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Trails of Hope: Overland Diaries and Letters, 1846–1869



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"Where the Prophets of God Live": A Brief Overview of the Mormon Trail Experience

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 indicates a link to an image of a journal. [\[1\]](#)

Introduction

In the dead of winter 1846, Appleton Milo Harmon left his home in Nauvoo with his wife, Elmeda, "Crossing the Mississippi on the ice." [\[2\]](#)  Neither the season nor conditions of their move were of their choosing. Having returned from a one-year mission in New York three years earlier, Harmon only briefly enjoyed "the refreshing teachings from the lips of Prest. Joseph Smith and Hyrum."[\[3\]](#)  In the spring of 1844, things changed for the Mormons in Illinois. Although they were never generally popular, Illinois had accepted the Mormons in 1838 after Missouri cast them out. That initial welcome and feeling of goodwill gradually diminished until 1844, when Harmon noted:

the tide of emigration in to Nauvoo had for a time been gradually increasing, and had caused a Spirit of Jelousey to arise in the breasts of our eneymies they feard that if they left us thus alone all men would believe on us and the Mormons would take away their place and nation, and hold the balance of power, accordingly our old enemies renewed the attact and new ones Joined in the prececution until it became quite warm.[\[4\]](#) 

In the latter part of June, Joseph and Hyrum Smith were murdered by a mob while in custody in a jail in Carthage, Illinois. Though understandably despondent, most of the Mormons accepted a continuation of leadership by Brigham Young and the apostles.[\[5\]](#) Construction was pushed forward on the temple, in the face of continual and increasing persecution by their enemies. Of this, Harmon wrote:

our enemies Continued to Haras us in the fall of 1845 their percecution became mutch warmer even so they commenced Burning houses grain Stacks driving off cattle catching and whiping the Breathering and some ware Killed. the persecution became So ginerall that for the Sake of peace we agreed to leave as early in the Spring of 1846 as Circumstances would admit[\[6\]](#) 

After his mother Anna's baptism in 1833, the family became practiced in moving. They picked up and moved first in 1837 from Pennsylvania to Kirtland, Ohio, then to Springfield in 1838, and Nauvoo, Illinois in 1840, always following the Mormons as they were driven from Ohio and Missouri and at last their final expulsion from Illinois in 1846. Appleton Milo Harmon, married only six weeks, set out to cross Iowa for the frontier in weather so cold that the Mississippi River was frozen solid. He wrote, "we experienceed a great a mount of Cold . . . weather Snow & rain. High water & Mud." Leaving Nauvoo with "the Twelve and Some 12 or 15 hundred wagons,"[\[7\]](#)  the Mormons turned their backs on their homes and set their course west.

The Mormons did not leave Nauvoo without extensive preparations and planning.[\[8\]](#) Before he died and possibly as early as 1831, Joseph Smith had talked about establishing a safe retreat in the Rocky Mountains for the Latter-day Saints. The persecutions they had experienced in Ohio and Missouri

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hastened their interest in seeking a place of refuge in the unsettled far West. Joseph Smith reportedly prophesied on 6 August 1842 "that the Saints would continue to suffer much affliction and would be driven to the Rocky Mountains."^[9] After the murder of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Mormon leaders intensified their study of the West. From 1844 to their departure in 1846, they researched all available maps and printed works to try to determine the best possible place where they might settle. During the winter of 1845, Mormon leaders intensively studied Lansford W. Hastings' *Emigrants Guide to Oregon and California*.^[10] With the prophetic mantle of church leadership falling on his shoulders, Brigham Young sought divine confirmation on where the Latter-day Saints should locate. Mormon leaders close to Brigham Young attested that Brigham Young had seen the Salt Lake Valley in a vision before reaching it. Upon first entering and looking at the Valley, Young's "pre-vision" was confirmed and he said, "This is the right place."^[11] In that brief moment, he had received a personal spiritual confirmation that in the fastnesses of the Rocky Mountains the Mormons would be safe from violence and persecution.

Emmeline Wells left Nauvoo only two weeks after Harmon. When she arrived at the Sugar Creek base camp only seven miles west of the river, she viewed a scene that resembled something akin to the wanderings of the ancient Israelites. She wrote, "it looked like pictures I have seen of the ancients pitching their tents and journeying from place to place with their cattle and their goods."^[12] Bedding down for her first night in the wilderness with her people, she "slept for the first time on the ground."^[13] After spending a week at Sugar Creek, the large company pulled out to start west. In a portent of their experiences making their way through Iowa, they "travelled over a very bad muddy road." Reaching their camping place, they "pitched their tents, made their fires and soon had a place fitted and prepared to pass the night." Even under adverse conditions and forced removal from her home, there is no rancor in her writing. Of her feelings after that day's travels she wrote, "We are all happy and contented as yet and determined to go ahead."^[14]

It is that determination and optimism that mark the story and history of Mormon emigration. Years of gathering overland via rail, steamboat, wagon, and handcart followed their enforced exodus from Nauvoo in 1846 and their settlement in the Great Basin in 1847. Prior to the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, more than 250 organized companies transported over 60,000 Mormons to their Far West haven. After each year's emigration, the leaders continually reviewed their methods and made changes where deemed beneficial. Prior to 1851, most migrants came from the continental United States. Thereafter a doctrine of gathering was preached that brought thousands of converts across the oceans to America and then overland to Utah. Most of them were poor. To help them the leaders devised different methods to finance their travel: Perpetual Emigrating Fund, handcarts, and out-and-back wagon trains. Those with sufficient means sometimes organized their overland travel in independent companies. Others with scant means hired on as teamsters in freight companies. In the course of Mormon emigration, outfitting locales changed. The frontier outfitting posts of Florence, Kansas City, Atchison, St. Joseph, and Iowa City at one time or another served as jumping off places for Mormon emigration companies. The all-encompassing object for all these Mormons was to get to Utah—a place where they could find a home, make a living, and where they could be close to their leaders whom they revered as prophets and teachers.^[15] Of this place upon reaching the valley, Andrew Ferguson wrote, "we had reac[he]d the place of our destinatin wher the Prophets of God live, & when we can be taught in his ways & walk in his paths."^[16]

