

PORTRAIT OF GREG MACGREGOR BY JO WHALEY, COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Photographing the Mormon Trail Across the West

by *Greg MacGregor*

When I first became interested in photo-documenting western migration trails in 1986, my motivation was grounded in what photographers then called “re-photography.” This was a fairly popular genre in photography circles, in which one would obtain a photo made in the mid- or late 19th century, locate the exact position, and re-photograph a modern view of the same location. The object was to record the changes that had occurred over the past century.

There were already several models for this type of project but none on overland trails. After an exhaustive search in archives that housed photographs of the early West, I soon realized that the migration of some 300,000-500,000 persons walking, riding, and pushing their way west was, in a word, “undocumented”—at least visually. Not only was this true for the migration itself, but only in a few places were the landscape, trail, and topography visually recorded.

There are several reasons for this. The wet plate process, invented in 1851, required that the glass plate negatives be prepared in the field and used while still wet and sensitive to light. Photographing the western landscape therefore required an entire portable darkroom on wheels. A photographer’s wagon had to haul the enormous weight of dozens of glass plate negatives, a large camera, and bottles of chemicals. All this added up to a process that was simply impractical.

There was also a motivational factor. The land traversed by these trails had one thing in common: it was the flattest terrain possible, usually a long way from the more scenic parts of the West like Yellowstone or the spectacular gaps in the Rocky Mountains. In comparison with such dramatic landscapes, this flat terrain was usually considered visually boring. Consequently, even though western survey parties traveled migration trails, photographers such as A. J. Russell, who documented the Union Pacific Railroad accomplishments of 1866-1868; Timothy O’Sullivan, with the King Survey of 1867; and William H. Jackson, with the Hayden Survey of 1870 didn’t record much of the “highway” itself. They were saving their precious glass plate negatives for the more salable views of Yellowstone and the Tetons.

As for images of the actual wagon trains and emigrants, by 1869, when qualified photographers and military expeditions were now free from documenting and fighting the Civil War, the transcontinental railroad was completed and the first wave of migration had finished. The only photos I have located of actual emigrant wagons on the trail were taken by Charles Savage, a Salt Lake City resident who waited near the mouth of Emigration Canyon and photographed the end of the journey as wagon trains passed through. The vast distance of some 1,300 miles between the Mississippi and Fort Bridger in southwestern Wyoming went unphotographed.

Given what little I could find of historic trail images, my project then changed into what would be a first look, rather than a re-look, at this historic route. My equipment was simple: a tall tripod, my homemade camera with large format and a wide angle lens, a ladder, and a cable release. My methodology was equally simple: I would shoot the photo either standing directly in the ruts of the trail or looking straight at where they used to be. It was tempting to wander a hundred feet off to capture a spectacular image, but I resisted. The maps of the trail are sometimes very specific, and I followed them whether they led under concrete, through cities, or across water.

I usually worked about five days in a row. The days were long, hot, and exhausting. The best light for landscape photography is early morning and late afternoon. But since there was nothing to do with the middle hours and since I was usually far from any towns, I just worked through the whole day, sometimes driving a hundred miles between photographs because a site could not be located, or when it was, there was nothing but grass and a historic marker.

The following selection of photos focuses on the Mormon Trail, the only western migration trail to cross Iowa (see map below). Although some of the events explained here were unique to Mormons, in general the western trail experience was shared by hundreds of thousands of emigrants, Mormons and non-Mormons alike. Their wagons creaked through the same ruts, passed by the same landmarks, and struggled across the same endless expanse of the West.

Physical evidence of the Mormon Trail itself is difficult to locate across Iowa and Nebraska; because of the ample rainfall and rich farmland, vegetation and cultivation have long since obscured the trail.

