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So you've been a good Mormon and learned all you need to know to make it to the celestial kingdom. Your wife and her sister wives approach you because they have decided it is time to begin making plans for your first world. So being the good husband you are, you stop by the council office and request a few "Spirit Material Requisition" forms. To your shock the characters on the page seem totally foreign to you. Oh no! I would hate to be in your shoes (or sandals) when you get back to the wives, and try to explain this one.

Well fortunately this can all be avoided, if you take some time to learn a little bit about the "Mormon Alphabet". Of course I am jesting, but as in all fiction there is a hint of truth...

For the last few weeks I have been engaged in researching something that I feel is simply brilliant, (in a few different ways). I would like to share with you what I have found and some of my own observances of a clever bit of Mormon history. Some historians have mistakenly termed it the "Mormon Alphabet" even implying it was the character set used in Joseph's "Golden Book". In reality it might have cost as much to create as a golden book, but was not associated with the Golden plates at all. The official name is the "Deseret Phonetic Alphabet" the word deseret was used for a lot of things in early Salt Lake, it comes from a verse in the book of Mormon...

Ether 2:3 And they did also carry with them deseret, which, by interpretation, is a honey bee; and thus they did carry with them swarms of bees, and all manner of that which was upon the face of the land, seeds of every kind.

The honey bee and hive are evident everywhere still today, and most have heard of deseret industries etc..

The Deseret Alphabet was first introduced to the common LDS members at the October 8th 1868 General Conference in the Tabernacle, Brigham Young announced... *There are a few items I wish to lay before the Conference before we dismiss, which I think we shall do when we get through our meeting this afternoon. One of these items is to present to the congregation the deseret Alphabet. We have now many thousands of small books, called the first and second readers, adapted to school purposes, on the way to this city. As soon as they arrive we shall distribute them throughout the Territory. We wish to introduce this alphabet into our schools, consequently we give this public notice. We have been contemplating this for years. (...) It will also be very advantageous to our children. It will be the means of introducing uniformity in our orthography, and the years that are now required to learn to read and spell can be devoted to other studies.* JD 12:298

Just as Young had stated they had contemplated this for years, it is not clear when this idea, or possibly 'revelation' began. As early as 1854 it was an established idea as I found the following reference to it ...

"In 1854 the University of Deseret, predecessor of the University of Utah, introduced the Deseret Alphabet, consisting of thirty-eight characters to conform with the basic number of sounds in the English language. The curious set of symbols was created by 39-year-old George D. Watt, an expert in Pitman shorthand" see footnote 1 for source

There are some unreliable sources that put it's first use two years earlier in 1852.

Something to think about here is that, Brigham Young's famous statement *"It is enough. This is the right place. Drive on."* was just uttered in July of 1847. So within

seven years of arriving to the Great Salt Lake, (and this was not the bulk of the saints, just a small forward group, the majority would arrive much later, some even years later.) this phonetic system had been developed and introduced, not necessarily to the general membership but introduced and somewhat complete. The cost and resources that it must have taken had to have been phenomenal for a struggling new society. Not only the work of developing a new writing system, but the cost of having type set created in St. Louis, and the cost of printing the over 20,000 first reader books, is added to by the following later decision ...

“The ‘church-owned’ Deseret News at Great Salt Lake City, Utah’s first newspaper, published portions of its 1859 editions in the distinctive system. And the University of Deseret’s board of regents at one time voted \$10,000 to print text books in the alphabet for students in classrooms across the territory” [see footnote 1 for source](#)

As a comparison, it is estimated that in 1860 the ratio to the value of a year 2000 US dollar is approx. 20 to 1. This means they spent at least an additional \$200,000 dollars to promote the use of the Alphabet. At a time when some saints were still without homes and hungry, this was quite a sacrifice.

The new writing system did have its moment in the spot light. It was used quite a bit in the news paper, even used on some road signs, many pioneer diaries were kept with deseret, and four books were printed with it.

- The First Reader (a children’s learner)
- The Second Reader (just like the first with different stories)
- A small Book with the first few chapters of the book of Mormon (this was before verses)
- The Book of Mormon (yes the entire BOM in Deseret)

In a meeting on October 9th 1867 George Albert Smith said...

“In speaking of the education of our children, I wish to draw the attention of the Saints particularly to the system of phonetics, or the Deseret alphabet, which has been referred to by President Young and some of the brethren. (...)I think that in all our schools phonetics should form one branch of study, and as fast as works of phonotypy(he meant phonotypy) can be obtained they should be introduced, for there is no doubt that a general reformation will be effected in our English orthography. It is said that the Lord will restore to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon Him with one consent. (...) remember that the orthography which the English nation has adopted is by no means perfect, for our present mode of spelling might be materially improved. JD 12:140

Within this quote is a powerful statement, we can conclude that a common belief was that the “Pure Language” of the Lord is English, However the way it is represented on paper is not, which would imply that Deseret is. An additional thought might be that because the BOM was translated directly from an ancient form, which was unspoken, into “old English”, which was not used in the 1800’s (except in the KJV Bible), the actual “Pure Language” of the Lord is “old English”. This could be further encouraged by the fact that we are taught in the church to address our heavenly father using thee, thou, thy will, art, etc etc. (I should also point out that the BOM has quite a few non-old English phrases and words, and same meaning words in the old and modern English forms.)