Despite a sameness in the general content of these overland Mormon Trail narratives, they hold a kind of fascination for the reader to a time in American history when transcontinental travel was measured in months rather than in minutes. For each traveler, the daily routine of camp life presented a monotonous sameness interspersed with occasional adventures and challenges. Oliver Huntington wrote, "every days travel was about alike and as near a monotony as anything I ever saw, the roads all near alike, each camping place alike."^[17] Despite these similarities, we see the trail freshly through the differing perceptions of each trail traveler. Admittedly trail journals do vary in quality; some are literary, romantic, and wonderfully descriptive while others tell us little and only report the mundane. Through descriptions of geographic places mentioned in these narratives, we can match places with particular events and incidents. We can read first-hand what it was like to travel over Rocky Ridge and to cross the Platte River. All these variations and the plethora of Mormon Trail documentation all add up to giving us a fuller understanding of the people and places on the trail.

The Pioneer Company of 1847

After crossing Iowa, the Mormons wintered in eastern Nebraska on the bluffs overlooking the Missouri River. They called it Winter Quarters where they spent those cold months in their dugouts and log buildings studying maps and reports and discussing how they would organize for their journey in the spring. Among those maps researched were the 1846 Mitchell map, which Brigham Young requested six copies of while at Winter Quarters in February 1847.^[18] In early April 1847, Appleton Harmon joined "a bodey of 143 picked men with 73 waggons" to lead out as pioneers.^[19] Levi Jackman also joined this pioneer company "to finde a location for the saints Some whair in the west."^[20] With thousands to follow these pioneers led by Brigham Young, their job was, in Harmon's words, "to find a secluded retreat a resting place for the Saints and for the Saints as meney as possible to follow as soon as the Grass should grow so as to afford their teams a good sustanance on the way."^[21] This pioneering advance company departed for the west before there was even sufficient grass to feed their animals. They fed them grain for a few weeks until the grasses were mature enough to permit grazing. When they reached the Platte River bottom, they found lush prairie grasses which Jackman wrote "had the appearance of a vast green sea."^[22]

The Trail

Some days, Jackman thought he was riding in an old pasture where the ground was "well covered with dung but the fence is missing."^[23] Except for certain sections of the Platte River, the landscape was lacking trees: "The sight of a tree is out of the question. It is seldom we see so mutch as a bush."^[24] Without trees or wood, they fueled their fires with dried buffalo dung: "If it was not for the buffalo dung which is plenty we must frequently have suffered for want of fire."^[25] The dung was thick in most places, and like chips and score blocks -- for this and the sake of softening a hard word they go by the name of Buffalo chips."^[26] To measure their daily travel, Harmon "completd a roadometer and attached it to the wheel of a waggon by which we could t[e]ll each night the distance traveled through the day."^[27] Oliver B. Huntington wrote that "The distance was all measured by the Pioneer company, from W.Q. to the Salt Lake, and posts set up every 10 miles."^[28] Once they came to a stretch of the road where a prairie fire had burned off the grass. Jackman wrote that they could see the green grass on the other side of the Platte. With the water low, they could have easily crossed and followed a more developed road on the south side. He reasoned,

for us it would have ben better, but it was nessasary to Select a rout on the north side of the Platt for the church to travel. And if we had crosed those who followed would loose the track or at least the water by that time would be so high they could not cross and it might prove gratley to there disadvantage, so we kept on.^[29]

The advance party of pioneers had to make decisions on the route of travel to be taken by the hundreds of people who were following behind them. In traveling on the north side of the Platte, the Mormons avoided the heavy traffic on the south side bound for Oregon and California. They didn't have to compete with them for forage, water, or camping places -- and they avoided potential contact with those who favored, if not sought, their exile. In their efforts to scout out the best path for Mormon companies to follow, the advance company saw little evidence that others had preceded them. Of their travel on the north side of the Platte between the Loup Fork and Fort Laramie, Jackman wrote: "we came a rout that emegrant never came before a distance of something like 390 miles."^[30] At the time of their travel, the north side was more of a trail than a road. Indians and mountain men traveled on the north side, but Jackman was patently unaware that Caleb Greenwood had guided a train of twenty-eight ox wagons up the north side of the Platte in 1844. They were the first group to take a wagon company of emigrants overland to California in a single season. Will Bagley has pointed out that prior to Mormon travel up the north side of the Platte in 1847, that route saw such "limited use" that "the trace was not yet a trail, let alone a wagon road."^[31] At Fort Laramie, they crossed over to the south side of the Platte and there began traveling on the Oregon-California Trail. But even there, they chose to take the less-traveled "hill route" variant in the Black Hills rather than the "river route."

It was in the nature of Mormon travelers to be thoughtful of those following them -- their brethren and sisters in the gospel -- in repairing roads and bridging creeks. Historians have noted this commendable characteristic of Mormon travelers. John Unruh described the contrasting attitudes of Mormon and non-Mormon trail travelers: "This route, which has come to be known as the Mormon Trail, was quickly improved by Mormon pioneers for the benefit of oncoming Saints. By contrast, overlanders on the Oregon-California Trail less frequently made improvements specifically to benefit those in the rear; on rare occasions attempts were even made to hinder those behind."^[32] In the years that followed, Mormons scouted out new routes and short cuts and sent parties out from Utah to work on the roads. In fact, a detailed study of the routes taken by all the Mormon emigrant companies would reveal a spider web of variants and shortcuts on almost all sections of the trail, revealing that there is no single Mormon Trail. In reality, there are a multiplicity of Mormon trails and trail variants within a defined corridor of east-west direction that are generally unique to each company or that were used during certain years of trail travel.


