. . . . Fisher's picture of Brigham Young is a caricature, nothing more, and the picture of Joseph Smith is not much better. . . . It would be a pity to have Fisher's point of view reflected in any motion picture or elsewhere for that matter."(12)

To avoid friction, producer Zanuck not only secured all screen rights to the book should any of the material be duplicated, but heavily publicized the film to be "based on the story by Louis Bromfield." But in spite of his extensive personal research, it is evident that Bromfield was impressed by Fisher's more romantic account inasmuch as many of the lines from *Children of God* wind up as dialogue in the film. Although Vardis Fisher's work was not well received by his former brethren, it must be admitted that he is responsible for much of the favorable change in image that ultimately resulted from the making of *Brigham Young*.

### The Stars

During the formative stages of the screenplay, Zanuck embarked on a talent hunt for his *Brigham Young* that closely rivaled David O. Selznick's search for Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With The Wind*.

Popular actors Laurence Olivier, Don Ameche, and Spencer Tracy were considered but were gradually eliminated. Olivier was too English, Ameche (also considered for Joseph Smith) too well known, and Spencer Tracy's established Catholic Priest image would have made him appear ludicrous in Mormon trappings as the polygamous frontier prophet. Sticking to his tenet that stories were stronger than stars,

Zanuck decided that he needed the combination of a lead who could carry a major role against lead stars Tyrone Power and Linda Darnell, have the necessary magnetic charisma, and at the same time be relatively unknown to the moviegoing public.

It was while vacationing in Idaho that Zanuck viewed the thirty-minute screen test of his 46th contestant and found the solution to his demanding requirement in a strapping six-foot-two stage actor from Indiana, Dean Jagger. Thirty-three-year-old Jagger had been a veteran of the stage since the mid-1920s and would have been by then a three-time loser in films had he not been chosen for the title role in *Brigham Young*. Lured from the Chautauqua circuits to Hollywood in the late twenties, Jagger endured a string of minor movie roles until 1936, when he returned to New York determined never to be humiliated by the movies again.

Up in lights on Broadway as Jesse James in the *Missouri Legend* provided the success that Jagger hoped for and gave him little reason to accept an offer to test yet again for a Hollywood film; but he was nevertheless impressed that the invitation came from Darryl F. Zanuck himself and that the part would be a major role. *Brigham Young* brought Jagger to Hollywood--and stardom--to stay.

On seeing Jagger in action, George Pyper was amazed by the similarities between Jagger and the real Brigham Young: "There are resemblances in the facial features and in the voice. When I watched Mr. Jagger pleading in a courtroom scene, I thought I was listening again to Brigham Young. I was 17 when President Young died, but I had known him for years, and his voice and his looks are as firmly implanted in my memory as though it were only yesterday. Mr. Jagger even adopted some of President Young's mannerisms and his walk."(13)

Regardless of the prominence given to Jagger and Price as key figures in the story, top billing went to Fox's two leading box office sensations, Tyrone Power as Jonathan Kent, the Mormon scout, and his beautiful sixteen-year-old leading lady Linda Darnell as Zina Webb, the "outsider." Supporting players included Jane Darwell, who received an Academy Award that same year for *Grapes of Wrath*, character actor John Carradine as Porter Rockwell, Brian Donlevy as Angus Duncan, and talented Mary Astor as Mary Ann Young, Brigham's "favorite" wife. The film's lone Indian, Big Elk, was played by Chief Big Tree, and the only Mormon in the production, Moroni Olsen, an experienced actor who portrayed Willard Richards, was also retained by the studio as a technical advisor.

