



Type: Magazine Article

Oliver Cowdery's Non-Mormon Reputation

Author(s): Richard Lloyd Anderson


Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 71, No. 8 (August 1968)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 18-19, 22, 24, 26

Abstract: This article is a review of Oliver Cowdery's life and accomplishments in the years following his excommunication until his death. Deals specifically with his reputation among associates.

Beginning - a new series on the Three Witnesses



Oliver Cowdery's Non-Mormon Reputation

By Dr. Richard Lloyd Anderson

● Oliver Cowdery played an extraordinary role in the beginning of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. His title of “second elder” was appropriate, as an examination of incidents in which he was prominent indicates: the translation of the Book of Mormon, restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, printing of the Book of Mormon, the conversion of Sidney Rigdon, and the vision of the Christ and the Old Testament prophets in the Kirtland Temple. Since he was announced as the sole companion of Joseph Smith in the foundation experiences, no one else stood in the unique position of being able to expose Joseph Smith at all critical points, if he could be exposed. Because whatever Oliver Cowdery reported about the earliest events of Mormonism is of the greatest significance, it is most important to study the kind of man he was and assess his reliability.

Oliver Cowdery was respected by associates wherever he lived. The pinnacle of his Latter-day Saint career was in Kirtland in 1836, when he was a trusted “assistant president” to Joseph Smith and was involved on many practical fronts of the expanding LDS movement.¹ In that year he reassumed the editorship of the Church newspaper, and his brother-in-law characterized him publicly as “a man of piety, of candor, of truth, of integrity, of feeling for the welfare of the human family, and in short, he is a man of God.”^{1a} Except for the religious connotations of such an evaluation, there is no reason to think that the non-Mormon community of the Kirtland region felt differently.

After the Mormons left northern Ohio, it was fashionable to portray them as less than respectable, but Cowdery is conspicuous by his absence in such negativism. The most specific recollection of a non-

Illustration by Dale Kilbourn

Mormon is by Samuel Murdock. Toward the end of a distinguished career as attorney in Clayton County, Iowa, he recalled his youth in the Lake County, Ohio, area at the time of the Mormon settlement there. His family arrived in Ohio in 1827, and Murdock evidently participated in the educational program that was sponsored by the Latter-day Saints during the years 1835 through 1837. Journals of many early Mormons mention Sidney Rigdon and on occasion Joseph Smith as teachers. Although no journal yet found mentions Oliver Cowdery as a regular instructor, he was a trustee of the school as a member of the First Presidency of the Church, and it is known that the trustees considered instruction under their "immediate care and inspection."² As a young man Samuel Murdock had the following contact with Oliver Cowdery:

"Kirtland is situated in the county in which I was raised from youth to manhood, and at the time Smith and his Mormons settled there I was nearly a man grown, and some of them were my immediate neighbors, with whose children I was often schoolmates, and I often met their prophet, Joseph Smith, although I was not personally acquainted with him. I was, however, intimately acquainted with Mr. Cowdery, one of his scribes, and to whom I was indebted for his special kindness to me, as well as for the many lessons of instruction I received from him as my preceptor in the school room, and a Mormon as he was, shall ever cherish his memory. A more amiable, generous, kindhearted man, I have not met since."³

Although Cowdery was prominent in Ohio, the history of Mormonism in Missouri is written with his name largely in footnotes. Personally hurt in his relationship with Joseph Smith, he allied himself with his Whitmer relatives in differences concerning Church administration in Caldwell County, Missouri. He left Far West prior to mob violence and by the end of that year found his way back to Kirtland. In the decade between his excommunication from the Church in 1838 and his return in 1848, his name is absent from Mormon annals.

But no one can make an intelligent appraisal of Cowdery as a person without knowing a good deal about his non-Mormon career. By failing to conform to Church discipline, he forfeited his title of "second elder" and exchanged it for "Oliver Cowdery, Esquire," the traditional designation of an attorney-at-law. Without companionship of his church associates, he nevertheless belonged to the fraternity of fellow attorneys, who admired him as a legal craftsman. During his non-Mormon decade, he was also a politician, journalist, promoter of education, and civic servant. The opinions of his friends of this period

show clearly that he was widely respected as a man of more than ordinary stature.