Even as an Oregon-bound company passed them, Jackman wrote that the pioneer Mormon company stopped to "fix some sideling places and some steep pitches "to improve the road for those following.^[33] When they reached the upper crossing of the Platte River, they joined other emigrants in fording and ferrying over the deep river. They crossed their wagons on the rafts and their goods in a leather boat they had brought with them. Seeing an opportunity to run a ferry business, they "made a kind of ferry boat by digging out 2 trees of Some 30 feet in length and facing them side by side and decking them over."^[34] Harmon was one of those selected to run the ferry: "my Self with 8 others was Chosen to Stop and Keep the ferry boat we a cordinly done so and for 3 weeks was quite busy in ferrying over the Emegrants that was then passing to Oregon we cleared to our Selves about \$70 eac[h]."^[35]

The others left the last crossing of the Platte and ventured over a hilly alkali country where they found infrequent patches of grass and mineral-impregnated watering places. They shared this road all the way past South Pass after which they parted ways with those bound for Oregon and California. Along this part of the road they passed Independence Rock, Devil's Gate, and traveled along the beautiful Sweetwater River. They got their first glimpse of the Wind River Mountains: "they look verrey high."^[36] Their road took them over Rocky Ridge: "we passed over some high hills some of them ware covered on the tops with rock standing partley on the edge at an incline of about 45 degs."^[37] Before reaching Green River which they crossed on rafts, they met the celebrated Jim Bridger who gave them much information about the Salt Lake country and "the account was verrey favorable."^[38] It was at Green River that they met Sam Brannan. He had taken a shipload of Mormons from New York around Cape Horn to San Francisco and gave them a "good" report of that golden country.^[39] They also met returning members of the Mormon Battalion enroute to Fort Bridger.

First Glimpse of the Great Salt Lake Valley

At about this time, members of the company began getting sick, including Brigham Young. Scouts sent ahead found evidence of the trail taken by the Donner Party through the Wasatch Mountains: "the mountains on boath sides was verrey high." This mountain barrier prevented them from seeing the valley on the other side: "we could not see but a short distance and it looked as thos we ware shot up in a gulf."^[40] Jackman and others breached the mountains on 22 July and got their first view of the Salt Lake Valley: "A valley of about 20 eight miles wide lay before us the most of it covered with good gras and various outhter vegetables. but timber was handey."^[41] Having been very ill, Brigham Young didn't arrive until 24 July. Even before their leader's arrival, they had turned over the soil and "some plantin don that day."^[42]


For Jackman, the overland journey had been a great blessing: "we ware out of the reach of our enemis. and that the countrey was well wathered with gods watter and that god had blessed us on our journey verrey mutch."^[43] On 28 July, they voted on where to make their permanent location. Of the Salt Lake Valley location, Jackman wrote, it was "unanimoseley aggreed that this was the spot." After that expression of approval by the people, President Young said that "he knew that this is the place. he knew it as soon as he come in [s]ight of it and he hav seen this verrey spot before. He then gave us an idea how the city was to be built and the order of things. that the Law of God was to be kept

strickley."^[44]  The Salt Lake Valley, seen in vision by Brigham Young, in this way became the place of refuge to which thousands of migrants traveled in succeeding years over ocean and land.


For Mormons, Salt Lake Valley and the settlements that the faithful colonized in the Rocky Mountain West became more than just protected places where they could live in peace. From the very beginning, members were commanded to gather to the place where the church was established.^[45] Nestled in the protected valleys of the Wasatch Mountains, the Mormons viewed their western habitation as fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy wherein the house of the Lord would be established in the "top of the mountains."^[46] The doctrine of gathering, a commandment for the faithful, pulled converts from every corner of the earth until the Church de-emphasized the doctrine in the 1890s.

1848 -- The Next Companies

After overseeing the planting of crops, building houses, and exploration of the Great Basin for outlying settlement, Brigham Young departed from Great Salt Lake City on 26 August, leading a company of 107 men back to those waiting in Winter Quarters. This initiated a process of bi-directional travel in which emigrants traveled west to Salt Lake and missionaries, freighters, and those sent to assist the Mormon emigrants traveled east. Journals and diaries were kept by those traveling in both directions.

In 1848, the second year of Mormon emigration to Utah, the leaders again displayed caution in their organization. They banded together in three large companies with Brigham Young's company numbering over twelve hundred people. This was done to "awe the Indians."^[47]  They also suspected "Government officers" of plotting some "mean treachery" against them when out on the plains. To defend against this "it was Brigham's orders for all the camps keep together until [s]afely passed that country, that from that cause, by the blessing of God they might be over=awed; but it much to our disadvantage to travel in so great a body."^[48] [p103](#) [p104](#)

Camp Life

According to Esaias Edwards, these large companies "traveled pretty much together for over three hundred miles and then it was thought best to separate and travel in Smaller Companies."^[49]  The logistics of finding camping places that would provide sufficient water and feed for the livestock each day for large companies was unworkable. From Oliver Huntington's journal, we get a descriptive picture of camp life. After each day's travel, all in the camp were "busily employed -- some hunting, some unloading and repacking, some fixing broken wagons, the Blacksmith shop well employed." He wrote:

