This piece of cast-iron machinery is one of the few remaining pieces of the gristmill owned by Jacob Hawn. It is known as a “face wheel,” and it transferred power from the waterwheel to the rest of the mill’s machinery. This mill became infamous because of what happened there on October 30, 1838—what is now known as the Hawn's Mill massacre.

Jacob Hawn established his mill in 1835 along Shoal Creek in Caldwell County, Missouri. He was not a member of the Church, but he and his family were friendly with the 15–20 Latter-day Saint families who built a small settlement in the area.

Tensions that had been simmering between Missouri residents and Latter-day Saint settlers for several years began to increase when hundreds of Church members from Kirtland started moving into the area in 1838. With marked cultural, religious, and political differences between the Latter-day Saints and the Missourians, one resident commented that the two groups were “completely unfitted to live together in peace and friendship.” Missourians feared that the Mormons would soon overrun the state, disenfranchising the Missourians and their rights. Often, that fear led to violence.

Several skirmishes and ongoing harassment led to a conflict known as the Battle of Crooked River on October 25, 1838. Both sides suffered casualties, and accounts of Mormon aggression led Governor Lilburn Boggs to issue the following order two days later: “The Mormons must be treated as enemies and must be exterminated or driven from the state, if necessary for the public good. Their outrages are beyond all description.” Immediately after the Battle of Crooked River, Joseph Smith advised all Church members in outlying settlements to gather to Far West or Adam-ondi-Ahman, where they would find strength in numbers.

In addition to the Prophet’s counsel, John Killian, captain of the county militia, also advised Jacob Hawn to move residents to safety in Far West, about 15 miles away. But in the chaos of the moment, that counsel was either not communicated or not taken seriously enough, and the residents of Hawn’s Mill chose to remain in their homes. They had not had conflicts with their neighbors, and on October 28, they made an agreement with the militia stationed nearby to keep the peace.

On October 30, 1838, an armed militia rode into Hawn's Mill without warning and began firing. Most of the women and children fled to the woods, while the men and several boys made a stand in “an old log building used as a blacksmith’s shop, which was neither chinked or mudded.” David Lewis recorded:

“When men ran out and called for peace they were shot down; when they held up their hats and handkerchiefs and crying for mercy, they were shot down; when they attempted to run, they were cut down by the fire of guns; and when they stood still, they were shot down by putting their guns through the cracks of the building.”

The men in the shop fired on their attackers but were not able to fend them off. When the mob dispersed, 15 men and 2 boys had been brutally murdered, and 15 others were wounded. The survivors, fearing further attacks, hastily buried their husbands, sons, and friends in an unfinished well.

In the depths of this tragedy, God granted miracles. Isaac Leany was shot seven times yet remained on his feet until he reached safety. He lay near death for some time, but after the elders promised him in the name of Jesus Christ that he would recover, he recovered rapidly and fully.
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One of the first shots fired by the mob hit John Walker in the right arm, making it impossible for him to reload his gun. He hid near the bank of the creek but was not well covered. His daughter related that “in answer to prayer, [the attackers’] eyes were blinded, and, although they looked directly at him, yet apparently did not see him, passed on, declaring with an oath that not another Mormon was to be seen. He remained there until all was silent.”

Willard Smith, who was 11 years old at the time of the attack, was the first to enter the blacksmith shop after the conflict. He found the bodies of his father and younger brother Sardis and was amazed to find that his younger brother Alma was still alive. Alma’s hip had been shot, and the entire joint was gone. His mother, Amanda Barnes Smith, asked Alma if he believed the Lord could make him a new hip. He replied that if she thought He could, he also believed it. Calling her remaining children around the bed, she prayed for faith and guidance. Willard recalled:

In her terrible sorrow and bereavement, her only help could come from divine guidance. By inspiration, her prayers were answered and she knew what to do. First she was directed to take the ashes from a fireplace and made a mild lye solution with which she bathed the gaping wound until it was as white as the breast of a chicken, with all the mangled flesh and bone gone. Then she prayed for further guidance and was prompted to take the roots from the slippery elm tree and made poultices for application.

After lying still for five weeks, Alma was able to walk without difficulty. A less obvious miracle related to this story is that Amanda Smith and her children were able to remain in Missouri during those five weeks without...
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experiencing further violence. Willard later commented, “The story of the miraculous healing of Alma’s hip has been related many times, but few realize the constant terror of the stricken family, unable to leave the State as Alma could not be moved because of his injured hip; yet they were repeatedly warned that if they did not leave, they would be killed.”

During this time, the family was forbidden to pray vocally. Unable to bear this “Godless silence,” Amanda Smith hid in a cornfield and “prayed till her soul felt satisfied.” As she left the field, she heard the words:

That soul who on Jesus hath leaned for repose
I cannot—I will not desert to its foes.
That soul, ‘though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.

Willard recalled: “From that moment Mother said she had no further fear of the mob, and she inspired us children with faith that if we conscientiously did right, the Lord would shelter us from harm.”

The Hawn’s Mill tragedy contains many lessons, but perhaps the greatest lesson is that God will never forsake us, even in our darkest moments.

Hawn’s Mill was torn down in 1845, and the face wheel remained in the creek bed until 1981, when a local fisherman discovered it.

Footnotes


[8] Church History in the Fullness of Times, 201.


[16] Lyman Omer Littlefield, Reminiscences of Latter-day Saints (Logan, Utah: The Utah Journal, 1888); boap.org.