### **The Making of an Epic**

Action director Henry Hathaway was assigned to direct, but probably because of Zanuck's personal approach to film making--writers did not write scripts for directors; they wrote them for Darryl(14)--he later mused that "I made *Brigham Young* because they asked me to. . . . It was a very difficult picture to make."(15) Such complications incident to the filming of Zanuck's multi-million-dollar effort put such a strain on Hathaway that Mary Astor later recalled that he was "a director with a bad temper who

drove his people unmercifully."(16) The physical aspects of making Brigham Young were, by today's standards, awesome. The allocated budget of \$3,500,000 was spent largely on elaborate sets and extensive shooting--over eighty percent of the film--on location. An eighteen-week shooting schedule involving a cast and crew of five hundred people traveled nearly 2,000 miles to six major locations in Utah, California, and Nevada. Outdoor sets included Nauvoo, Illinois (complete with Temple), constructed on the vast backlot at Fox studios for \$50,000; Fort Bridger and Council Bluffs built at Big Bear Lake in California's San Bernardino Mountains at \$40,000 (used in only ten minutes of the film); a six-foot deep, two-city-block long sheet of ice replica of the frozen Mississippi River costing \$25,000; the spectacular Salt Lake Valley set consisting of fifty-five log cabins built on a twenty-acre tract near Lone Pine, California, totaling \$85,000; and a mile-long train of covered wagons costing \$300 each.(17)

The demands for realism required that real crickets be used in the seagull sequence. Responding to a wire from the Chamber of Commerce, the crew flew up to Elko, Nevada, where a blanket of crickets six miles long and a mile wide was swarming the countryside. "The first few hours of the morning were full of practical jokes," recalled Astor, "with squeals from the girls when somebody would put a cricket down the neck of a dress. But in a very short time, none of it was a joke. We had to go right into the spots where they were worst, with brooms and sacks, beating at them in the tall grain. Two days of this were all any of us could have taken. It was nauseating to walk through them piled to a foot deep in some places, and the stench was awful."(18) Certainly the Hollywood stars must have gained a new respect for their pioneer counterparts from this and other experiences encountered while in production of the film. The Plot

In its final version, the Lamar Trotti screenplay opens in Carthage, Illinois, hotbed of anti-Mormon activity. A sign posted in the newspaper office reads "WOLF HUNT. 7 O'CLOCK. COME ONE, COME ALL. THE HUNTING IS FINE!" The object of such predatory affections, we discover, is the Mormons. A mob raids the Kent residence near Nauvoo where the fathers of both Jonathan Kent and visiting non-Mormon Zina Webb are beaten to death, their homes burned because they refused to spit on the Book of Mormon.

Aided by a bellicose Porter Rockwell, Joseph Smith parries the suggestion by Apostle Angus Duncan to compromise with the mobbers' demands. Joseph decides that "we're through turning the other cheek" and alerts the Saints to arm themselves with guns.

Finally Smith is hauled into court on trumped-up charges and is prosecuted by a rabble-rousing lawyer who obviously has the entire town on his side. Brigham Young, coming to the jury box from the courtroom audience, delivers an impassioned five-minute speech against religious intolerance and recounts his meeting Joseph Smith.

The entire courtroom is visibly taken aback by this eloquent defense but with many of the mob in the jury, Smith is quickly pronounced guilty. Before leaving the courtroom, Smith charges Young with leadership over his flock, reminding him that

"only the Lord God of Israel can whip us and I don't think he's in cahoots with the local sheriff."

That night while being held for sentencing, Smith is murdered by the mob, thus leaving the Church in Young's hands. Duncan, still preaching compromise, contends against Young for the presidency.

However, events force Brigham Young to make the fateful decision to leave Nauvoo. Shown now to be in league with the mob himself, Duncan finds out that the ruffians intend to run him out of town as well.

The Mormons are then chased by the mob, crossing the frozen Mississippi River in the dead of night. In moments of despondency--and in the film Brigham has them with clockwork regularity--Young is reassured of his leadership ability by his wife, Mary Ann.

At Salt Lake, following a dramatic hilltop announcement that "this is the place," trying conditions convince Young's followers that the Salt Lake Valley is anything but the place. Even Jonathan and Zina (not married but somehow "living together") begin to question their leader's inspiration.

As Brigham Young, weary of his colony's predicament, is at the height of self-doubt the crickets attack. After beating them with every implement imaginable, the forlorn Saints led by Duncan denounce Young as a fallen prophet.