I never saw so buisy a thing as in traveling with the Camp -- there was hardly ever a minute to spare to read, write or even to pray. As soon as we stoped at any place I had to spring right to my regular daily duties, to get through by bed time. Our daily tasks were regular. As soon as we had struck our wagon in the Corell, unyoke the cattle, gather wood, or Buffalo chips for cooking, and usually to save fuell, dig a hole in the ground about 3 feet long, one wide, and 6 inches deep -- this prevented the wind from blowing the heat away -- our wood generall being dry, burned well. The next thing was to get the Cow (they were drove all together clean behind all the company) and milk then drive stakes to tye the Cattle to and about this time the drove would come in and then get the cattle and tie them. There were regular -- and sometimes as many more, according to Company ground, Sometimes have to go a mile and a half for water and sometimes had to dig wells. Each ten hurded their cattle and every man and boy able to do it took their regular turn according to the number in the ten. In the ten I was in there was an increase until the number of w[a]gons amounted to 24 and 25 persons to hurd, and it came each ones turn once in 5 days taking 5 to each days company. The guarding of the camp fell on each man proportionally -- once in 7 and sometimes 6 nights, and then half the night, only The hurding and guarding together with my daily tasks, kept me beat down and and wore out all the time. The women were as well drove [?] beat down as the men. Sundays were scercely a day or rest, nor could it be if we traveled on Monday.^[50] [p110](#) [p111](#)

After finishing his work at the upper Platte ferry, Appleton Harmon was hired to work as a blacksmith at Fort Laramie. He was employed there from 8 September 1847 until 1 March 1848. He returned to Winter Quarters and arrived there on 24 March. Upon his return, he learned from his tearful wife that their little boy had died in his absence. He made preparations to leave in early June with his wife and extended family. Traveling in Heber C. Kimball's company, Harmon was given "charge of the hunting department and was comesary in dividing the game to the camp." Of this he wrote: "meney a Sportive day we had and meney a long tramp after the Buffalo and Antelope until our legs would git wearied looking for game or tracking them on the Sandy plains."^[51] Game, fresh fish, and berries and fruit gathered and picked along the road provided variety in their diet. In the Black Hills, Huntington wrote that they feasted on "an abundance of Black. Read and yellow Currands Choke Cherries and Gooseberries." He attested philosophically, "We are as comfortable and happy as most of the stationary communitys, for if we have not all that our wants may call for, we have the art of lessening our wants, which does as well."^[52]

Brigham Young counseled every person to be "humble peaceful, meek long suffering and in the great troubles bustles and cares of a camp life, never get out of patience nor get snappish or say any thing to hurt anothers feelings."^[53] After crossing the plains four times in the space of eighteen months, Orson Hyde made some interesting observations: "A trip across the plains is calculated to try any and every person to the very core. The good and bad qualities of the heart are most clearly and conspicuously developed."^[54] The majority of the people tried to follow Brigham's counsel, but sometimes the natural man bubbled to the surface despite their best efforts to be saints. For instance, Brother Gates had hidden a barrel of wine in the bottom of his wagon. In the course of traveling along the bluffs bordering the Platte River, his wagon overturned. His wife had been driving and Gates lost his temper:

He blamed his women severely for it, and what mortified him worse than all, it disclosed a Bbl. of wine; before unknown. The wagon turned square bottom side up -- no one in it -- that night he quarreled with his wife and whiped -- The guard about 11 o'clock saw it and when the hour came to cry, He loudly cried eleven O, clock -- all is well and Gates is quarreling with his wife like hell.^[55]

Apostle Franklin D. Richards recognized how people's true natures would be revealed during a journey overland: "on the Plains, camping in the open air, dusty, tired, and travel-stained; the Saints will show more of their true dispositions to each other, and learn more of themselves than they ever did before in their lives."^[56] In point of fact, these trail writings reveal the very human qualities of the pioneers -- with all their quirks, foibles, and diverse personalities held out for public view. And for some people like Brother Gates, that view may have become a little too public when the cover on his wagon proved too thin to shield some rather unsaintly behavior.

Brigham became disappointed and even angry when he saw people enroute to Zion falling short of being good people. He viewed their home in the tops of the mountains as being God-given and a place of refuge from their enemies if his people would be worthy and faithful. At a meeting on the plains he prophesied

that we should never be driven from there unless we done it ourselves, and he was determined that the law of God should be observed by all that should go to that land; and if any man would mind his own business -- not infringe upon our laws -- be peaceable and not take the name of God in vain he was perfectly welcome to go with us, he being of the Methodist Presbyterian or any other faith, but they that lifted their voices in cursing this people and reviling them, I will just blot them out of existance, and if any man will curse and swear he can not have a place among us.^[57]

For the people traveling with him, Brigham was like a father in the manner of Moses or Abraham. They felt safe and secure with him near: "Our Camp moved on under a new organization each Ten to take care of itself but this partly fell through, as all wanted and would be near Brigham when there

was good feed."[\[58\]](#) After months on the trail with Brigham at their head, all looked forward to their arrival in the "promised land." Not only did those traveling long to arrive in the valley, but the anticipation of those awaiting their arrival was also great. Of this, Huntington wrote, "We no more anticipated our arrival there, than those there already; longed to see The presidency, that better order might prevail, for as long as there was a greater authority known they much anticipated their presence."[\[59\]](#) With their first view of the valley, travelers often described their feelings. Huntington wrote, "We entered on the 20th day of September A.D. 1848 A fine clear fair day - and the Fort, as we emerged from the Kanion, had a rather singular appearance; or rather the whole Valley was the great scene of curiosity wonder and astonishment, and Fort contributed much to the grandure of the view before us."[\[60\]](#)

The Years 1849–1852

In 1849, the Church leaders established a Perpetual Emigrating Fund (PEF) to help members in need emigrate. In theory, the PEF was a revolving assistance program in which those receiving support to emigrate agreed to repay their loans when circumstances permitted. During the years the program functioned, almost 30,000 were helped to emigrate. The first PEF company traveled to Utah in 1850 led by Edward Hunter. In purchasing cattle, he had to compete with gold diggers bound for California. This competition drove up the price for good cattle and delayed his start.