So we see that Deseret was deemed very highly, and much time, effort and not in the least a small fortune was spent on it; but what happened to it? Why are we not

spending time in Sunday school learning this? Why do we not see it in the temple? Well by most accounts the Deseret Alphabet died with Brigham Young in 1877, some accounts determine the cease of use earlier, 1869. Historians have given many reasons for the demise, from a lack of support from the general body of the saints (akin to the law of consecration), to the difficulty in grasping the concept (learning curve if you will), to even conjecturing it was due to its unaesthetic nature. One said as detractor... *“Type was ordered, and with a view to durability, made so as to contain neither the top nor tail extensions of the letters.”* History of Utah: 1540-1886. Hubert H. Bancroft. Pg.714

Gone but not forgotten. So you may think Deseret is completely gone, even detecting a glimpse of those squiggly lines is only a dream. You could not be more wrong. In actuality, it is right in front of you at this very moment, no not that you would notice; but deep in the recesses of this very computer lays the “Deseret Phonetic Alphabet” of the Brigham Young days of the church. You see, when you press a key on your keyboard the actual data behind that key, is numeric. For example; when I press shift + a, the code for the letter “A” 41 is actually what the computer gets. This system is all kept up with a code table, which comprises several sets of characters. Have you ever seen an ©, ē, or ā? They are not on your keyboard but they are in the code table. There are ways to access these other characters; one way is to tell your computer that you want to change your default language. If you choose Spanish, your keyboard will shift to a higher area in the table and you will get characters with the funny accents like, ã, ô, ó, ó, etc. Another way is to use a combination of keys to enter the exact number of the character you want. Now do not get this confused with a “Font” like Arial or Times New Roman, this is deeper and much more important. There is a basic Standard accepted by all computers it is called UNICODE, if you can imagine this huge index of characters and their assigned value or number, then just about any possible character you may ever need is in this list. Well imagine my surprise when I found that right after the Cherokee character set, there is a (40 character) character set named Deseret! It turns out that the original 38 characters devised by George D. Watt for Brigham Young, along with two additional characters that were added later were included in the UNICODE standard beginning back with Version 3.1 till the current version. The range is 10400 (hex) to 1044F (hex). Now if you are reading this on a Mac, you only need to change your character set to use them. However if you are like the majority of us and running a PC with M\$ Windows, you will not be so lucky, you see windows has restricted us a bit and we can not access the entire Unicode, it is in here but we are restricted from accessing it. Some applications can enable it, but only from within their scope, so you can’t just yet open M\$ Word and type me a letter in Deseret. But be patient, because with the new version of widows “Vista” it will be enabled. For the mean time I have created a small application that uses a “Font” to allow us to use it until then. It is not as direct but it works ok.

This is getting really long and if anyone is still reading, I thought I should mention one last thing, and that is... Why should we be interested or even care about this? Well in my opinion, beyond the obvious reasons, is that as we discovered earlier many people sacrificed a lot of time and resources to create it, I feel like I at least owe those poor people a bit of my time to check it out. Another reason I personally like it is that I have always been interested in codes and symbols. Don’t you remember making

the simple ABC ZYX keys and sending encrypted messages to a friend? (Well maybe I was a weird kid!) The main thing that makes this interesting to me is that we can get a bit closer to those early settlers, and because it is a Phonetic system, we can even determine how they spoke, the dialect and even some of the accents they had. For example, say the word “Deseret” to your self. See how the second “e” is a short e sound? Well we are pronouncing it wrong! The early saints pronounced it something like Deseeret or Des ee ur et. Have you ever wondered how some of those crazy names in the book of Mormon should be pronounced? Well the closest you will ever get to knowing, is to ask someone that heard Joseph Smith pronounce it himself. Well we have been given that chance right here...

About the Alphabet. The 38 characters represent the basic sounds of the English language. By combining the sounds you create words. Much like my favorite Language Egyptian, the hieroglyphs represent sounds as well. The Egyptian hieroglyphs are much more complicated because the character can represent the actual object or the sound of the word assigned to that object, and it is not an “English” word, so there is a further translation needed. With Deseret we really have it made because it is a representation of our own language! If we break each word down into syllables and then into base sounds we can easily “spell” it with Deseret. We can also easily sound out the word that is represented by the characters. In the small application I created “translate.exe” I try to do this for you, allowing you to enter either the English or the Deseret and converting it to the opposite for you. The logic is not just a simple word replace, it is somewhat intelligent, but the more I worked on it the harder it got. So you need to double check it before you accept its results. You will see how confused it can get once you start playing with it. If there is any interest in it, I may spend time improving it in the future. In the beginning of both of the original readers is a Key. I would print one of them off if you decide to look at any of the Deseret material, they are helpful.

In closing I would like to challenge you to use Deseret in a lesson or hand out in a meeting, I am curious of what kind of response you will get. Please feel free to pass this resource along.

On this CD I have included...

The First Reader

The Second Reader (all except the last 10 or so pages)

The first few pages of the original Deseret BOM
(and for fun...)

A Proclamation to The World (in deseret)

Triple Combination (Modern translation)

A pronunciation chart for BOM names. (this should not be accepted at face value, It came from an article that was trying to endorse an earlier FARMS article that appeared to be in err when compared to the phonotypy of the newly resurfaced “original” Deseret version of the BOM. Not that Farms would try to cover up anything! Wink wink.

Footnote 1: source *Forgotten Kingdom: The Mormon Theocracy in the American West, 1847-1896*, by David L. Bigler, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1998, p.56

Other sources:

JD = the Journal of Discourses

The Deseret Alphabet Died With Brigham Young, " by Vania Grandi, *Salt Lake Tribune*, Dec. 2, 2000, p. D8

History of Utah: 1540-1886, Hubert H Bancroft, ch.26, 1889, pp. 712-714

Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet, by Thomas G. Alexander, Signature Books, 1991

Glenn N. Rowe, "Can You Read Deseret?" *Ensign*, Mar. 1978, 60

The UNICODE Home Page <http://unicode.org/>

Others as mentioned after quotes.