Young is about to tell his people of his weakness when the sky is blackened with seagulls, sent by Divine Providence. Mary Ann assures Brigham that the Lord "was speaking to you all the time" as they gaze on the hungry birds devouring the crickets.

The scene dissolves to a modern day view of Salt Lake City and the Seagull Monument on Temple Square as Young narrates gratitude to "the symbol of God's benevolence--the seagull." Box Office

Knowing, as Hathaway did, that realism as well as sensationalism brings people to the box office, the Fox publicity department directed their promotional campaign towards the more susceptible elements of the film in both their posters and other media-oriented material. To the easterners, where the religion was founded, the name Brigham Young carried with it a much different, more theological, connotation than it did to people in the west, where Young's pioneering efforts took place.

Consequently, studio publicity campaigns in the East emphasized the epic pioneer elements of the film (the title was changed to Brigham Young--Frontiersman) and billed it as "The Great American Motion Picture."

Commercial success also demanded romance; hence box office attractions Power and Darnell. Zanuck's story conferences were punctuated with remarks like, "The romance in this story is particularly important from a commercial standpoint"(19) and

"The romance must be strengthened."(20) As it turned out, Brigham's sermonizing--so much a part of earlier drafts--was deleted and Young was given a lengthy speech in a courtroom scene, nonexistent in earlier versions, that shifted the focus from Mormon doctrines to the more universal theme of religious tolerance.

Polygamy, also a substantial part of early drafts, fell prey to the censor's pen and was touched on only for a brief moment in the film. But Zanuck saw to it that plural marriage was utilized heavily to promote the film and with this the Fox public relations men had a field day. One photograph used on some posters included in the publicity kits showed Jagger surrounded by a bevy of wives. Time magazine, in an article reviewing the film, noted the disparity between those wives depicted in the publicity shot--twelve--and those actually seen in the film--four--by the caption, "Only the publicity department gave him his full share."(21) One advertisement appearing on a Los Angeles newspaper read "Here was a Man! He had 27 wives . . . and 47 Children!" Another showed Linda Darnell saying, "Marry you--and be one of your six wives! How can I marry you--I'm an outsider--you a Mormon and can have many wives--and what if you get to loving one more than any of the others?"(22) Polygamy was not treated as sensationally in the film as these lines suggest, but such an emphasis in promotion was intended to send the public running to see just how Tyrone Power did it!

### **The Premiere**

Finally, Brigham Young was ready for the screen. Studio officials had announced the Salt Lake City premiere for August 23, 1940. Ten days prior to that, however, the First Presidency of the Mormon Church was accorded a private screening in Salt Lake City. What must have been anxious moments for Fox representative Colonel Jason Joy were no doubt relieved when emerging from the Studio Theatre, President Grant stopped to announce his approval to waiting reporters. "I endorse it with all my heart and have no suggestions. This is one of the greatest days of my life. I can't say any more than 'God Bless You'."(23)

Utah's Governor Henry H. Blood and Salt Lake City Mayor Ab Jenkins declared the 23rd as "Brigham Young Day" complete with parade, window display competition amongst the downtown merchants, and special advertising campaigns based on the pioneer theme. The Centre, Salt Lake's largest and most elaborate motion picture theatre was chosen as the premiere showcase for Brigham Young. It was thought that the Centre's capacity would be ample for enthusiastic Salt Lake City crowds. Yet by the premiere night, a total of seven theatres had completely sold out to nearly 9,000 people at the then high ticket price of \$1.10. Such unprecedented response to a film premiere set an industry record for the number of theatres used simultaneously for the premiere of one film.

At the Salt Lake Municipal Airport on the Friday afternoon of the premiere, over 5,000 spectators greeted the two chartered planes bearing Twentieth Century-Fox notables including the lead stars, Fox president Sidney Kent and Zanuck himself. When asked if he had seen a reception like this before, Zanuck responded, "Not quite, not

quite."(24) Nearly 100,000 well-wishers jammed the parade route of the stars down State and Main streets.