The discovery of gold in California brought a great rush of humanity to the Far West. Mormons on the overland trails were first-hand witnesses of this historic tide of trail travel. In mid-April 1849, Huntington joined a group of men charged with delivering mail from Salt Lake to Council Bluffs. Traveling on the south side of the Platte in mid-May they "met the first company of the overland California Gold Imigration at the mouth of South fork of Platt." From then on, he wrote, "we were never out of sight of wagons and much of the way we rode 1/2 a mile from the road to avoid being hindered by their ten thousand questions."[\[61\]](#)

Job Smith was with the first group of missionaries sent from the valley in October 1849. Such late departures by hardy men were not uncommon and their narratives are replete with adventures and weather-related exploits. Following a snow storm, Smith's company met "a company of 17 emigrants for the gold mines Cal. Camped near Devil's Gates."[\[62\]](#) Heavy travel on the trail during the years of the gold rush precipitated much disease and caused many deaths, principally from cholera. William Snow, a leader of a company traveling to Great Salt Lake City in 1850, emphasized the constancy of disease and death. He noted, while traveling on the south side of the Platte near Plum Creek, "This day passed 15 graves mostly gold diggers."[\[63\]](#) Death was no respecter of persons or religion and twenty-six people died in Snow's company after leaving Kanessville, Iowa; many at the hands of the quick-killing cholera.

At the upper crossing of the Sweetwater in 1850, Appleton Harmon, on his way east to serve a mission in England, met "a company of Gold diggers." River crossings often presented challenges. Harmon's group safely crossed the rain-swollen river, but "the Gold diggers had it yet to cross. it put them to conciderable trouble, mency of them got their goods wet and one waggon Capsised, and Blankets Kettles, Pans, Bottles, Buckets, and lumber Could be seen floating off down the river." In an attempt to retrieve their goods, "several men Jumped in to save all they could and right the waggon while others followed down the stream to save the floating articles as they would come near to the shore in passing a bend in the river and sometimes wading in up to their middles to catch a passing article." They were able to salvage most of their goods "altho their Sugar flour and Salt would be a total loss."[\[64\]](#) [p69 p70](#)

With Salt Lake and the Mormon settlements in the inter-mountain west designated by the Mormon prophet as the place to which all the faithful should gather, Brigham Young became not a little upset when he saw many settling comfortably in western Iowa. In the fall of 1851, he urged these scattered saints to gather immediately. "What are you waiting for? Have you any good excuse for not coming? No!"[\[65\]](#) Over five thousand saints responded to his firm appeal. Organized in more than two-dozen companies, 1852 marked by far the largest year of Mormon emigration.[\[66\]](#) George H. A. Harris, who had been a British sailor, joined one of the emigrating companies. Upon departing in his wagon from

Kanesville, he wrote: "for the 1st time in my life I drove an Ox team."^[67] He composed a poem of his trail experiences and of this first attempt at driving an ox team, he wrote:

"Twas fun to see a Sailor drive
 Wohaw, get up, & look alive.
 The buck skin down on them did come.
 Then al[l] would start out on the run."^[68]

He found much that was new and interesting to him on the plains: "The morning was cloudy & cold but at noon it was very hot, & while the Sun was near burning the hair off our head we were picking up 2 oz hail stones, that had just fel in the forenoon, Such was miraculos to an Englishman <Sailor> on an American Parire."^[69] In verse, he explained how he got relief from the extremes of hot or cold weather:

We had a little Alchcohol,"
 That warmed us up, when very cold;"
 And when the Sun was scorching hot,"
 From it, releif we always got."^[70]

From this little rhyme, we get a glimpse of how difficult it was for converts to cast off all their old habits and traditions. When he got his first look at Salt Lake City, Harris joined in the general acclaim. He wrote, "We behold the beautiful <City, The City> we loved so wel[ll]."^[71]

The Perpetual Emigrating Fund was a great idea, but it never functioned according to design. Contributions to fund the program were solicited as charitable donations from those already settled in Utah. Those who received loans to emigrate from the PEF often were never able to reimburse the fund because they came to Salt Lake poor and they stayed poor. It was an expensive program and without a quick return of loan repayments, the monies in the fund became depleted. A drought and famine devastated Utah in 1855, drying up the charitable resources and leaving leaders scrambling for an alternative way to gather Europe's poor.

The Handcart Pioneers, 1856–1860

For the 1856 emigration season, Brigham Young proposed that they employ two-wheeled carts that could be pulled by people. In this way they would greatly reduce the costs by eliminating the need of providing expensive wagons and ox-teams. The handcart experiment lasted from 1856 to 1860 and enabled almost 3,000 poor European converts to have an affordable opportunity to gather with the saints in Zion. During that period, there were a total of ten handcart companies. Of those ten, two handcart companies in 1856 suffered tragic losses of life in arguably the worst trail disaster in U.S. history.^[72] The image of suffering and tragic death is forever linked to the handcart story because of the Willie and Martin catastrophe. In those two companies, over 220 emigrants lost their lives. The majority of those who died were either the very young, the very old, or men. In the Willie company, male mortality was "nearly three times that suffered by females."^[73] By way of comparison, a total of fifty-five people lost their lives in the other eight handcart companies. The extraordinary number of deaths in the Willie and Martin companies should be viewed as an anomaly because, in general, almost all Mormons who started out on the trail to Utah survived to arrive there. Rather than focusing on the tragic deaths of these two handcart companies, the Mormon genius for organization was competently successful in bringing thousands of people thousands of miles across the vastness of an ocean and an unpeopled continent. In 1857, there was a unique missionary handcart company that traveled eastward from Utah. Jesse B. Martin, who led a wagon company from Iowa City that year, met four of these handcart missionaries in southern Iowa who were bound for Canada. Of their encounter he wrote, "We sang some of our songs for them and they in return sung us the Missionaries Hand Cart song."^[74] Except for the Willie and Martin companies, the handcart experiment proved largely successful.