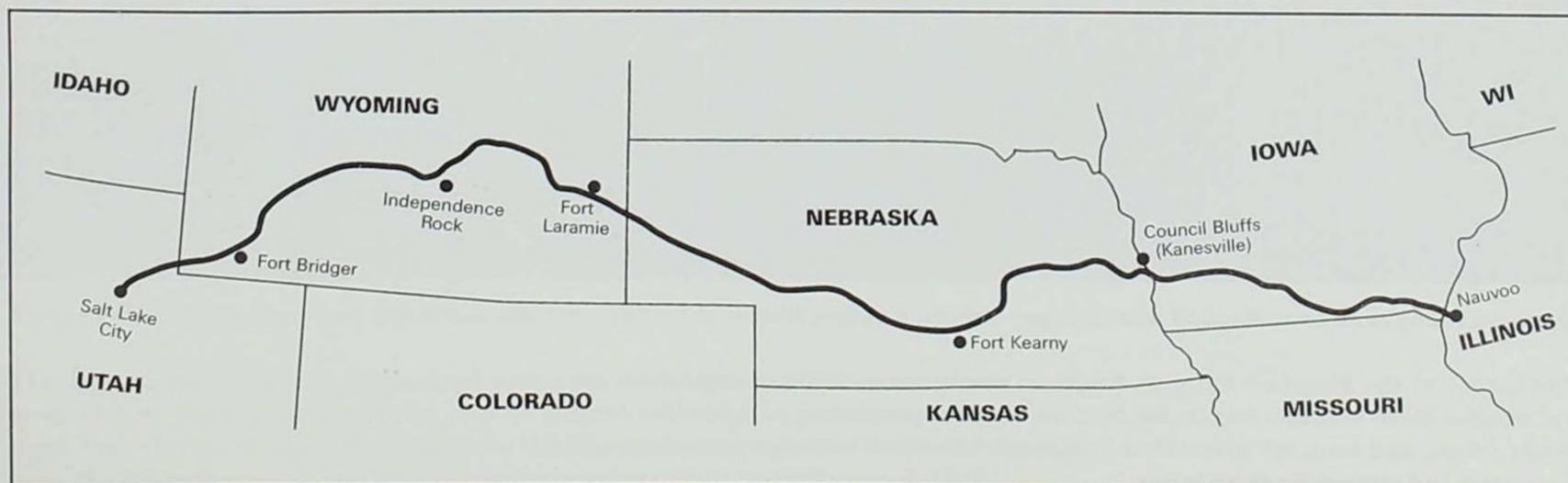
Occasionally, faint ruts may be found, for instance, near the Mormon Trail Park east of Bridgewater in Adair County. Trail enthusiasts in southern Iowa have been diligently searching for evidence of the trail in the southern tiers of counties, and there are many well-marked spots along the way that identify early campsites and way stations.

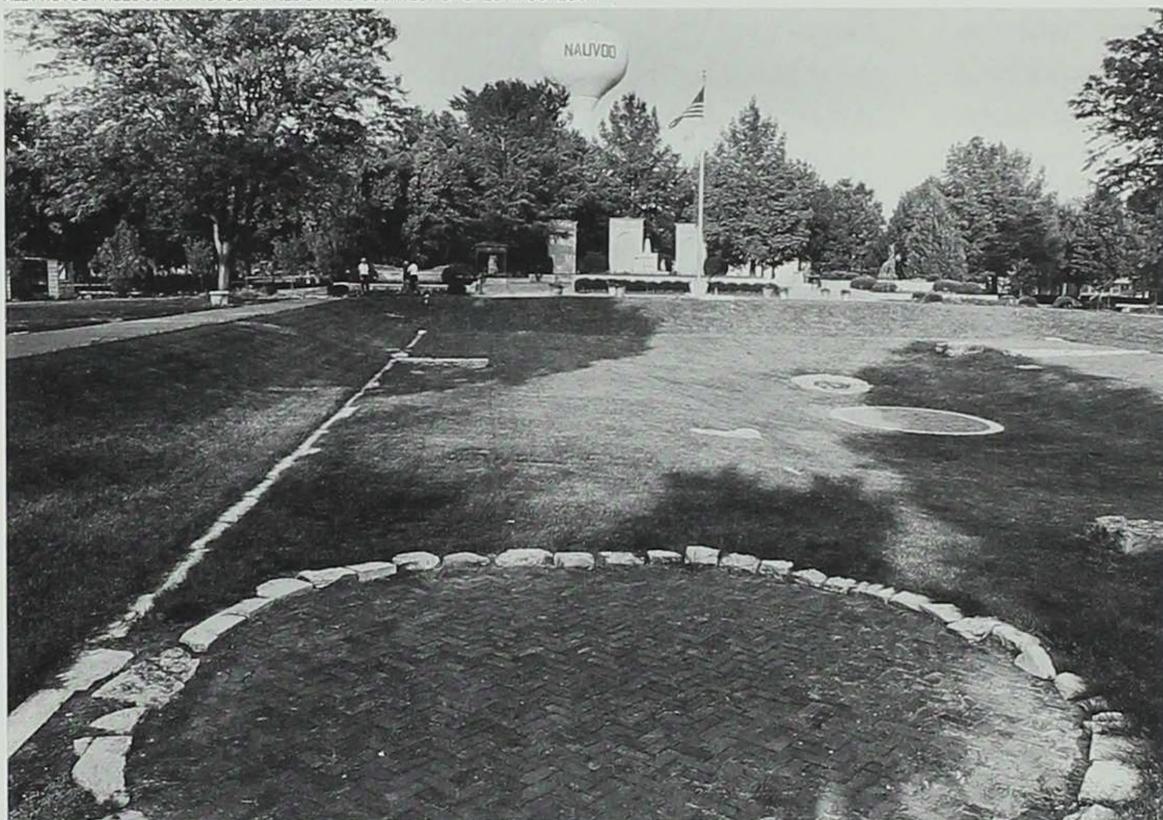
Once the trail enters the treeless grasslands of western Nebraska, where ranching has disturbed the land less than farming, ample evidence of the trail still may be seen. This is especially true after the Mormon Trail joins the California-Oregon Trail at Fort Laramie in Wyoming.

Yet recent changes are taking their toll. I often revisited a site two years after I had photographed it, only to discover that oil, water, and mining ventures, road construction, and rainfall and natural erosion were all taking their turn at erasing the original remains of the trail.

