

GARY B. PETERSON and LOWELL C. BENNION. *Sanpete Scenes: A Guide to Utah's Heart*. Eureka, Utah: Basin/Plateau Press, 1987. 144 pp. \$14.95.

Reviewed by Edward A. Geary, editor of *BYU Studies*.

The cover photographs alone are almost worth the price of *Sanpete Scenes*. They are extraordinarily beautiful and at the same time represent symbolic images that effectively set the tone for the entire volume. On the front cover is an autumn scene in Spring City, the gem of gems among Mormon villages. The foreground is composed of richly colored maple leaves above a shaggy carpet of roadside grass and weeds. Through the leaves, the weathered boards of a barnyard gate are visible, and beyond that the roofline of a pioneer adobe house, and farther still the graceful steeple of the Spring City LDS chapel silhouetted against the sky. It is a remarkable composition that captures the essence of the Mormon village: its oasis quality; the beautiful and durable (yet constantly endangered) historic houses and public buildings; and the rich accumulation of clutter that tells of lives lived and things valued. The back cover offers a montage of representative scenes: a sensitive shot of the Manti Temple, perhaps the most beautiful and surely the most strikingly situated building in Utah; the winding road up Maple Canyon; and the sun rising over the ridges of the Wasatch Plateau on a herd of sheep with shepherd. These photographs make a fitting introduction to a book that exemplifies, as the authors put it in the preface, "the art of reading landscapes and interpreting them graphically" (4).

Both Peterson and Bennion are competent geographers, and their book, though aimed at a wide audience, reflects solid scholarship in its treatment of the elements of place. The goal, however, is breadth rather than depth. The book is made up of seven chapters divided into forty-four topical subchapters, most of which are only one or two pages long. Chapter 1 presents an overview of Sanpete County, with emphasis on its physical setting ("A Basin between Plateaus"), its location at the geographical center of Utah yet remote from population centers and off the main transportation routes, and its essential character as "A Rural-Small Town Domain." Chapter 2 focuses on the peoples of Sanpete and the historical development of the communities, with an especially fine account of the Scandinavian heritage. Chapter 3 treats transportation, both in the narrow sense of railroads and highways and in the broader sense of the movement of population. It includes a section, titled "Sanpete's Curse," about the Balkanization that has prevented the development of any one dominant commercial center in the county. (Earlier the authors quote a local resident who compares the individual



towns to “a bunch of city-states” [29].) It would be equally appropriate, however, to call this characteristic “Sanpete’s Blessing,” for it is largely the strong sense of community identity that makes Sanpete towns so interesting.

Chapter 4 deals with the economy, from the early period when Sanpete was Utah’s breadbasket, through the emergence of wool-growing as the dominant wealth-producer at the turn of the century, to the more recent growth of the turkey growing and processing industry, and the general struggle to make a living in “a region depressed ever since the Depression” (53). Chapter 5, which I found most interesting of all, is titled “The Mormon Landscape” and includes perceptive and well-illustrated analyses of landscape elements, town plans, and architecture. A section of this chapter is devoted to the Manti Temple, and another section to “Cemetery Symbolism.”

Chapter 6, “Change in Sanpete,” describes not only technological and social changes over the years but also changes in the “Neverlasting Hills,” from the pristine condition in which the first settlers found them, through the ruinous erosion and flooding caused by overgrazing at the turn of the century, to more recent efforts at stabilization and conservation. Chapter 7 is perhaps the most immediately useful part of the book. It is given over to tour guides, with detailed tours of Mount Pleasant, Spring City, Ephraim, and Manti, and briefer guides to other towns—even to such little-known hamlets as Jerusalem, Pettyville, and Dover.

Such a book as this is the product of numerous compromises. The cover photographs illustrate the rich potential for color treatment of this scenic region, but color plates throughout the volume would have made it prohibitively expensive and turned it into a coffee-table book instead of a useable guide to be carried into the field. The authors’ determination to include as many aspects of the Sanpete scene as possible meant that no topic could be explored in much depth. The desire to present a comprehensive visual record of Sanpete’s past and present resulted in an extraordinary wealth of photographs, more than six hundred in a volume of fewer than 150 pages. Many represent Gary Peterson’s efforts to document the Sanpete scene as it exists today. Many more are historical shots, some by the great nineteenth-century Utah photographer George Edward Anderson, others gleaned from various family collections. Taken all together, they reflect every period of life in the towns and fields and mountains of Sanpete. In addition, they are supplied with informative captions and are effectively placed as close as possible to the relevant text. In order to include so many photographs, however, it was necessary to make some of them very small. I sometimes found myself wishing there were fewer but larger illustrations—though I would be hard put to identify any that I would willingly give up.



There are also compromises determined by sponsors and intended readers. Peterson and Bennion clearly hoped to spread as wide a net as possible, to catch Sanpete residents as well as outsiders, casual tourists as well as serious students of Mormon landscape and townscape. Publication of the book was funded by Snow College, as part of its centennial celebration, and by local governments. In view of these considerations, it is not surprising that a mild strain of “boosterism” runs through the volume. At the same time, however, one of the book’s objectives is obviously the raising of local residents’ consciousness of the value of their own material heritage.

The authors lament the continuing loss of historic structures and the devastation too often wrought in the name of “beautification,” and wonder why it is that “the landscapes of Mormon settlement, as unique and attractive in their way as those of the Amish in the East, have never really been perceived as ‘marketable’ by Utahns” (65). Noting that the town of Gunnison was the “winner” in the recent competition for a new state prison, they remark, “After spending a night in the beautifully restored Manti House Inn, we began to wonder if Sanpete could somehow combine economics and aesthetics instead of having to choose one *or* the other” (64). They go on to raise the possibility that Sanpete could, by taking full advantage of its historic assets, reap the benefits of a much strengthened tourist economy:

What if Sanpete were to preserve, in fact as well as on paper, the historic districts of Spring City, Mt. Pleasant, and some other towns? What if Ephraim, which razed its striking stone tabernacle in the early 1950s, were to restore its classic Co-op and convert one level into, say, a museum and gallery with a professional curator and the other into a quality crafts center? And then make the adjoining old Relief Society granary into an eatery that served barbequed beef or lamb, sourdough biscuits and mutton, and smoked turkey or Scandinavian pastries—dishes which Sanpeters normally save for special private affairs? Who in the world would support such radical restoration of the old Sanpete landscape? Any and all Utahns who have gained an appreciation for their lost past now that so little is left of it even in the most rural regions. (64–65)

One can only hope someone will heed Peterson’s and Bennion’s message before it is too late.