By the time of his excommunication on April 12, 1838, Oliver Cowdery had formulated definite plans for the practice of law. The only question was where. He exchanged much correspondence with his brothers in Kirtland in hopes of settling in the same vicinity, and one letter states his ideal of professional competence:

"I take no satisfaction in thinking of practicing law with a half dozen books. Let us get where people live, with a splendid library, attend strictly to our books and practice, and I have no fear if life and health are spared, but we can do as well as, at least, the middle class."⁴

After experimenting with living in Missouri, he decided to move back to Kirtland, where his brothers Warren and Lyman were beginning their careers in the field of law. This move to Kirtland took place at the end of 1838, and by January 1840 it is clear that Oliver Cowdery was practicing law.⁵ The year 1839 was undoubtedly devoted to study for his admission to the bar,⁶ but there were other activities. His biography in the family history was compiled with access to information from his widow, Elizabeth Whitmer Cowdery, who lived until 1892, and it says that he "supported himself by teaching school while pursuing his study of the law."⁷ If this phrasing is strictly correct, then Cowdery taught during his non-Mormon stay in Kirtland. Perhaps this is why he appears as secretary of one of the organizational meetings of the Western Reserve Teacher's Seminary and Kirtland Institute, which utilized the Kirtland Temple in the period that he was there.⁸

Be that as it may, Cowdery was active in the Democratic Party during his Kirtland stay. In 1839 he was chosen as one of the 13 delegates from Geauga county to the bi-county senatorial convention.⁹ The upset victory there for Benjamin Bissell is most interesting,¹⁰ since, as Joseph Smith's attorney at Kirtland, Bissell was well-acquainted with Mormon



For over a decade, Dr. Richard Lloyd Anderson, professor of history and religion at Brigham Young University, has researched new information dealing with the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. His interesting and stimulating findings will be presented to Era readers in the months ahead.

leaders. He is spoken of as Cowdery's patron in introducing him to law, and consequently he was the likely source of Cowdery's recommendation to the Democratic leaders in Tiffin, Ohio, where Cowdery next moved.

The spirited presidential campaign of 1840 necessitated a Democratic paper in Seneca County, Ohio, and both a press and an editor were imported. Cowdery was chosen for that job, obviously on the basis of recommendations of prominent Democrats of his Cleveland-Kirtland region, some 125 miles northeast. A prominent Tiffin politician later said of the founding of that campaign paper: "Oliver Cowdery was to have been editor, but was dropped on the discovery that he was one of the seven founders of Mormonism."¹¹ If the arithmetic of the six organizers or the 11 witnesses is garbled, the recollection is clear that a Book of Mormon witness was no political asset and could not be tolerated in a local party post. The fact that Oliver Cowdery nevertheless remained in Tiffin for seven years and earned the respect of a biased community says a good deal for his personal capacities and character. Before leaving he was appointed temporary editor of the Democratic weekly and was publicly thanked in its columns for his "ability" as shown in "the management of our paper."¹²

While the above incident illustrates Cowdery's lifelong talent as a writer, it was through his profession as a lawyer and his public activities that he was chiefly known while in Tiffin from 1840 to 1847. The courthouse today holds files of legal pleadings signed "O. Cowdery"; the two local newspapers of the period contain both his lawyer's advertisements and the notices of his cases requiring publication. More significantly, two colleagues of that period are on record with their estimate of the man and his legal talent.

William Lang had the greater personal contact with Cowdery, because he apprenticed in his office for the period of one and a half years. Lang was a self-reliant man of 25 at the beginning of his period of reading law in the Cowdery office, and the senior attorney created a powerful impression upon his student. This relationship with Cowdery terminated in 1842 upon Lang's own entrance to the bar, but he associated with Cowdery for another five years, both as a member of the Seneca County Bar and in the inner circles of the county Democratic organization. Lang's lifetime legal career was supplemented with public service as prosecuting attorney, probate judge, mayor of Tiffin, county treasurer, and two terms in the Ohio senate. He was nominated by his party for major state offices twice. In later life he wrote a *History of Seneca County*, in which he expressed

unlimited admiration for the "noble and true manhood" of Oliver Cowdery. He there describes Cowdery personally and professionally:

"Mr. Cowdery was an able lawyer and a great advocate. His manners were easy and gentlemanly; he was polite, dignified, yet courteous. He had an open countenance, high forehead, dark brown eye, Roman nose, clenched lips and prominent lower jaw. He shaved smooth and was neat and cleanly in his person. He was of light stature, about five feet, five inches high, and had a loose, easy walk. With all his kind and friendly disposition, there was a certain degree of sadness that seemed to pervade his whole being. His association with others was marked by the great amount of information his conversation conveyed and the beauty of his musical voice. His addresses to the court and jury were characterized by a high order of oratory, with brilliant and forensic force. He was modest and reserved, never spoke ill of any one, never complained."¹³