Seeing this happen before my eyes, I realized that I was documenting a part of our past that in this lifetime would be considerably diminished. Starting on the next page, then, is my late 20th-century view of the mid-19th-century Mormon Trail, through Iowa and beyond.

Greg MacGregor is professor of photography at California State University, Hayward, and author of Overland: The California Emigrant Trail of 1841-1870 (University of New Mexico Press, 1996). His work will appear in an exhibit in the Western Historic Trails Center in Council Bluffs, opening this October.





Foundation remains of original Mormon temple, Nauvoo, Illinois.

The story of the Mormon Trail starts in Nauvoo, where members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had established a faithful and industrious community. But persecution from the outside led to mob violence and the murder of Mormon prophet Joseph Smith Jr. and others. In early 1846, a three-part exodus began; by year's end, more than 13,000 Saints had fled Nauvoo.



Brigham Young residence, Kimball and Granger Streets, Nauvoo, Illinois.

The leader of the Mormon Church, Brigham Young was a brilliant organizer. As the exodus from Nauvoo began, he divided the Mormons into companies of hundreds, fifties, and tens. He knew that crossing Iowa was a necessary step to reach unsettled and therefore safer land.

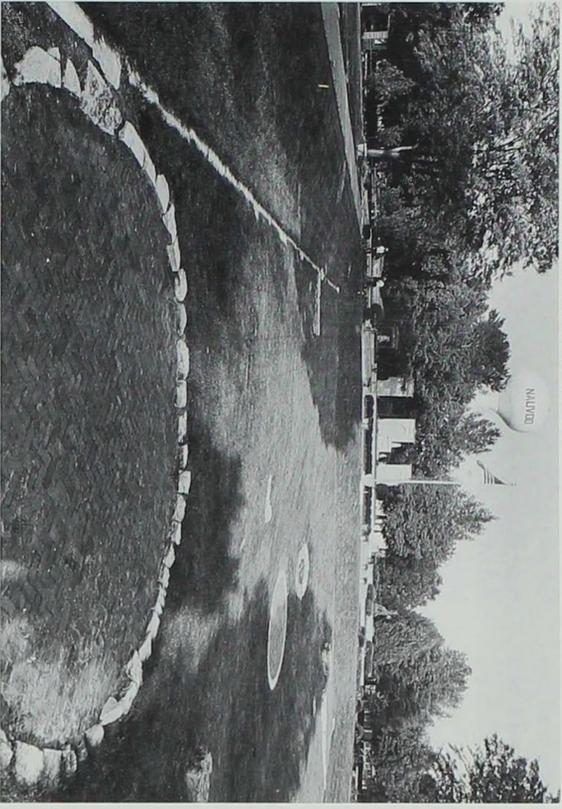




View of Mississippi River and departure site from Nauvoo.

The first obstacle was the Mississippi, which bordered Nauvoo. Mormons first crossed over here, by ferries, rafts, and flatboats, to Montrose, Iowa (from left to right above). About a hundred yards up the Illinois shore, a plaque reads: "Near here the Mormon exodus to the Rocky Mountains began on February 4, 1846."