Later that afternoon a special invitational luncheon was held for the dignitaries and stars at Brigham Young's own Lion House hosted by the First Presidency. Afterwards, the movie company was given a tour of numerous local Church history sites.

All was in readiness for the premiere festivities as both Salt Lake radio stations provided live coverage of the event. The Deseret News and

Salt Lake Tribune published a special supplement to their regular editions devoted entirely to the film with photographs and background information about its production.

The entire Salt Lake City police force was called in anticipation of the huge evening crowds. While no major incidents occurred it was estimated that Salt Lake's population of 150,000 swelled to nearly a quarter-of-a-million that night as visitors came from surrounding states.

Dean Jagger, Mary Astor, Tyrone Power, and Linda Darnell literally ran to five of the seven premiere theatres to appear briefly on the day before the screening of *Brigham Young*. "It was a tired Hollywood party that landed at the Union Air Terminal in Burbank Saturday morning . . .", reported *Variety*.(25)

## **The Reviews**

Delighted with the overwhelming success of the Salt Lake premiere, Fox executives nevertheless knew that the record attendance was due chiefly to curiosity. They were concerned about the later reactions of the viewers to their expensive production.

*The Deseret News* praised the film but pointed out the major criticism voiced by Church members. "The Brigham Young of the picture lacks the faith and knowledge the real Brigham had, who never doubted his leadership nor its divine direction. It therefore to the Church members comes as a shock," they add, "when Brigham doubts." It is a balanced and just treatment, they conclude, "so much so that Church members will readily overlook the infelicities that appear and that they only are likely to see."(26)

The *Salt Lake Tribune* opined similarly that *Brigham Young* was a picture of "transcendent merit with a fidelity to facts and details" and cautioned with reference to polygamy that "there is nothing calculated to reopen old wounds, nothing likely to revive rancor."27 While the Salt Lake City premiere was a predictable success, Brigham Young met with only moderate acceptance at the New York premiere on September 20.28 Fox executives had expanded the film's title to *Brigham Young--Frontiersman* for the generally effete East prior to its showing there. This, wrote Mary Astor, "was to steer the audience from thinking it had religion as its theme. . . ." (29) Even so, the film could not balance its box office receipts with the uniformly high critical praise.

Subsequent to the premiere and local reviews, national magazines hailed *Brigham Young* as a motion picture triumph, many of whom ranked it as socially significant as Zanuck's earlier hit *Grapes of Wrath*. "Where in *Brigham Young*," wrote *Life*, "Darryl Zanuck caught the spirit of these intrepid builders of a new world, his \$2,500,000 was not wasted."(30) Newsweek acclaimed it as "one of the year's outstanding films."(31) Rarely found reviewing a motion picture, the University of Southern California's Sociology and Social Research commented that "the arrival at Council Bluffs and the welcome given one group of harried people by another group of harried human beings--are a relief from the frequent film display of Indians as scalpers and barbarians. The picture has historical value," they conclude, "for it shows how human beings are willing to struggle and to endure hardship in order to obtain freedom of conscience for themselves and their posterity."(32)

### **High Drama vs Sober Fact**

In spite of the prevailing harmony in the media over Brigham Young, Mormon viewers were divided on the issue and fell into one of two basic ideological camps:

1. A moderate group who generally admitted that while *Brigham Young* took liberties with history, the film was a reasonably accurate presentation of the Mormon story that elicited sympathy for the Mormons when persecuted and admiration when they were faced with and overcame difficult obstacles in their trek west and arrival in the Salt Lake Valley.

2. A more conservative group who were decidedly more vehement in their stand than the moderates. These individuals reacted strongly to what they claimed was the continual weakness attributed to Brigham Young, who according to Mormon Church teachings as a prophet should have been portrayed enjoying more in the way of revelations from God. Had this emphasis been made in the film, they say, it would have lent more strength and assurance to Brigham's otherwise doubting posture in the film. They contended also that further distortions appeared as many obvious and important historical events were either modified in the film or ignored altogether.