The other Tiffin attorney who left written recollections of Cowdery was William Harvey Gibson. It is an adequate introduction to him to note that a statue in his honor stands in front of the courthouse. He won considerable fame as a civil war general, but the statue commemorates his more famous achievement as an orator and nationally known campaign speaker in the late nineteenth century. Although Gibson was involved in a state scandal and resigned his elective office of treasurer of Ohio in 1857, no doubt remains that he won back a creditable reputation as Tiffin's most famous citizen. An active lawyer from 1845 to 1872 and a seasoned businessman afterward, he evaluated Cowdery from the vantage point of a fellow attorney and political opponent. In a letter designed for publication in 1892, Gibson said, "Cowdery was an able lawyer and [an] agreeable, irreplicable gentleman."¹⁴

Of Cowdery's considerable public service in his Tiffin career, most consistent and significant is his service as a member of the Board of School Examiners of Seneca County. Both William Lang and William H. Gibson's wife remembered his questioning them for certification to teach. Another individual of some ability attended one of these public examinations that Cowdery and two other trustees administered and reported, "I must acknowledge myself not a little instructed, though but a spectator."¹⁵ The court files also reveal that Cowdery was prominent in testing candidates for admission to the bar, so it is clear that he displayed lifelong interest and ability as an educator.

Several remarkable estimates of Cowdery as a person stem from his political activities in two states

while out of the Church. In Tiffin, Ohio, he was regularly before the public as an active party worker, public speaker, and occasional candidate for civil office. In 1842, 1844, and 1845, he was elected by the party township meeting as delegate to the Democratic county convention. In all these years he was named on the resolutions committee at the county convention because of his characteristic role as an articulate party spokesman. He was regularly sent to political rallies as a persuasive stump speaker. In 1845 he was elected as one of three township trustees, defeating his nearest opponent by a 26 percent vote margin.¹⁶ In his last year of political activity in Tiffin, 1846, Cowdery was promoted for the office of state senator at a tri-county convention by a dozen delegates who were loyal to him through two ballots.¹⁷ At an early point of his stay in Tiffin, Cowdery had written Brigham Young that he labored to produce "a fair reputation and a fair business,"¹⁸ and his solid political career in Seneca County shows the continued truth of that statement.

The year that the Latter-day Saints migrated west, Cowdery moved also, mainly for reasons of health (perhaps tuberculosis). He located at Elkhorn, Wisconsin, where he was attracted by the personal association and established law practice of his brother Lyman. It is characteristic that his first known letter from Wisconsin is from the state capital, where he initiated contact with a chief justice and a key Democratic editor.¹⁹

His career had three phases in the year spent in Wisconsin prior to his returning to the Church. First of all, he continued his profession as a lawyer. The minutes of the Walworth County commission reveal that he was granted an office in the courthouse October 3, 1847: the two known surviving issues of Elkhorn papers for that period contain his law advertisement: "O. Cowdery, Attorney & Counsellor at Law"; and court records include a number of his cases. Second, for a few months prior to rejoining the Church he was co-editor of the *Walworth County Democrat*.²⁰ A neighboring party newspaper acknowledged his appointment by observing, "Mr. Cowdery is highly spoken of as an editor."²¹

The third activity, politics, provides the most impressive evidence of what associates thought of Oliver Cowdery while away from the Church. With less than a year of residence in Elkhorn, he was nominated as state assemblyman in the first voting under the state constitution of Wisconsin. This election in the spring of 1848 was characterized by the predictable campaign smears for which Cowdery's Mormon background left him vulnerable.

With no copies of local newspapers of that period

still available, the political infighting must be reconstructed from borrowed articles. The Whig paper of Cowdery's district first noted that Democrats had nominated "one of the three witnesses to the discovery of the Golden Plates, or Mormon Bible, by Joe Smith."²² It next ran liberal extracts from the Book of Mormon, undoubtedly including the testimony of the three witnesses, which were the basis of personal sarcasm against Cowdery not only in the *Elkhorn Western Star*, but elsewhere.²³ Since the campaign was short, the timing of the vicious personal attack on Cowdery resulted in much of his defense reaching print after the election. He was defeated, but by only 40 votes out of about 500 total votes cast, which under the circumstances was both a moral victory and a vindication of the man.