ALL PHOTOS PAGES 66-67 PHOTOGRAPHED BY AND COURTESY OF GREG MACGREGOR



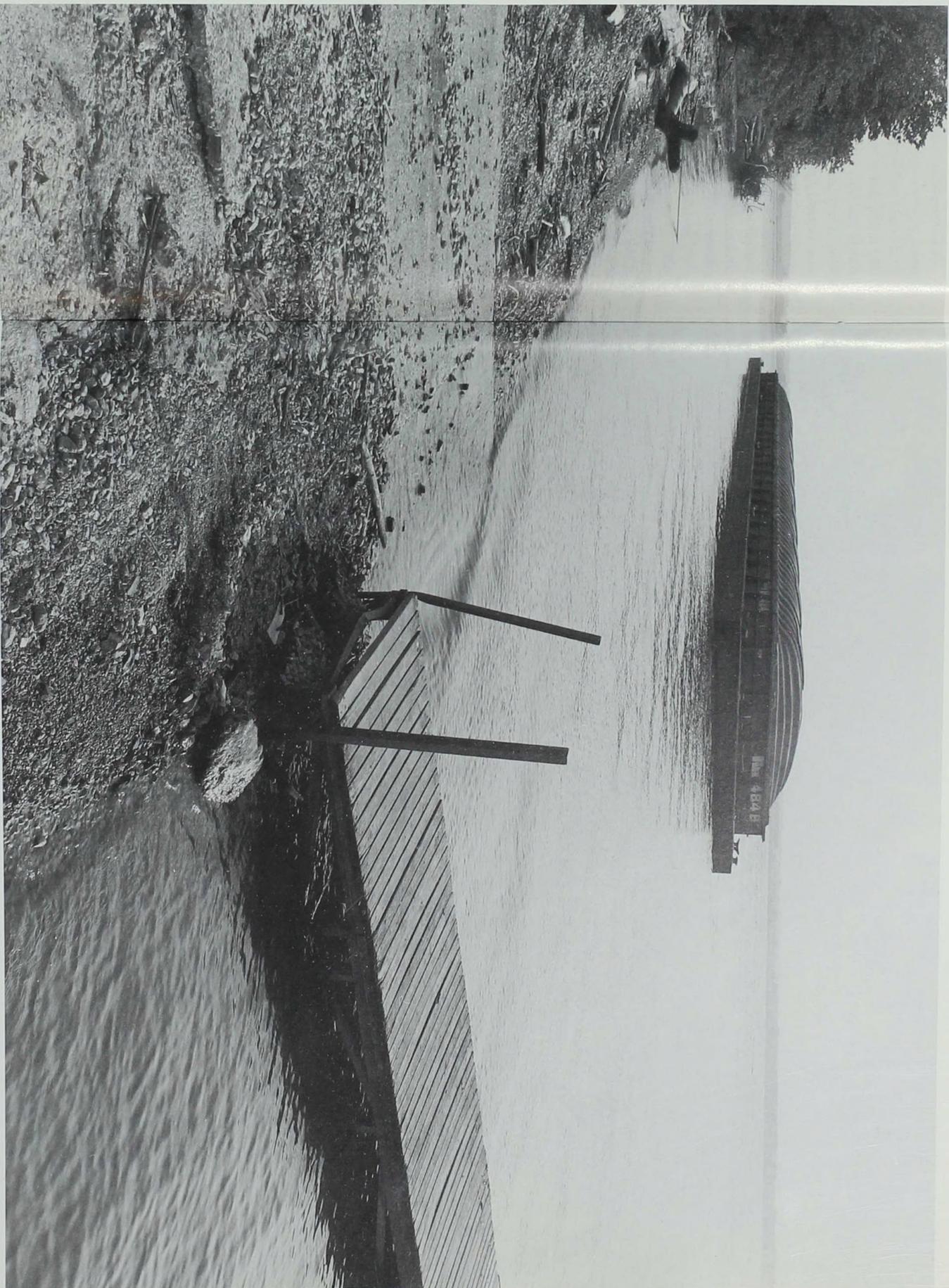
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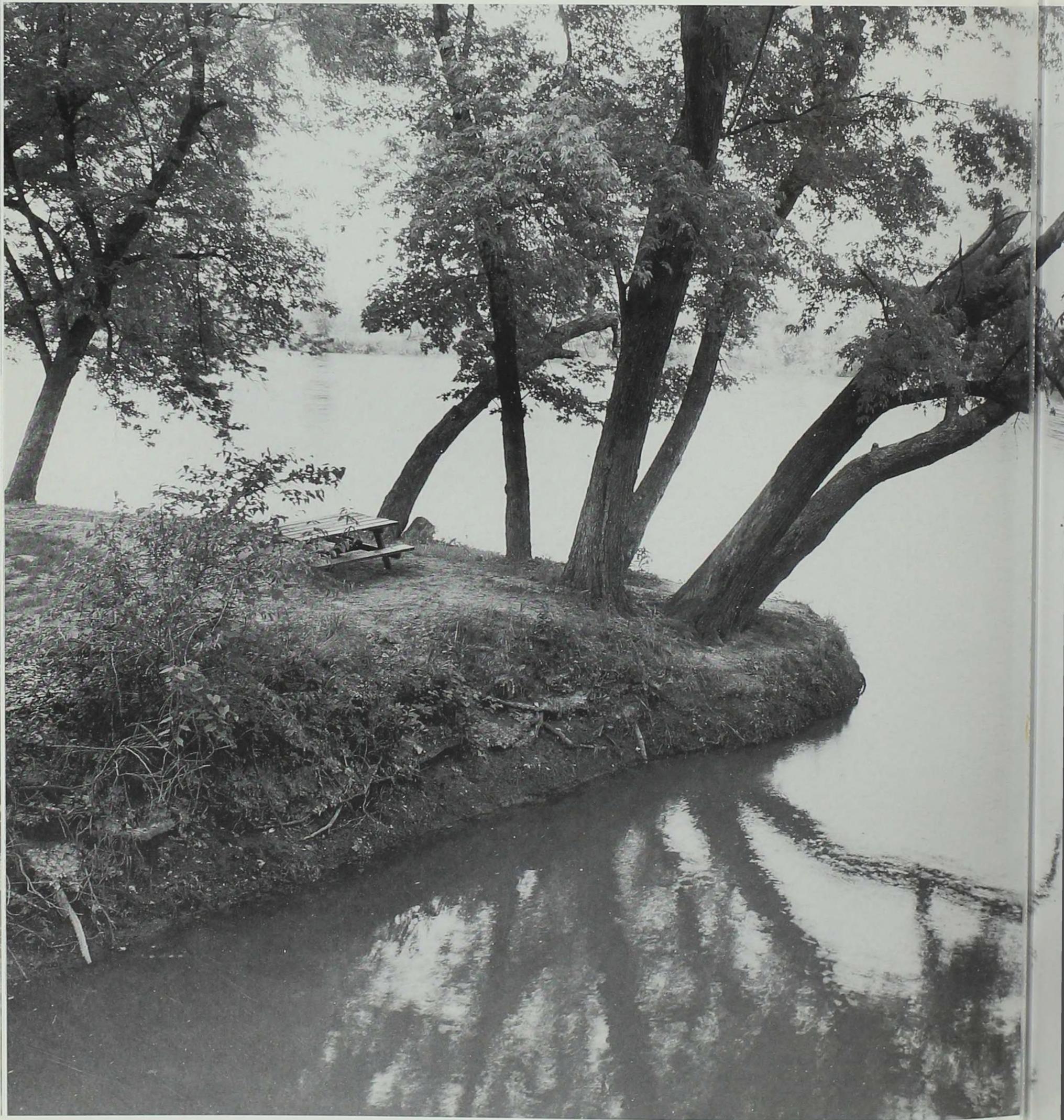
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Ely's Ford, Van Buren County, Iowa.