What feelings were undoubtedly voiced by many Latter-day Saints regarding this latter view finally reached the press. In an article under the byline "S.F. Descendant Resents 'Vacillating' Hero", Truman Young, northern California lawyer, descendant of Brigham Young and a Mormon, complained that "Brigham Young is characterized as altogether too vacillating in the screen portrait. He may have had some doubt of his ability as the perfect leader. But he felt called to aid his people, first in saving their lives and then in finding a peaceful haven for settlement." This great-grandson of Brigham Young, however, concluded that overall, "it's a sympathetic and entertaining film, if not an epic."(33)

Even Morris R. Werner, whose *Brigham Young* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1925) was and is still considered by secular scholars to be the best biography of Young, joined in the controversy and seemed to speak for many in the conservative or

"purist" camp. "Personally, I found the 'Brigham Young' of Darryl Zanuck an excellent vignette of history," Werner said, "but I am also purist about history. I don't think anybody ought to take liberties with Clio--the woman I love--for purposes of fiction, propaganda or box office."(34) He pointed out that it took nearly two years to evacuate the Mormons from Nauvoo, not in one night as depicted in the film. Nor did every-one cross the frozen Mississippi River--only the small advance party. Rather, the majority ferried across to Sugar Creek on barges. Furthermore, Brigham Young had studied extensively the accounts of travelers and explorers like John Fremont who had visited the area of the Great Basin of the Rocky Mountains and because of this research Brigham Young was able to move his people to that general area, which is in sharp contrast to the screen portrayal of Young as an aimless wanderer. Also, the lust for gold and the desire to go to California for that reason, used as a political lever to divide the Church by Angus Duncan, was two years ahead of its time as shown in the film. Gold was not discovered in such large amounts as to precipitate a rush until 1849-ironically by a detachment of these same Mormon pioneers. In the final scenes of the film depicting the coming of the seagulls, Zanuck makes two errors of fact, says the conservative group. First it was wrong to picture an attempt by Brigham to confess his weakness and deception to his people because secondly, he was not even in Salt Lake when the seagull incident occurred, but hundreds of miles away in Council Bluffs, Iowa.(35)

Beyond these inaccuracies, the conservatives' principal bone of contention was the problem of succession, the transmission of the authority to lead the Church after the death of Joseph Smith. LDS historians asserted Brigham Young's right to the presidency owing to his seniority in the Church's ruling body, the Council of Twelve Apostles. However, the dispute over Joseph Smith's successor was (and still is) the principal point of disagreement between numerous religious groups who claim Smith as their founding prophet.

Following the murder of Smith that night and during the remainder of the story, Brigham, outwardly forceful and decisive with his people, is inwardly tormented by doubt. In "going to the Lord" one night in deciding whether to lead his people from Nauvoo, Brigham prays, "Of course, I'm not the one you've picked to run the Church and that's why you won't talk to me, why I don't mind. . . . Why don't you talk to me? Why? Why?"(36)

By the end of the film, Brigham's credibility is restored, for as the seagulls descend on the crops and devour the crickets, Mary Ann confidently assures Brigham, "He was speaking to you all the time."(37) While both fervent Church members and knowledgeable academicians reacted against the movie's interpretation of Brigham Young's historical character, liberal arts scholars and many, but not all, top Church authorities held a more moderate position. Those who were members and non-members of the Church connected in some degree with the dramatic or entertainment industry tended in general to allow for the dramatic license where historical authenticity was modified. It was generally felt that in order to compress fifteen years of history with which the non-Mormon audience was largely unfamiliar into two hours of screen time, some alteration of history must be made to tighten the pace and include scenes which

emphasize necessary character traits and plot elements that would result in an interesting yet cohesive screenplay.