As a consequence of the "Utah War" in late 1857 and 1858, very few Mormons traveled overland travel in that period. Less than three hundred traveled overland to Utah in 1858.^[75] The largest company in 1858 was the John Berry company, comprised principally of returning missionaries. While enroute, they took pains to avoid any contact with the soldiers in Johnston's Army. They passed Fort Kearny in the night and were not observed by any while passing Fort Laramie during a heavy hail storm. Upon reaching the Sweetwater, they learned, as described by James L. Bunting, that "the Saints had left the City of G.S.L. and all the Northern settlements and were gone South."[🔗] Despite learning that Thomas L. Kane had engineered a "treaty of peace," they "thought it wisdom to shun the troops and therefor took a Northern route from the big bend on sandy."[🔗] In doing this, they took the Kinney variant of the Sublette Cutoff of the Oregon-California Trail. In traveling down Echo Canyon, they surprised a company of soldiers who were building bridges and repairing roads: "They all lookd quite amased at seeing us pass them as bold as lions."^[76][🔗]

Out-and-Back Companies, 1861–1868

Beginning in 1861, a different method of transporting migrants to Utah was devised. Referred to as the "out-and-back" or "down-and-back" method, wards throughout Utah were given quotas to supply wagons and teamsters to drive east to meet the emigrants at the outfitting posts to assist them to get to Utah.^[77] Those who supplied either wagons or teamsters received tithing credit.^[78] In this way, the Church avoided having to annually purchase wagons and teams at fluctuating and high prices. The teamsters were generally teenage boys who brought much enthusiasm and adventurous spirit to the appointment.

O.D. Bliss went back as a teamster to help the emigrants in 1864. On the way back, he recorded that the teamster boys enjoyed a "game of ball" and "had big sport a shooting at ducks" near the Sweetwater.^[79][🔗] The boys teased each other about the opportunity they would have to meet pretty girls in the companies upon their return. When they reached the outfitting post, it didn't take long for the boys to make acquaintances with the girls. Bliss wrote, "the boys and girls are heavy on the spark this evening." Their familiarity was a trial to some. According to Bliss, "bro Bywater gave the boys and girls fits for playing together and wished them to stop it."^[80][🔗] While readying things for the return trip and loading wagons, the teamsters often took time out for a bit of fun: "The majority of the teamsters amused themselves, and us also, this morning in a kind of sham parading. Their manoeuvres caused much laughter among themselves as well as among us."^[81][🔗]

When they finally started, William Ajax was thrilled at the abundance of berries and fruit that grew along the road. He picked wild grapes, black currants, plums, gooseberries, buffalo berries, and ground cherries. They used these wild fruits and berries to make pies, tarts, and puddings. His descriptions make it sound as if they were in a veritable miles-long Edenic paradise: "I went for nearly a mile and a half down the banks of the river, and the whole distance was liteerally strewn with vines and grapes."^[82][🔗] The animals were able to forage on the lush grasses: "We had grass for some distance up to our waists, and weed sometimes as high as our heads."^[83][🔗] The streams and rivers were laden with fish that almost begged to be caught: "Bro. D. Todd caught a cat-fish this morning weighing full 20 lbs., of which we had a share. It had got into shallow water, and in a place it could not escape from; therefore, bro. Todd jumped on it, and caught it without a hook."^[84][🔗] At Wood River Center, they picked up a cache of 7,000 pounds of flour which had been deposited there by wagons coming from the valley.

The "down-and-back" method of transporting emigrants enabled them to carry sufficient quantities of food and supplies so that suffering from lack was lessened. The Mormons also traded with the Sioux, Cheyenne, Shoshone, Pawnee, and gave them what they could afford to part with when they begged. Sometimes they didn't have much to share and sometimes their hearts weren't charitable. At a Pawnee village, Ajax learned of meanness in the companies traveling ahead of them: "They complained that our people had given them but little, and that they had driven them away, which was, undoubtedly, true; for many in our midst were entirely destitute of the feeling that Saints should possess."^[85][🔗] At times, Indians were noble and kind, offering to help push a handcart or to help Mormons across rivers. At a Sioux encampment at Skunk Creek, an Indian on horseback saw the women "wading the river with some difficulty." Using sign language, he sought permission of the company captain to carry them over.

That accepted, he drove through the river, alighted from his horse, and asked the sisters to get on the back of the same. The majority were afraid to venture; but a Danish sister mustered courage at last, and broke the ice, which example was followed by quite a number of the sisters. He walked himself through the water, leading the horse.[86]

Incidents such as these outnumbered those times of conflict or discord. Mormon trail narratives offer a rich resource for studying Native Americans. In the intervening years since that first year when all of Great Salt Lake City was housed in the walls of a fort, the city had grown and developed as incoming emigrants filled it up. In 1862 Ajax, a Welsh convert, came out of Emigration Canyon on the bench and got his first view of the city laid out before him. He wrote,

Its first appearance produced no extraordinary impression upon our minds, neither did it convey unto us any ideal of a beautiful place; but, when we came near it and we were permitted to have a full view of the whole of its buildings and gardens, the effect on the mind became quite different, and we were fully convinced that, on the whole, it was a delightful city.[87]

For saints imbued with the "real object of the gathering," Salt Lake City's beauty for them lay in its people and prophet -- the real objective of their overland journey.