Ely's Ford is a site where Mormons crossed the Des Moines River. (The crossing occurred just to the left of where the picnic table appears here.) Marked by a monument, this area is now in Lacey-Keosauqua Park.

For all emigrants on western trails, crossing rivers and streams could be treacherous unless shallow places to ford were located. The first Mormon companies to head across Iowa built bridges for the several thousand Mormons who would follow over the next few years.



Site of Locust Creek Campground in Wayne County, 106 miles west of Nauvoo.

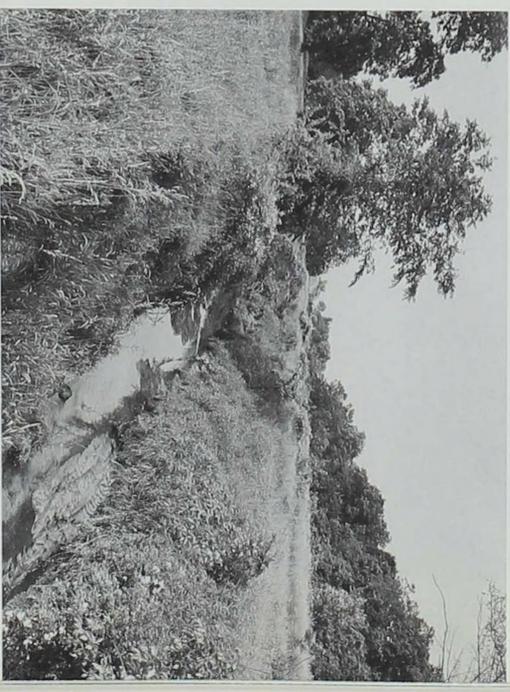
Mormons camped on a nearby ridge and in the flat grassy areas on both sides of Locust Creek and drew water from it. It was at this campsite that William Clayton wrote the words to the Mormon hymn "All Is Well" on hearing that his son had been born safely in Nauvoo. (The hymn was later renamed "Come, Come, Ye Saints.") In a nearby cemetery, a bronze marker commemorates the event.



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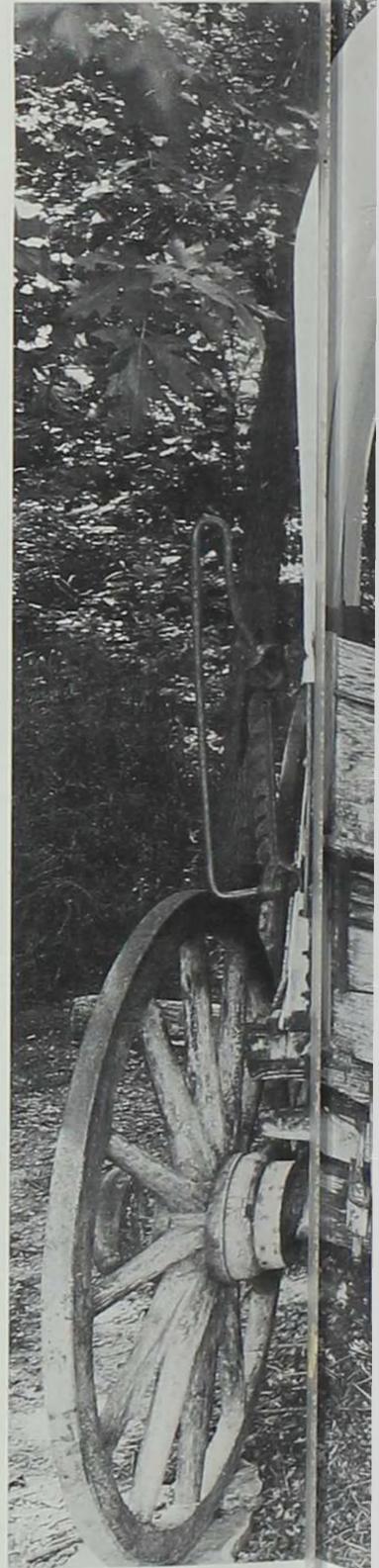
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View of Council Bluffs, Iowa, at dusk, looking toward Omaha, Nebraska.

