

# Iowa after the Mormon Exodus

by Bettie McKenzie

**W**hat did the Mormon trek mean to a newly organized and yet unsettled state? Did its impact end when the last wagon or handcart crossed Iowa's western state line? Were the deep wagon ruts across southern Iowa all that remained of the great exodus?

In 1936 Union County historian Mertle Brunson considered these questions, writing about the Mormons' temporary camp at Mt. Pisgah: "The spring of cold crystal water still called Pisgah Spring, the Mormon ford on Grand River, the stones on the A.C. White farm, the cemetery plot with its monument, the repaired log cabin and a few family names in the community are the only marks remaining of a once populated little village."

"The exodus of the Mormons was complete," Brunson continued. "And yet, the very pulse of settlement of Union County, the lives and history of its early people were influenced by the Mormon settlement at Mount Pisgah. Here our first permanent settlers bought cabins and land from the Mormons, locating here even before the Mormons pulled stakes for final exit. Here the first Post Office was located . . . [and the] first school, church, blacksmith shop."

Iowa clearly benefited from the ground-breaking efforts of the Mormons as they crossed Iowa. From the Mississippi to the Missouri they forged trails and marked the best river crossings, and they built bridges and mills.

To earn money en route or to work for food and supplies, Mormons helped non-Mormons build structures on farm and town sites. At their temporary camps like Mt. Pisgah and Garden Grove, and for 40 miles east of the Missouri River, they cleared and cultivated the land. Within four days of the advance company's arrival at Mt. Pisgah alone, 1,000 acres had been plowed, fenced, and planted.

Between 1847 and 1852, the years of the migration, all of the southwest Iowa counties were created, and most were organized. When the Mormons arrived in Pottawattamie County, there were only three trading posts in the area. During their stay, Kaneshville became a booming town and headquarters for thousands of emigrants. City government was established and the county was organized with Mormon officers. A post office was secured and residents became voting citizens of Iowa. Mormons founded the first school in 1849.

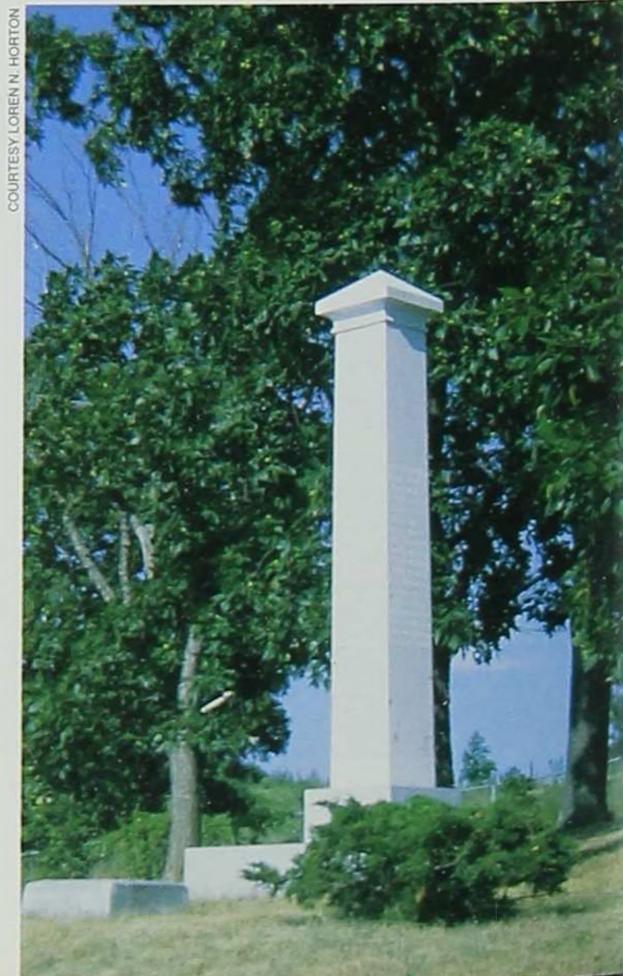
As the Mormons left Iowa for Utah, they left behind these improvements, which non-Mormons put to use to speed Iowa's transition from prairie to farms and settlements. However, the Mormon crossing of Iowa left behind more than a trail of physical improvements. While most of the faithful heeded the call to Utah, many did not. Scattered across southern Iowa were families who remained behind, and the careful reader will find occasional refer-

ences to them in county histories. In Shelby and Harrison Counties, for example, Mormon Jonas Chaburn in 1854 built the first sawmills, and wives of Mormon elders taught the first schools.

