

THE BRIGHAM CITY COOPERATIVE

As first advocated during the winter of 1873-1874, the United Order, as it was usually called, appears to have been based upon the success of an experimental community which previously had been established by Apostle Lorenzo Snow in Brigham City, Utah. In 1864, Snow, who had been a student at Oberlin in the early 1830's, organized a mercantile cooperative [i.e. a general store organized as a cooperative] in which a number of Brigham City people took shares. As profits were made, members received dividends in kind, rather than in money. Cash resources were husbanded, ward members were encouraged to buy capital stock, and within four years the cooperative had accumulated sufficient funds to build a \$10,000 tannery. The tannery soon produced all the boots, shoes, saddles, and harness needed in the community by using locally available hides. In 1870 the expanded Brigham City Cooperative Mercantile and Manufacturing Company founded a \$35,000 water-powered woolen factory which contained 200 spindles and seven looms and employed thirty-two hands. The policy of paying worker-capitalists with cooperatively produced goods was continued, and dividends were paid only in kind. By 1874 approximately forty branches or departments had been established covering almost every phase of industry and agriculture in the valley. The paid-up capital of \$120,000 was owned by approximately 400 shareholders.

Almost every conceivable good and service, from brooms and hats to molasses and furniture was produced and sold in one of these departments. In addition to the general store, tannery, and woolen mill, the cooperative owned 5,000 sheep, 500 milk cows, and 100 hogs, and operated several farms devoted to specialized crops. A colony was established at nearby Mantua, Utah, to raise flax; and another near Washington, in southern Utah, to raise cotton and other semitropical products. Carpentry, brick, blacksmith, cabinet shop, and painting departments built homes and made furniture, while a public works department contracted with the county government to build roads, bridges, dams, canals, and public edifices. Nearly all the workmen in this village of two thousand people owned shares in "The Co-op" and were employed in one of the departments.

Brigham City came to be recognized as a "hive of industry" - one of the most prosperous and progressive settlements all the territory. Calculating that the cooperative was 85 per cent self-sufficient, the management paid 85 per cent of the wages and dividends in "Home D" scrip (scrip redeemable in products of the cooperative) and 15 per cent in "Merchandise" scrip

(redeemable in imported merchandise). For the few items which had to be ordered from Salt Lake City, the cooperative traded locally produced leather, and some rather famous local cheese. In the single year 1875, the total production was valued at \$260,000, of which \$100,000 was said to have been reinvested in new cooperative enterprises.

When the Panic of 1873 struck Utah, Brigham City was left almost untouched, experiencing in that year its greatest expansion. The community, in fact, enjoyed a certain amount of notoriety. Newspaper reporters visited the area and reported such interesting features as the manner in which homes were built for the poor and widows; how a department was set up to provide labor for tramps and benefit from feeding them; how the cooperators planned to locate their shops and factories on a twelve-acre square around the center of town and run street cars from the square to various parts of the town; and how they maintained their own monetary and banking system. One reporter declared:

"If the example of the inhabitants of this town was more generally followed, Utah would be far more prosperous and her people much better off. Our present suicidal policy of exporting raw materials and importing manufactured articles would be stopped, we would be far more independent of our sister states and territories; the financial panics of the east or west would not affect us; our people would all have good homes and enjoy more of the comforts of life than they can hope for under present regulations; and our children would stand a much better chance of receiving good educations and becoming useful members of society."

Even social reformers in England heard of the cooperative community, and one of them, Bronterre O'Brien, wrote that the Brigham City Mormons had "created a soul under the rib of death." Edward Bellamy paid them a week's visit, and may have received some of the inspiration for [his book] *Looking Backward* while observing their system.

Brigham Young seems to have been impressed with the manner in which Apostle Snow had succeeded in mobilizing labor and capital for the promotion of home industry and agriculture. The people were achieving unity and the whole system was based upon recognized corporate procedures and law. "Brother Snow," he said, "has led the people along, and got them into the United Order without their knowing it."

Source: *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-Day Saints, 1830-1900*, by Leonard J. Arrington. Pages 324-326.