Conclusion

Jacob Weiler traveled with Brigham Young in the pioneer company in 1847. Near the end of his life, he recorded some of his memories of that epic experience. He recalled many nights when they sat around a campfire and would "talk over the future of the dreary wastes through which we were traveling. I remember more than once the possibility of a railroad to the Pacific was spoken of as being in the near future." [88] From at least as early as 1830, people had been talking about, writing about, or wishing for a transcontinental railroad, so these conversations about such an undertaking weren't by any means unique, prophetic, or visionary. [89] In the context of the history of the Mormon Trail, it is interesting to picture Brigham Young, weary from a day of walking and riding, anticipating a day when people could cross the plains of America by railroad. In 1868, the final year of Mormon emigration by wagons, Brigham Young reflected on their discussions and anticipations two decades earlier: "I do not suppose we travelled one day from the Missouri river here, but what we looked for a track where the rails could be laid with success, for a railroad through this Territory to go to the Pacific Ocean." [90] Although an astute businessman, his interest in having a railroad bridging the nation went beyond the shipping of freight and merchandise. He said, "We want the benefits of this railroad for our emigrants, so that after they land in New York they may get on board the cars and never leave them again until they reach this city." [91] And beginning in 1869, that is what happened. When the final spike (a gold spike) was tapped in on 10 May 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah, it marked the end of more than twenty years of Mormon travel on foot or in wagons to Utah. Mormon converts continued to come to Utah, but after 1868 they traveled across America by locomotive power in less time and with much less physical exertion. When Fred C. Anderson arrived in Salt Lake City with wagons transporting sixty converts from Europe on 24 October 1868, it marked the end of the pioneer era of the Mormon Trail. It also marked the end of a kind of rite of passage for the Mormon convert. Wallace Stegner observed, "For every early Saint, crossing the plains to Zion in the Valleys of the Mountains was not merely a journey but a rite of passage, the final, devoted, enduring act that brought one into the Kingdom." [92]

The diaries that are digitized and transcribed in this on-line collection offer a sampling of hundreds of Mormon Trail narratives preserved in archival and library repositories. They give us a close-up view of the emigrant, teamster, herdsman, and pioneer in petticoat and sunbonnet. In these journals, we get a glimpse of the devotion that Stegner noted, but we also see the Mormon pioneer in his/her common, everyday dogtrot kind of life. We get to see them as people, as rugged, admirable individuals -- faced with challenges and problems. We get a feel for the trail over which they traveled -- the rattlesnake-infested sand hills of Nebraska, the windy plains of Wyoming, and the mountainous terrain of Utah. In these narratives, the pioneers speak for themselves about the Mormon Trail

experience, giving us a greater basis for understanding what this important story in the history of the West was really like.

Notes

1. Most of the journal texts quoted in this introductory overview of the Mormon Trail are taken from documents on this website. Some minimal changes to the text were made for the sake of clarity. Simplified bibliographic entries are given in the endnotes from the journals. The pages are actual diary pages, found in brackets in the upper left or right corner of each transcript page, although in some instances the page number will not be bracketed. Whenever the diarist entered a specific date, that date is included.
2. Appleton Milo Harmon, 13 February 1846, vol. 1, p. 14.
3. Ibid., p. 11.
4. Ibid.
5. An apostle is a high priesthood office in the hierarchy of Mormon church administration.
6. Ibid., p. 13.
7. Ibid., p. 14.
8. For a discussion of these early planning focusing on the west see Lewis Clark Christian, "Mormon Foreknowledge of the West," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21, no. 4 (fall 1981): 403-15.
9. Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. by B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. (1932-1951; reprint, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 5:85.
10. Lansford W. Hastings, *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*" (1845; reprint, with a historical note and bibliography by Charles Henry Carey, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1932). For a discussion of this trail guide see Will Bagley, "Lansford Warren Hastings: Scoundrel or Visionary?" *Overland Journal* 12, no. 1 (spring 1994): 12-26.
11. Quoted on page 109 in Ronald K. Esplin, "A Place Prepared': Joseph, Brigham and the Quest for Promised Refuge in the West," *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 85-111.
12. Emmeline Wells, 27 February 1846, p. 27.
13. Ibid., p. 28.
14. Ibid., 1 March 1846, p. 30."
15. For an overview of the whole spectrum of Mormon emigration history see William W. Slaughter and Michael Landon, *Trail of Hope: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1997) and James B. Allen and John W. Welch, eds. *Coming to Zion* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, Brigham Young University, 1997). For a book focusing on just the early years of Mormon emigration, see Richard E. Bennett, *We'll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus, 1846-1848* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997).
16. Andrew Ferguson, p. 242.
17. Oliver B. Huntington, 6 July 1848, vol. 9, p. 117.
18. For a detailed study of this important and popular map see Max W. Jamison, "The Annotated 1846 Mitchell Map: Francis Moore Jr.'s Chronicle of the Mormon Exodus, the Mexican War, the Gold Rush, and Texas" *Nauvoo Journal* 11, no. 1 (spring 1999): 49-100.
19. Harmon, vol. 1, p. 21.
20. Levi Jackman, 29 March 1847, p. 1.
21. Harmon, vol. 1, p. 21.
22. Jackman, 28 April 1847, p. 7.
23. Ibid., 2 May 1847, p. 9.
24. Ibid., 19 May 1847, p. 14.
25. Ibid., 13 May 1847, p. 13.
26. Huntington, 23 June 1848, vol. 9, p. 109.
27. Harmon, vol. 1, p. 23.
28. Huntington, 10 June 1848, vol. 9, p. 99.
29. Jackman, 6 May 1847, p. 11.
30. Ibid., 3 June 1847, p. 18.