### *Brigham Young* and Film Innovation

From a purely artistic viewpoint, many of the ideas and techniques incorporated into *Brigham Young* were both highly sophisticated and innovative for that period of film history. For the first time, a heretofore unknown actor was given top-star treatment (Jagger appeared in more scenes in *Brigham Young* than did Vivien Leigh in *Gone With The Wind*) (38) and as a result he successfully carried the burden of the film, even outdistancing billed leads Power and Darnell.

Strangely enough, it is not Zanuck who traditionally has been given credit for the movie's innovation of starring unknowns, but a man more often associated with innovation, Orson Welles. And yet with as many credits as Mr. Welles deserves, due honor should go to Zanuck for discovering and starring a relatively obscure actor in a major motion picture.

### *Brigham Young* and the Mormons

Mormons worldwide, delighted at the Hollywood-financed publicity but unsure of its meaning, waited to hear from their prophet in the Church's upcoming October General Conference. In his keynote address, Grant spoke to both opinion groups in an attempt to smooth the rough edges of dissension and unite his people behind Zanuck's multi-million dollar effort: "I have heard some little criticism of it, but we cannot expect the people who do not know that Brigham Young was in very deed the representative of God upon this earth who do not know of his wonderful character, to tell the story as we would tell it."

President Grant then encouraged Church members listening to his address, which was later reprinted in the Church's official publication, the *Improvement Era*, (39) to view the film in terms of the traditional presentation of the Church image:

"It is a very marvelous and wonderful thing, considering how people generally have treated us and what they thought of us. Of course, there are many things that are not strictly correct, and that is announced in the picture itself. It is of course a picture and we could not hope that they would make a picture at their expense, running into a couple of million dollars, to be just as we would like it."(40)

The Mormon leader's conference address more or less closed the issue among the Saints at that time. But with time and an increasingly favorable public image, the Mormon Church today has no longer needed to look to Hollywood for assistance in image-making in quite the same way or degree as in President Grant's era when the need was much more pronounced and appreciated. It is interesting to contrast the feelings of President Grant about Brigham Young with those of Spencer W. Kimball, current leader

of the Mormon Church, who in a recently published book makes brief reference to the film in connection with a character analysis of Brigham Young:

“The motion picture Brigham Young pictured President Young wondering if he were called of God. The picture showed him vacillating, unsure, and questioning his calling. In the climax of the play he is shown wavering, ready to admit he had not been inspired, that he had lied to them and misled them. . . . But there was nothing vacillating or weak about Brigham Young. He knew he was God's leader. . . .”(41)

The tone of these comments is decidedly different from President Grant's remarks although the stated facts are essentially the same. Obviously the Church's perceptions of what is most important have shifted with changing needs. Unfortunately, the good which was accomplished by the film has been lost to the awareness of most LDS viewers in the shuffle of time.

### **The New Image**

The significance of Brigham Young in providing the first positive non-partisan look at the Mormon story has seldom been recognized. One had only to consider the difference between the common characterizations of Mormons in films such as *A Victim of the Mormons* and *A Mormon Maid* and the dignity accorded them in Brigham Young to realize that a monumental change had taken place. Ironically, the rather sensationalistic publicity campaign for the film helped change the image of the Mormon even more effectively from perverted religious fanatic to virile striving pioneer.

The influence which making the film had upon Hollywood is indicative of the effect which the film had upon the nation as a whole. This, his first noteworthy role in motion pictures, left its mark on Price. "I greatly enjoyed the part of Joseph Smith," he said some thirty years later--a time span during which many actors forget what films they have appeared in. "I read a great deal about him and with the help of the late Heber Grant kept on finding more material on the subject after the film was released. I have always had the utmost admiration for the Mormon Church which I'm sure stems from my fascination with Joseph Smith--what an extraordinary man!"(42)

Louis Bromfield likewise became fascinated with Brigham Young because of his research for the film and later stated enthusiastically that "He was one of the six or seven greatest men America ever produced. He should have been President of this nation."(43) Even more unusual than Price's and Bromfield's infatuation with the early Mormon leaders is the eventual conversion of Dean Jagger to Mormonism over thirty-two years later.(44)

To the millions of non-Mormons who saw it, the film became what Heber J. Grant hoped it would be, a friend maker. Brigham Young, to them, was seen in this screen portrait as a courageous and human leader who, while beset by natural self doubt, rose successfully to each challenge of circumstance.