Considering the unpopularity of Mormonism, Cowdery's Democratic associates might have chosen to respond to attacks on him with silence or even a disavowal of their candidate. Yet Horace A. Tenney, then editor of the important *Wisconsin Argus* in Madison and later a man of respectable public service to his state, deplored the defeat of "a man of sterling integrity, sound and vigorous intellect, and every way worthy, honest and capable."²⁴ Tenney had conversed with Cowdery personally, as well as corresponded with him, so his opinion is a matter of more than casual impression.

The most significant defense of Oliver Cowdery, however, came from John Breslin, his close associate in Tiffin, Ohio. Breslin had assumed the editorial post initially offered to Cowdery and had constantly promoted and defended him in the *Seneca Advertiser*. A brilliant young man in Ohio politics, Breslin was elected in 1848 to the Ohio House of Representatives, where he was chosen speaker. He subsequently was reelected as representative and later elected state treasurer. While in that office he made private investments of state funds (an action somewhat condoned by contemporary practice), but he was ruined politically in 1857 when the money invested was uncollectable.²⁵ But the personal mistake of Breslin is quite irrelevant to his judgment on Cowdery prior to this scandal, especially since Breslin's open approval of Cowdery points to considerable public opinion in agreement with him. Immediately upon hearing that Cowdery's Mormonism was the basis of personal attacks upon him in Wisconsin, Breslin published an article deploring the "baseness of such a course" of attack; and in another article, entitled "Oliver Cowdery, Esq.," he insisted on the capability and integrity of his friend:

"Mr. C. was a resident among us for a period of seven years, during which time he earned himself an

enviable distinction at the Bar of this place and of this Judicial circuit, as a sound and able lawyer, and as a citizen none could have been more esteemed. His honesty, integrity, and industry were worthy the imitation of all, whilst his unquestioned legal abilities reflected credit as well upon himself as upon the profession of which he was a member."²⁶

Although Cowdery had initially planned to come back to the Church at the April conference of 1848, his Wisconsin nomination obviously altered this decision and postponed the return to late October, when he arrived at Kanesville, Iowa, the "eastern" headquarters of the Church. Migration to Utah that fall was out of the question, so economic reality dictated his wintering with Elizabeth Whitmer Cowdery's relatives some 250 miles southeast, in Richmond, Missouri. Since his chronic lung condition left him too weak to cross the plains and had reduced his finances, he was forced to continue his stay in Richmond for the year 1849. Research has so far failed to find evidence that he practiced law there. As a matter of fact, for a considerable portion of that year he was bedridden, and in early spring of 1850, his weakened physical condition brought his death (March 3, 1850).

The three Mormon periodicals noting Oliver Cowdery's death did so either in brief comment or by way of reference to his early prominence in the Church. Until his brief reunion with former friends on his return to the Church, the Latter-day Saints were basically unaware of his non-Mormon achievements. But he had created a marked impression upon leading men wherever he lived. Though hardly a resident of Richmond, where he died, the circuit court and bar awarded him the normal honor of a practicing attorney in good standing. Adjourning all business in honor of his funeral, it passed a resolution of condolence on behalf of "his afflicted widow and daughter," and expressed regret that "in the death of our friend and brother, Oliver Cowdery, his profession has lost an accomplished member, and the community a reliable and worthy citizen."²⁷ Perhaps it is strange to those accustomed to modern communication that publicity of his death was not given in Salt Lake City until some four months afterward, when it was printed in the first issue of the *Deseret News*. However, the news did not reach his main non-Mormon home at Tiffin, Ohio, until some eight months after his death. Breslin immediately headlined a story "Death of Oliver Cowdery," in which he expressed sorrow at the passing of "our much esteemed friend and former fellow citizen." More important than the few circumstantial details in this article is the final judgment of Oliver Cowdery by

the friends who knew him best while he was out of the Church:

"His numerous acquaintances at this place will receive the tidings of his decease with much regret. He was a man of more than ordinary ability, and during his residence among us had endeared himself to all who knew him in the private and social walks of life."²⁸

Such a man publicly insisted that he and the Prophet Joseph Smith on several occasions stood in the presence of divine messengers who brought revelation and authority to establish The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. ○