31. Will Bagley, *The Pioneer Camp of the Saints: The 1846 and 1847 Mormon Trail Journals of Thomas Bullock* (Spokane, Washington: Arthur H. Clark, 1997), 116.
32. John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 18.
33. Jackman, 7 June 1847, p. 20.
34. Harmon, vol. 1, p. 23.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
36. Jackman, 23 June 1847, p. 25.
37. *Ibid.*, 25 June 1847, p. 25.
38. *Ibid.*, 28 June 1847, p. 27.
39. *Ibid.*, 30 June 1847, p. 27.
40. *Ibid.*, 20 July 1847, p. 31a.
41. *Ibid.*, 22 July 1847, p. 32.
42. *Ibid.*, 23 July 1847, p. 34.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*, 28 July 1847, p. 35.
45. Doctrine and Covenants 29:8.
46. Isaiah 2.2.
47. Huntington, 16 May 1848, vol. 9, p. 88.
48. *Ibid.*, 15 June 1848, vol. 9, pp. 103-4.
49. Esaias Edwards, Document 6, p. 23.
50. Huntington, 26 June 1848, vol. 9, pp. 110-11.
51. Harmon, vol. 1, p. 31.
52. Huntington to Father Neal, 20 August 1848, vol. 10, pp. 4-5.
53. Huntington, 4 June 1848, vol. 9, p. 96.
54. [Orson Hyde], "Things to Be Remembered in Crossing the Plains," *Frontier Guardian*, 14 November 1851.
55. Huntington, 9 July 1848, vol. 9, p. 120.
56. "Counsel to Emigrants," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 30, no. 23 (6 June 1868): 361-62.
57. Huntington, 2 July 1848, vol. 9, p. 116.
58. *Ibid.*, 24 July 1848, vol. 10, p. 2.
59. *Ibid.*, vol. 10, p. 30.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
61. *Ibid.*, vol. 11, pp. 17-18.
62. Job Smith, 3 November 1849, p. 79.
63. William Snow, 19 July 1850, p. 9.
64. Harmon, 17 May 1850, vol. 1, pp. 69-70.
65. James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (1965-1975), 2:75.
66. The "over 5,000" figure for Mormon emigrants of 1852 is based on my head counts company-by-company and is undoubtedly conservative. It conflicts with the more commonly cited figure of 10,000 that Unruh uses in *The Plains Across*, p. 120, which he indicates was taken from Wallace Stegner *The Mormon Gathering: The Story of the Mormon Trail*, The American Trails Series (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
67. George Henry Abbott Harris, 8 July 1852, part 1, p. 99.
68. *Ibid.*, 7 August 1852, part 1, p. 105.
69. *Ibid.*, 2 August 1852, part 1, p. 104.
70. *Ibid.*, 8 August 1852, part 1, p. 106.
71. *Ibid.*, 2 October 1852, part 1, p. 119.

- [72.](#) David L. Bigler, *Forgotten Kingdom: The Mormon Theocracy in the American West, 1847-1896* (Spokane, Washington: Arthur H. Clark, 1998), 118.
- [73.](#) Donald K. Grayson, "Human Mortality in a Natural Disaster: The Willie Handcart Company," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 52 (1996): 203.
- [74.](#) Jesse B. Martin, 20 June 1857, p. 90.
- [75.](#) For further reading see Richard D. Poll, "Buchanan's Blunder': The Utah War, 1857-1858," *Military Affairs* 25, no. 3 (fall 1961): 121-31 and Norman F. Furniss, *The Mormon Conflict, 1850-1859* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1960).
- [76.](#) James L. Bunting, 31 May 1858, p. 102; 11 June 1851, p. 102; 19 June 1858, p. 103.
- [77.](#) Similar to Protestant congregations or Roman Catholic parishes, Mormon wards were the focus of everyday life in pioneer Utah. Serving as the basic ecclesiastical unit, they were governed by lay leadership headed by a bishop. The bishop was directed by leaders in the general church hierarchy, oftentimes to assist in endeavors that would benefit others outside of their local ward boundaries.
- [78.](#) A bishop had many duties, one of which was to oversee the gathering of financial contributions or tithing. Tithing --the payment of a tenth of one's income -- was the main source of financial support for the church programs. Most tithing donations were contributed in kind -- produce, livestock, labor.
- [79.](#) O. D. Bliss, 18-19 May 1864, p. 7.
- [80.](#) *Ibid.*, 19-20 July 1864, p. 16.
- [81.](#) William Ajax, 31 July 1862, vol. 2, p. 130.
- [82.](#) *Ibid.*, 5 August 1862, vol. 2, p. 132.
- [83.](#) *Ibid.*, 6 August 1862, vol. 2, p. 133.
- [84.](#) *Ibid.*, 9 August 1862, vol. 2, p. 134.
- [85.](#) *Ibid.*, 5 August 1862, vol. 2, p. 132.
- [86.](#) *Ibid.*, 21 August 1862, vol. 2, p. 144.
- [87.](#) *Ibid.*, 5 October 1862, vol. 2, p. 186.
- [88.](#) Jacob Weiler, Autobiographical sketch, p. [3], microfilm of typescript, LDS Church Archives.
- [89.](#) For early anticipations of a transcontinental railroad see Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nothing Like It in the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad, 1863-1869* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 27.
- [90.](#) Brigham Young, "The Mass Meeting," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 30, no. 32 (8 August 1868): 499.
- [91.](#) *Ibid.*, 500."
- [92.](#) Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*, 1.