First named Kanesville, Council Bluffs served as a cohesive religious community for Mormons who had not yet moved on to the Great Salt Lake. It also thrived as a staging area for non-Mormon emigrants headed to Oregon and California. Kanesville businesses competed against outfitters in St. Joseph and Independence, Missouri, and the local *Frontier Guardian* recommended the best departure dates, routes, and supplies to the stream of emigrants ready to cross the Missouri River. Although the *Frontier Guardian* warned its Mormon readers against the vice and depravity that gold-seekers would bring to the town, it also promoted Kanesville as the best jumping-off place for the gold rush.



Pioneer wagon and reconstructed cabin, Winter Quarters, Omaha, Nebraska.

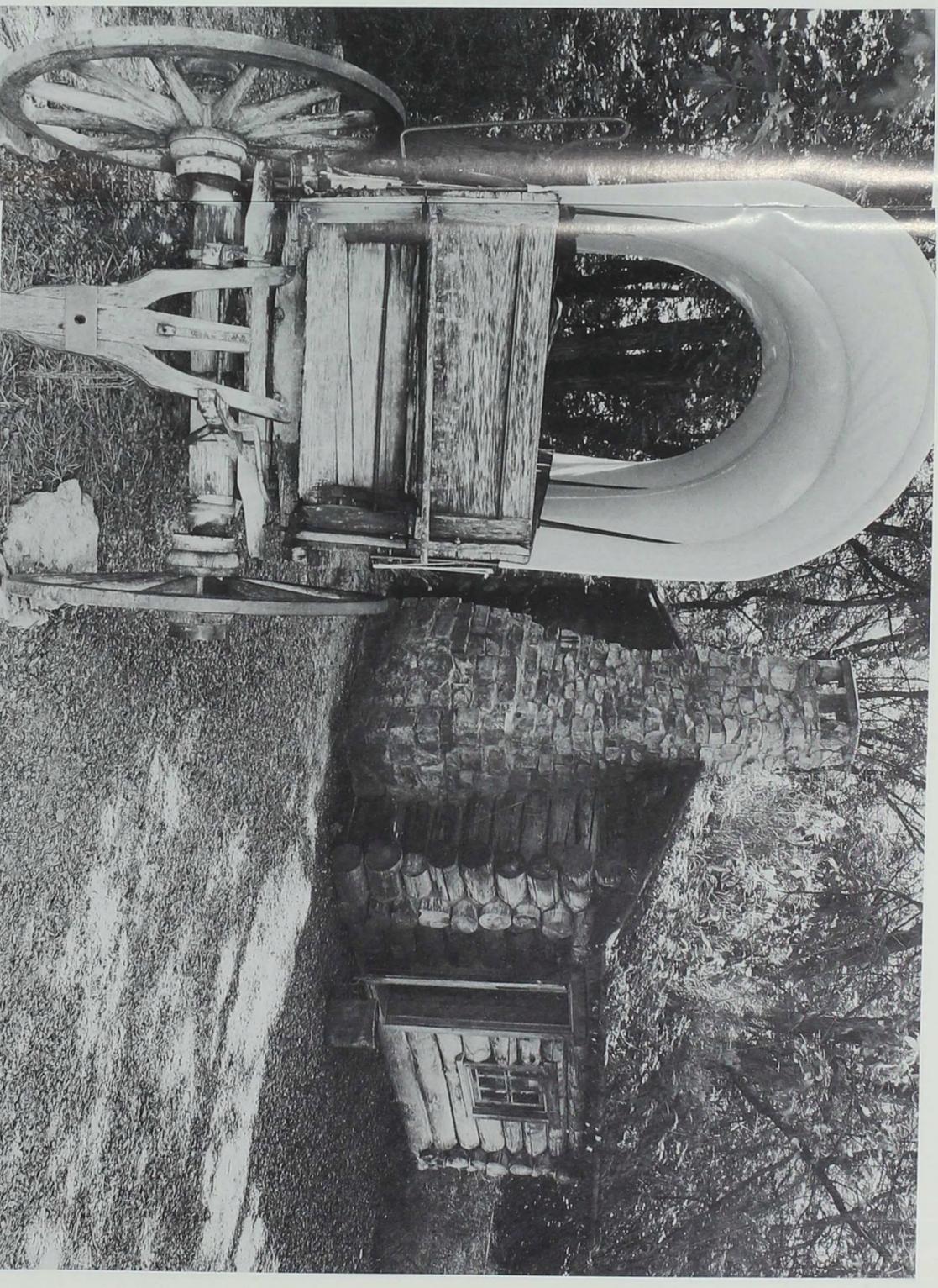
A historic site and visitors center in Omaha commemorate the Mormons' first winter beyond Nauvoo. Those who had forged the trail across southern Iowa reached the Missouri River by the summer of 1846, but it was already too late in the year to continue across the Great Plains. Mormons wintered over on both sides of the Missouri River, in Kaneshville and surrounding hamlets in Iowa, and in Winter Quarters on the west side.

