

Panther joined Mormons in 80s

By Vern Anderson
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SALT LAKE CITY - If Mormons who brought former Black Panther militant Eldridge Cleaver into their fold thought he would influence many other black Americans to join him, he proved them wrong.

For Cleaver's well-publicized embrace of Mormonism in the early 1980s proved both ambivalent and transitory, as improbable a spiritual stopover as his political jump from Marxist to capitalist, from revolutionary to U.S. Senate candidate.

"He's bounced around all over the place," said Newell G. Bringhurst, a historian at the College of the Sequoias in Visalia, Calif., who is researching Cleaver's Mormon experience. "He's all over the map."

Bringhurst remembers his own reaction when first hearing that Cleaver, a former felon and international fugitive, noted author and ex-

Black Panther minister of information, was considering joining a church that until 1978 barred black males from its priesthood:

"This is really very, very unbelievable."

In a paper delivered Thursday at the Sunstone Symposium, Bringhurst said Cleaver remains on the membership rolls of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but has had little contact with the church since 1986.

"In general, Cleaver's involvement and relationship to Mormonism was ambivalent," said Bringhurst, who has interviewed several members of the congregations in Oakland and Berkeley that Cleaver attended only sporadically.

But it wasn't until Wednesday night that Bringhurst, after much effort, finally located and talked briefly by telephone with Cleaver, who will be 61 on Aug. 31. Living with a married niece in Rialto, Calif., and

helping out with the family business, Cleaver is working on an autobiography and collection of essays.

In the early 1980s, many Mormons in the missionary-minded church were thrilled at Cleaver's interest and hoped his conversion would bring other blacks to a faith they viewed largely with suspicion and contempt.

But some Mormon acquaintances of Cleaver doubted the sincerity of his decision to be baptized a Mormon in 1983 after a three-year study of the faith and an elaborate courtship by such conservative Mormons as later church President Ezra Taft Benson and ex-Salt Lake police chief W. Cleon Skousen.

However, Bringhurst found that many who knew Cleaver well during that time still believe Brother Eldridge was genuinely committed.

At the time, Cleaver said he closely identified with church founder Joseph Smith as a religious seeker.

Churches bigger and better

By Vern Anderson
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BOLIGEE, Ala. - Three black churches that burned in rural Greene County are nearly rebuilt, bigger and better than the original buildings thanks to donations and volunteers.

"It's just wonderful," Mary Smith said as she sat under a big shade tree and watched Quaker volunteers lay bricks at Little Zion Baptist Church, which burned Jan. 11 along with Mount Zoar Baptist Church.

Work at Little Zion, Mount Zoar and Mount Zion Baptist Church is in the final stages thanks in large part to the Quakers, Mennonites and thousands of dollars in donations that have flowed in.

Contributions should cover the full cost of building the churches, organizers of the rebuilding efforts said.

Little Zion members are hoping the church will be complete by Sept. 15, in time for a dedication service in October.

The Rev. Willie Carter, a member of Little Zion and coordinator of the rebuilding efforts, beamed with pride as he showed visitors around the new church, stepping over piles of

plywood.

The wooden sanctuary walls are stained and varnished, and fan and a chandelier hang from the ceiling. The restrooms are handicapped-accessible, and the pastor's study is no longer cramped.

"In the old one, he couldn't even put in a couch," Carter said. "Now, he has better room to put furniture, like a desk."

When the work began, officials estimated the project would cost as much as \$200,000. Carter said he wasn't certain what had been spent so far.

Mount Zion, destroyed on Dec. 22, is the only one of the three Greene County churches relocated from its previous site. Robert Woolridge said the estimate for rebuilding was \$105,000, but the cost is running higher.

Virgil Kauffman, a volunteer from Michigan, said materials to reconstruct Mount Zoar have cost \$78,000.

When Art Smucker of the Mennonite Disaster Service came to the site to help with rebuilding efforts in May, all he saw was a clearing in the woods.

He returned last week to find the work nearly done at Mount Zoar.

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