



# Bunkerville Centennial

## 1877-1977





## Pioneer Mormon Settlement Celebrates Its First Century

The tiny town of Bunkerville, preparing to celebrate its centennial, bears several distinctions: it was the first permanent Mormon settlement in the southern Nevada desert; it overcame the many floods of the Virgin River; and for almost four years its first settlers maintained a communal way of life.

### Early Settlement

The founding of Bunkerville came about in 1877 when the first families moved to a site about two and a half miles northeast of the present town. Three years earlier, Brigham Young had encouraged the Latter-Day Saints to settle the desert areas of Utah and Nevada, emphasizing that they should farm, rather than prospect for minerals.

The settlers were not the first whites to see the area. Cecil Leavitt, in a history of Bunkerville he wrote several years ago, speculates that Jedediah Strong Smith was the first white man to see the area when he traveled up the Virgin River on an exploring trip in 1826. On an expedition through the area in 1844, John Charles Fremont described the "Rio Virgin" as "the dreariest river I have ever seen." He is said to have found the valley less than inviting, what with the hot, desert country and the Indians who harassed his band.

### The Communal Experiment

The early communal way of life in Bunkerville was tied in with the Mormon Church. Leavitt records that the members of the church believed all a person owned or made

should be given to the church, and the church would return to each person his needs. This United Order was practiced in many Mormon communities, including the town of Santa Clara, Utah, where the experiment proved unsuccessful. A few of the settlers there still believed the plan could work if given a fresh start, and a meeting was held New Year's Day, 1877, to organize a company to move further south into the valley of the Virgin River.

The 23 persons who set out for Mesquite Flat the next day were led by Edward Bunker, Sr., who was chosen president and gave his name to the new community. Bunker was well-known for his explorations and missions not only in the United States but overseas as well.

The men worked together to erect the first building, a meeting and dining room constructed of lumber hauled 70







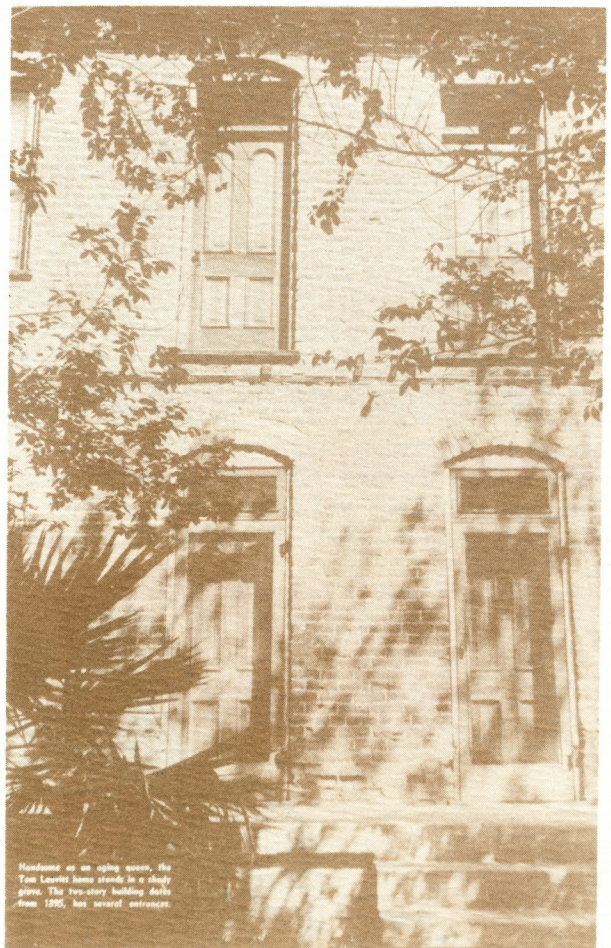
miles from Pine Valley, Utah. An irrigation canal was dug, the land cleared and cotton, grapes, wheat, corn, squash, sugar cane and vegetables planted by the men working together. The women took turns at a week's duty of washing, ironing, cooking and cleaning.

The United Order articles of government dictated that members must contribute all they possessed to the church, and continue to donate the products of their labors. Each person was given credit for his contributions and drew supplies according to his needs. All property was appraised at the time it was given, and this appraisal was made again at the end of each year. The articles also covered the possibility of persons wishing to leave the United Order, permitting withdrawal of capital stock and common goods, after allowing for any losses of the company.



This arrangement lasted until 1880. In October of that year, it became obvious that while some Bunkerville settlers were working hard and helping the community prosper, others were wasting the means of the company. This situation was irksome to those who did not care to see their hard work offset by others' laziness, and at a general meeting it was decided that each person could draw 80 percent of the proceeds of his labor, the remaining 20 percent to be retained in the treasury. Even this was unacceptable to some, and in the end the United Order was dissolved. The details of the dissolution took until the spring of 1881.

Hard work was not the only occupation of the Virgin Valley residents. Dances were extremely popular, to the point that the young people of the community constructed a building for dances—which was also used for school and church meetings—and the church headquarters in Utah



Headstone as an eyeing queen, the Tom Leavitt home stands in a shady grove. The two-story building dates from 1880, has several entrances.





issued rules for the proper conduct of dances. A Sunday School was begun shortly after the town was settled, and soon elementary school was held. A school board was selected, and in 1916 the town bonded itself to build a high school. Besides farming, the townspeople engaged in mining salt at St. Thomas and hauling supplies to the Silver Reef mines in Utah.

### Flood Times

The settlers faced many hardships in their early years in Nevada, living in tents or crude cabins and obtaining water for their crops by digging a seven-mile canal from the diversion dam on the river to the farmland. They spent long days plowing, digging ditches and planting, while searching for ways to purify the river water for drinking and rid themselves of mosquitoes and disease.

Survival of the disastrous floods which plagued Bunkerville periodically must be attributed to the determination of the settlers to succeed at farming the fertile soil of their desert home.

Leavitt notes that the settlers had to replace their diversion dam the first summer of Bunkerville's existence, and "had they known that this was only a preview of what was to follow, they might have gotten too discouraged to remain and make the settlement permanent."

June 28, 1882 was the date of one big flood. It destroyed crops and set the settlers back months in the labor of clearing and leveling the land. Other floods carried away farm buildings and livestock and left the town without potable water. Each time, the dam and ditches were rebuilt, with

sometimes a new site for the dam chosen in hopes of finding one that would withstand the forces of nature that turned the desert stream into a deluge.

A concrete diversion dam was built in 1957, with high hopes it would last. It has lasted, but so have the floods. The Soil Conservation Service reports there have been several floods in recent years and the dam is constantly being repaired. There is no real control on the river, and thoughts of building flood control dams to aid the area's alfalfa and dairy industries have failed to materialize. It still takes determination to live through the floods and the mountain thunderstorms that send cloudbursts down the canyons.

Today, Bunkerville is still a small town of about 300 people, primarily Mormon, with some large farms and many small ones. There are a host of pioneer buildings and memories in Bunkerville, a town that has every reason to be proud of itself.