Spring was the best departure time, while there was still sufficient grass for livestock and sufficient time to cross the high passes before early snows. The wagon most suited for the trip west was a covered farm wagon with a short wheel base (as typified here). The long, swayback Conestoga wagon depicted in so many Hollywood westerns would have been too heavy and could not have made the tight turns, handled the mud, or negotiated steep crossings at creeks.



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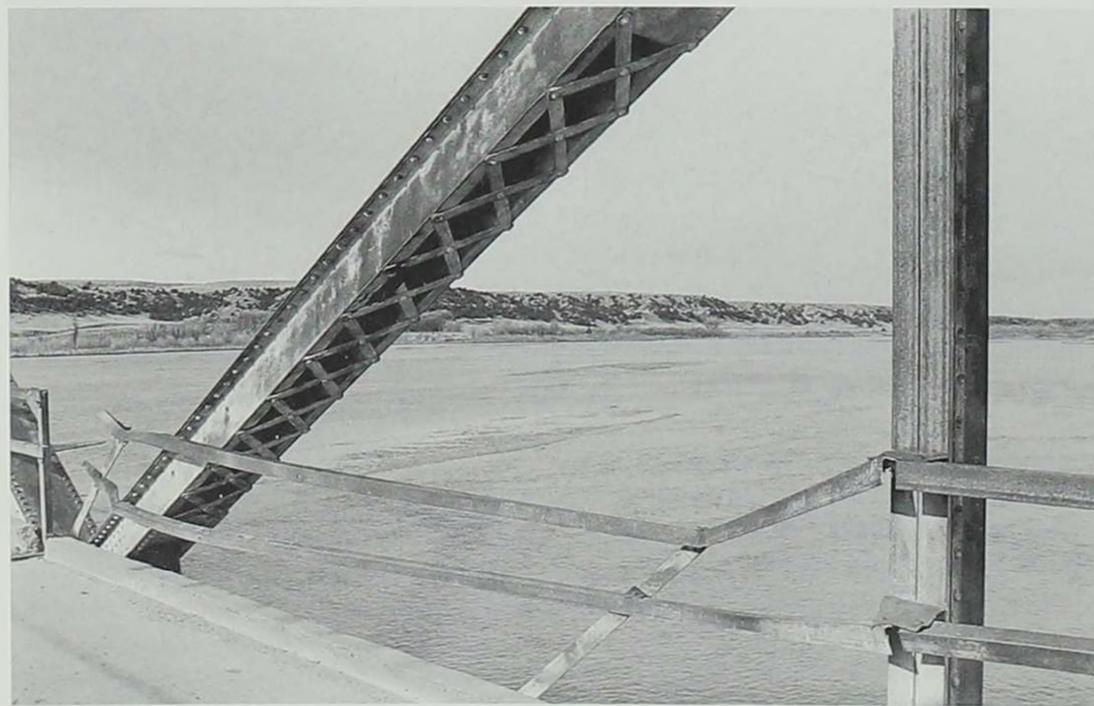
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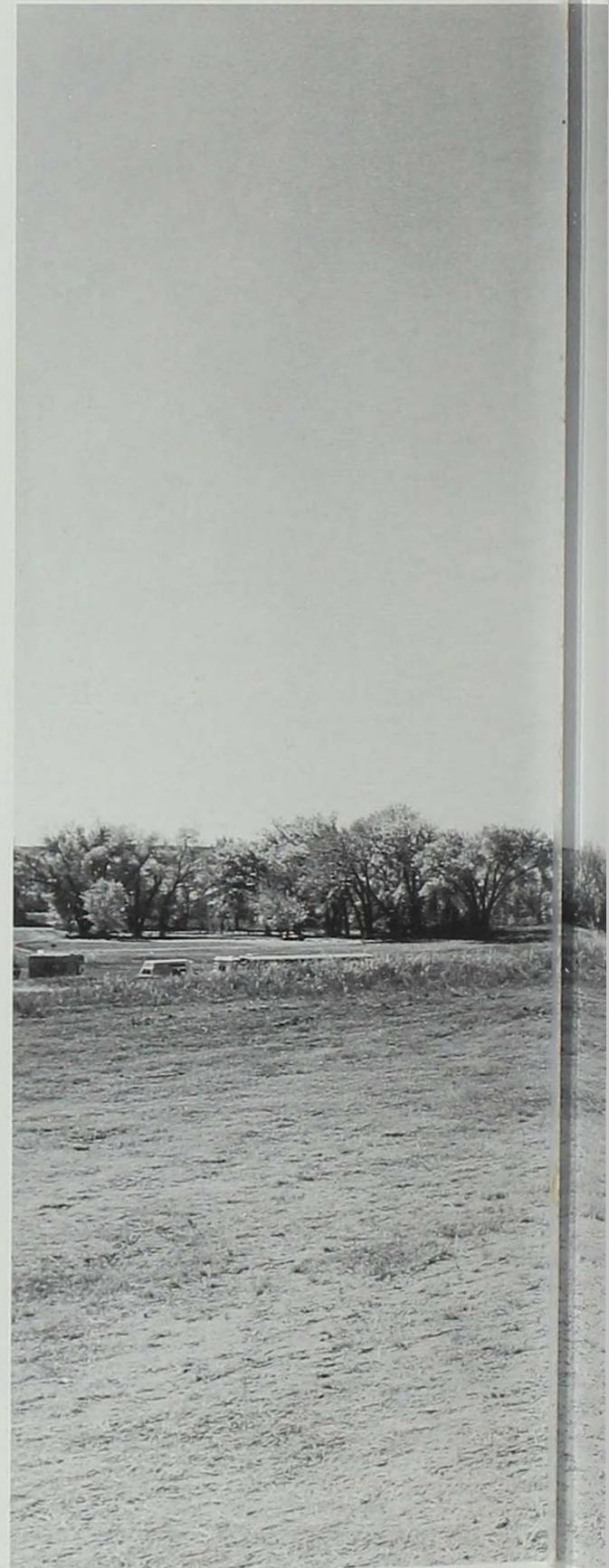
Tree stumps at site of Kearny City, Nebraska.