Since 1940, Brigham Young has been forgotten at film festivals and seminars, but has nevertheless been viewed over the years with considerable praise, not only for its championing of religious (with the attendant implication of racial) freedom but as one critic recently noted, it "proves that when producers put their minds to it, they can make pictures that show historical events as if they were something important happening to real people and not just another background for another boy-meets-girl romance."(45)

In 1948, the National Council for Social Studies edited portions of Brigham Young into a thirty-minute film entitled *Driven Westward* designed for use in secondary schools. Its purpose, as declared in the teacher's guide, was to provide a "stirring visualization of the contribution made by a minority group to our national development, and demonstrates the necessity for respecting the right of such groups."(46)

To modern viewers, Brigham Young appears somewhat dated and melodramatic and as has been illustrated, the Mormon Church has largely outgrown its need for it; yet when produced, Brigham Young gave to the world for the first time on a mass scale a fitting and sensitive introduction to the Latter-day Saint heritage--"a believable story of men and women fighting for their faith."(47)

1. Richard Paul quoting Zanuck in a letter to Dennis Rowley, Curator of Archives & Manuscripts, Brigham Young University, 25 March 1976.

2. Mel Gussow, p. 90.

3. Vardis Fisher, *Children of God* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1939), 13th ed. For views probing Fisher's historical accuracy see Joseph M. Flora, "Vardis Fisher and the Mormons," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 4, n.3, (Autumn 1969); and David Davis, "Children of God: An Historian's Evaluation," *Western Humanities Review* (Winter 1953-54), pp. 49-56.

4. Kenneth Macgowan, *Brigham Young, Conference With Mr. Zanuck* (on new treatment of 26 July 1939) 3 August 1939, p. 2. Unpublished typewritten minutes of story conference.

5. See Richard Alan Nelson, "A History of Latter-day Saint Screen Portrayals in the Anti-Mormon Film Era, 1905-1936" unpublished masters thesis, Brigham Young University, 1975, pp. 25-46.

6. May Mann, "Events in Mormon Pioneering of Salt Lake Will Be Chronicled in Hollywood Production," *Deseret News*, 26 December 1936, p. 3. The film, produced by E. B. Durr, was to have begun filming early in 1937 but never materialized. Ms Mann reported that "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount and Universal have toyed with the idea" of a large-scale film on the Mormon story and that even "Cecil B. DeMille has long been interested in the subject . . . but the present need is for concentrated action."

7. "Film Epic Thrills Audiences," *Deseret News*, 23 August 1940, p. 6.

8. Thomas Brady, "Profits vs. Prestige," New York Times, 28 July 1940, Section 9, p. 3.
9. Heber J. Grant in letter to Kenneth Macgowan, 30 August 1939.
10. Vincent Price in letter to James D'Arc, 17 February 1972.
11. Ibid.
12. John A. Widtsoe in letter to Kenneth Macgowan, 7 September 1939.
13. "Little Make-up Needed For Star of Picture Brigham Young," Salt Lake Tribune, 23 August 1940, p. 30.
14. Mel Gussow, p. 131.
15. Rui Nogueira, "Henry Hathaway Interview," Focus on Film, (No. 7, 1971), p. 16.
16. Mary Astor, My Story (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1960), p. 227. Additional information on Hathaway's interesting, if uneven, career may be found in Kingsley Canham, The Hollywood Professionals (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1973) 1: 139-198.
17. "Statistics Tell the Story of Vast Cost Involved in Producing Picture Brigham Young," Salt Lake Tribune, 23 August 1940, p. 35.
18. Mary Astor, My Story, p. 228.
19. Kenneth Macgowan, Brigham Young, Conference With Mr. Zanuck (on final script of 16 October 1939), 20 October 1939, p. 1. Unpublished typewritten minutes of story conference.
20. Kenneth Macgowan, Brigham Young, Conference With Mr. Zanuck (on first continuity draft of 30 September 1939), 5 October 1939, p. 1. Unpublished typewritten minutes of story conference.
21. "The New Pictures: Brigham Young-Frontiersman." Time (7 October 1940), p. 63.
22. Advertisement in unidentified New York newspaper contained in Dean Jagger Papers, MSS 60, Brigham Young University, Harold B. Lee Library.
23. "High L.D.S. Officials Preview Brigham Young," Salt Lake Tribune, 14 August 1940, p. 8.