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Although the title "assistant president" is loosely equated with "counselor" in early sources, it is clear that Oliver Cowdery's position as "Second Elder" meant that he "preceeded the counselors in the First Presidency in authority. . . ." (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954], Vol. 1, p. 212.) The main scriptural sources for this conclusion are his early designation as second in authority (D&C 20:3) and the 1841 appointment of Hyrum Smith to the "gifts of the priesthood, that once were put upon him that was my servant Oliver Cowdery" (D&C 124:95), a position distinguished in the latter revelation from that of the counselors in the First Presidency.
- ²*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 2 (March 1836), p. 236.
- ³*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1 (February 1835), p. 80. Compare Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (2nd ed., Salt Lake City, 1948), Vol. 2, pp. 474-75, which describes a public examination in January 1837, of the "Kirtland High School," at which "the trustees of the school" were present.
- ⁴*Dubuque Times*, April 16, 1893. Only Oliver Cowdery fits the description of one intimate with Joseph Smith and one of his scribes. A convenient reprinting of this article is found in R. Etzenhouser, *From Palmyra, New York, 1830, to Independence, Missouri, 1894* (Independence, Missouri, 1894), pp. 338-41.
- ⁵Letter of Oliver Cowdery to his brothers Warren and Lyman, Far West, Missouri, June 2, 1838. Still in private hands, the letter was reproduced photographically by Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery* (Bookcraft: Salt Lake City, 1962), pp. 263-66.
- ⁶The first known case is advertised under the name "L. & O. Cowdery" with the publication date of January 20, 1840, in the *Painesville Republican*. The notice of the case is preserved in the issue of January 28, 1840.
- ⁷William Lang, who knew Cowdery personally, says that he came to Ohio as a young man "and entered the law office of Judge Bissell, a very distinguished lawyer in Painesville, Lake county, as a student, and was admitted to practice after having read the requisite length of time and passed an examination." (*History of Seneca County* [Springfield, Ohio, 1880], p. 364.) Whether Lang really knew the details of Cowdery's pre-Tiffin period is open to question. There is no evidence that Cowdery resided in Painesville, although he was undoubtedly assisted by Bissell.
- ⁸Mary Bryant Alverson Mehling, *Cowdery-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy* (1905), p. 173.
- ⁹*Painesville Telegraph*, November 29, 1838.
- ¹⁰*Painesville Republican*, September 26, 1839.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, October 3, 1839.
- ¹²Letter from General W. H. Gibson, "Seneca Advertiser" (Tiffin, Ohio), April 12, 1892.
- ¹³*Seneca Advertiser*, February 19, 1847.
- ¹⁴William Lang, *History of Seneca County* (Springfield, Ohio, 1880), p. 365. In evaluating Lang's opinion of Cowdery, it must be admitted that he shows a distinct critical ability in appraising the qualities of his fellow attorneys in the Seneca County bar.
- ¹⁵Letter from General W. H. Gibson, "op. cit."
- ¹⁶*Seneca Advertiser*, October 14, 1842.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, April 11, 1845.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*, August 7, 1846.
- ¹⁹Letter of Oliver Cowdery to Brigham Young and Willard Richards, Tiffin, Ohio, December 25, 1843, copied in *Journal History* of that date, and cited by Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, p. 179.
- ²⁰Letter from Wisconsin, "May 18, 1847, *Seneca Advertiser*, June 18, 1847.
- ²¹Issues of January 19, 1848, and August 4, 1848, contain his law advertisements. The masthead of the latter issue also lists him as co-editor.
- ²²*Racine Advocate*, July 26, 1848.
- ²³*Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 13, 1848.
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, April 29, 1848.
- ²⁵*Wisconsin Argus*, May 16, 1848.
- ²⁶William H. Gibson, his brother-in-law and successor in the same office, was also discredited in this incident because he had bought time for Breslin to repay by not revealing the deficit at the beginning of his own term.
- ²⁷*Seneca Advertiser*, May 5, 1848. This article was copied verbatim as an endorsement in the *Walworth County Democrat* and then republished (May 30, 1848) by Horace A. Tenney in the *Wisconsin Argus* at Madison several weeks after Cowdery's defeat.
- ²⁸Circuit Court Record, Ray County, Missouri, Book C, p. 190 (entry March 5, 1850).
- ²⁹*Seneca Advertiser*, November 1, 1850.