Scattered records also document groups who chose to follow religious leaders other than Brigham Young. In 1852, for example, a group of Mormons who did not wish to follow Brigham Young formed at Plano, Illinois, the first conference of what was later to become known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS). In 1859, Elders E.C. Briggs and W.W. Blair were sent across Iowa to organize congregations and to convey the message that Joseph Smith III, son of their prophet, would soon reach manhood and assume leadership.

Briggs and Blair located Saints in Lee, Van Buren, Harrison, Shelby, Fremont, Mills, and Pottawattamie Counties. In Decatur County, they found little of the early settlement at Garden Grove, but at nearby Nine Eagles (later Pleas-

**Monument to the Mormon dead at Mt. Pisgah, in Union County**



anton) they located several Mormons, including Austin Cowles, a prominent defector from Brigham Young's group. In 1861, another RLDS elder, Charles Derry, returned to organize those in western Iowa, including many "go backs," families who had returned from Utah to Iowa for various reasons. Not all congregations of the early RLDS missionaries survive today, yet the relationship to the early trail is evident. Of the 30 RLDS branches in Iowa, 21 are located across southern Iowa south of Highway 34.

Other splinter groups formed as well. For example, Charles B. Thompson established Jehovah's Presbytery of Zion in a community named Preparation in Monona County. In this experimental communism, Thompson controlled all community resources, even personal property and clothing. After several disputes with his followers, he was expelled and chased from the county in 1858. Yet descendants of the Preparation community still live in Monona County.

In Fremont County, Alpheus Cutler established a settlement named Manti. Formerly a captain of the pioneer company under Brigham Young, Cutler declined going to Utah and undertook missionary work in Kansas with the Indians. In 1852 he returned to Iowa with many followers and founded Manti, a village active on the trading routes of southwest Iowa. Eventually, many of his followers joined the RLDS Church after its 1860 reorganization, and others moved to Minnesota. When the railroad reached Shenandoah in the 1870s, many of Manti's businesses and buildings were moved there to be closer to the railroad.

Because many of the followers of Joseph Smith, Jr. were familiar

with Iowa, as the years passed they often found themselves drawn back to settle here and form new RLDS congregations. These families included "go backs" from Utah; followers of Lyman Wright in Texas; followers of the Strang break-away group in Wisconsin; Missourians who had remained near the Iowa border after the Mormons' 1838 flight to Nauvoo; and relatives, friends, and immigrants.

Today one of the important Iowa communities related to Mormonism is Lamoni in Decatur County. In 1870 the RLDS Church chose Decatur County for a unique cooperative farming organization, and the county eventually became the homesite of church leader Joseph Smith III. Lamoni was the early headquarters of the RLDS Church and its publishing company, Herald Publishing House. By 1895 the RLDS Church had grown strong enough to establish an educational institution, Graceland College. Today Lamoni remains close to its roots. It is still the home of the beautiful Graceland College campus and the site of Liberty Hall, the restored Victorian home of Joseph Smith III.

In Keosauqua, a new branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Utah church) was formed in 1945. Planning to expand their cattle operations closer to Chicago markets, a small group of Saints from Arizona chose the rolling farmland of Van Buren County partly because of its relationship to their own church history. Their ancestors had struggled mightily through rain, mud, and storms to cross Van Buren County in 1846. They had



Liberty Hall, home of Joseph Smith III in Lamoni

cut timber for local farmers and had buried their dead on the trail. In 1980 these ancestors were commemorated by a 50-mile trek by wagon and handcart from Keosauqua to Nauvoo.

Although 150 years ago the goal of the Mormon Church may have been to cross southern Iowa quickly and escape the pervasive anti-Mormon sentiment, the Mormons nevertheless left a trail of physical improvements. But their impact was greater than the bridges and mills and acres of cleared land. The pockets of Mormons and those who broke away, of those who stayed in Iowa or returned, contribute to the mosaic of religious diversity in our state today. ❖

*Bettie McKenzie was the organizer for the Iowa Humanities Board project "Song in the Wilderness" about the Mormon Trek. She lives in Red Oak, Iowa.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Major sources include Lynn Robert Webb, *Contributions of the Settlements of Garden Grove, Mount Pisgah and Kanesville, Iowa to Mormon Emigration, 1846-1952* (1954); C.J. Colby, *Centennial Sketches, Maps and Directory of Union County, Iowa* (1876); Vern Ronald Jackson, ed., *Iowa 1850 Census Index*; Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri* (1987); Heman Hale Smith, *The Mormons in Iowa* (1929); Pearl Wilcox, *Roots of the [RLDS] in Southern Iowa* (1989); Steven Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration* (1990); Ford I. Gano "Historical Summary of the Keosauqua Branch, 1945-1980"; material in the RLDS Archives (Independence, Mo.); manuscript owned by Pauline Parrott; and an unpublished paper by Nancy Jaekel. Annotations are in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files.