24. "Salt Lakers Jam Streets To See Stars: Even Zanuck Has Not Seen Such A Premiere," Deseret News, 23 August 1940, p. 1.

25. "Huge 'Brigham' Preem Enthuses Zanuck Party," Daily Variety, 26 August 1940, p. 6.

26. Editorial, Deseret News, 24 August 1940, p. 4.

27. Editorial, Salt Lake Tribune, 23 August 1940, p. 10.

28. Brigham Young's greatest commercial success, other than in Salt Lake City, was seen in San Francisco where it outsold every other film in the area. However, the film was considered less than desirable to residents of Carthage, Illinois, who boycotted showings there. They had petitioned Twentieth Century-Fox to delete the unfavorable Carthage scenes but Kenneth Macgowan replied that Brigham Young was not intended to be a reflection on modern Carthage: "The foreward to the film clearly shows that the time is 1846. Every town undoubtedly has a few skeletons in its closet and Carthage shouldn't be unduly sensitive." (Deseret News, 22 August 1940, p. 11.)

29. Mary Astor, *A Life on Film* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1972), p. 147.

30. "Movie of the Week: Brigham Young," *Life*, (23 September 1940), p. 59.

31. "The drama of a Migration: Brigham Young Depicts Search of Mormons for Freedom," *Newsweek*, (23 September 1940), p. 151.

32. "Social Photoplay," *Sociology and Social Research*, (November-December 1940), p. 198.

33. Fred Johnson, "A Mormon Eyes 'Brigham Young': S. F.

Descendant Resents 'Vacillating' Hero," *San Francisco Bulletin*, 9 October 1940.

34. Morris R. Werner, "Brigham Young Seen As Screen Material," *New York Herald Tribune*, 15 September 1940, Section VI.

35. See B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1965) and Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1966), 21st ed.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 47. In a lengthy letter to Macgowan, John A Widtsoe criticized as inaccurate the use of "going to God" to mean prayer and colloquialisms such as "ain't" attributed to Brigham Young (letter to Macgowan, 13 November 1939).

37. Lamar Trotti from the story by Louis Bromfield, *Brigham Young* (Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp.: unpublished continuity & dialogue taken from the screen, 26 August 1940), R/12, p. 13.

38. Weston Nordgren, "Brigham Young", *Improvement Era* (September 1940), p. 533. Jagger appeared in 262 out of the total of 314 scenes.

39. Editor's Page, *Improvement Era*, (November 1940), p. 654.

40. Heber J. Grant, "Gratitude for Faith of People," *One Hundred and Eleventh Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1940), p. 96.

41. Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes The Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1975), p. 29.

42. Vincent Price in a letter to James D'Arc, 17 February 1972.

43. "Bromfield Applauds Brigham Young," *Deseret News*, 23 August 1940, p. 20.

44. See James V. D'Arc, "Dean Jagger: From 'Prophet' to Convert," *Daily Universe* (Brigham Young University), 19 November 1973, pp. 7-8.

45. John Hovard Reid, "The Best Second Fiddle," *Films & Filming*, IX 2 (November 1972), p. 15.

46. *Teacher Guide to the Classroom Motion Picture Driven Westward* adapted from *Brigham Young* (20th Century-Fox) distributed by Teaching Film Custodians, Inc., 25 West 43rd Street, New York, New York 10018.

47. Vincent Price in letter to James D'Arc, 17 February 1972.