Kearny City (or Dolbytown), two miles west of Fort Kearny, was a cluster of about 15 squalid adobe huts that housed the hangers-on, dropouts, and marginal traders who often settled near military outposts. Near Fort Kearny, the Mormon Trail converged with migration trails from Independence and St. Joseph. Historians generally agree that, for the most part, the Mormon Trail ran on the north bank of the Platte, so that Mormons could maintain distance from those on the south bank—gold-seekers and other non-Mormons bound for California and Oregon. However, both groups made many crossings, to avoid high-water impasses or to buy supplies from forts or independent traders.



Broken guard rail, North Platte River, Lewellen, Nebraska.

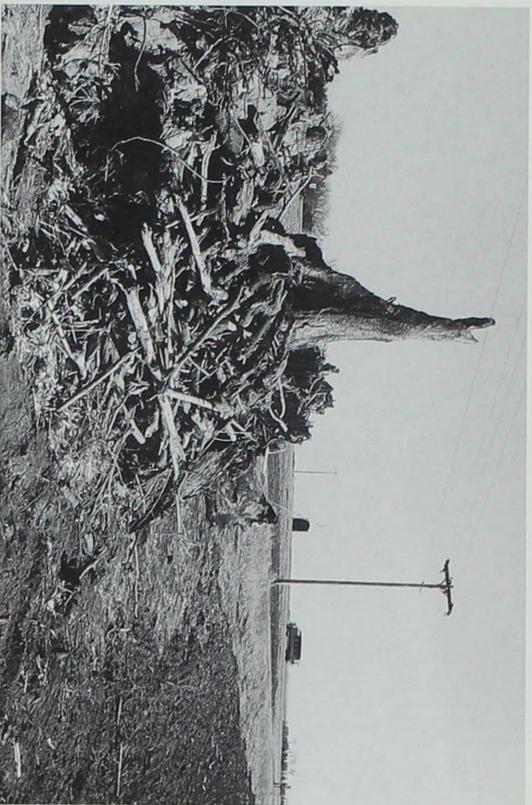
A mile wide and a foot deep, the North Platte had a distinct difference from the torrid South Platte: its placid current. The shallowness surprised emigrants familiar with eastern rivers.





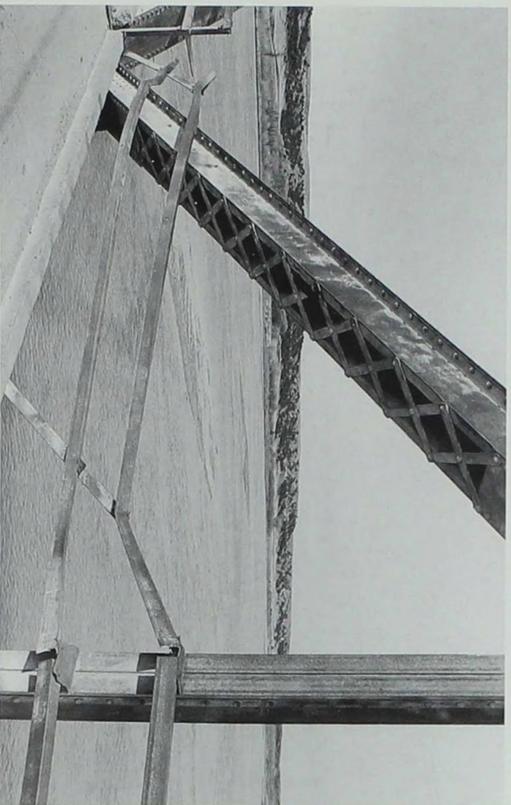
Hospital ruins, Fort Laramie, Wyoming.

At Fort Laramie, the Mormon Trail crossed the North Platte and joined the California-Oregon Trail. The fort was built to protect travelers and serve as a supply and repair station. An additional and historically valuable function was to keep a head count of the emigrant traffic passing through.



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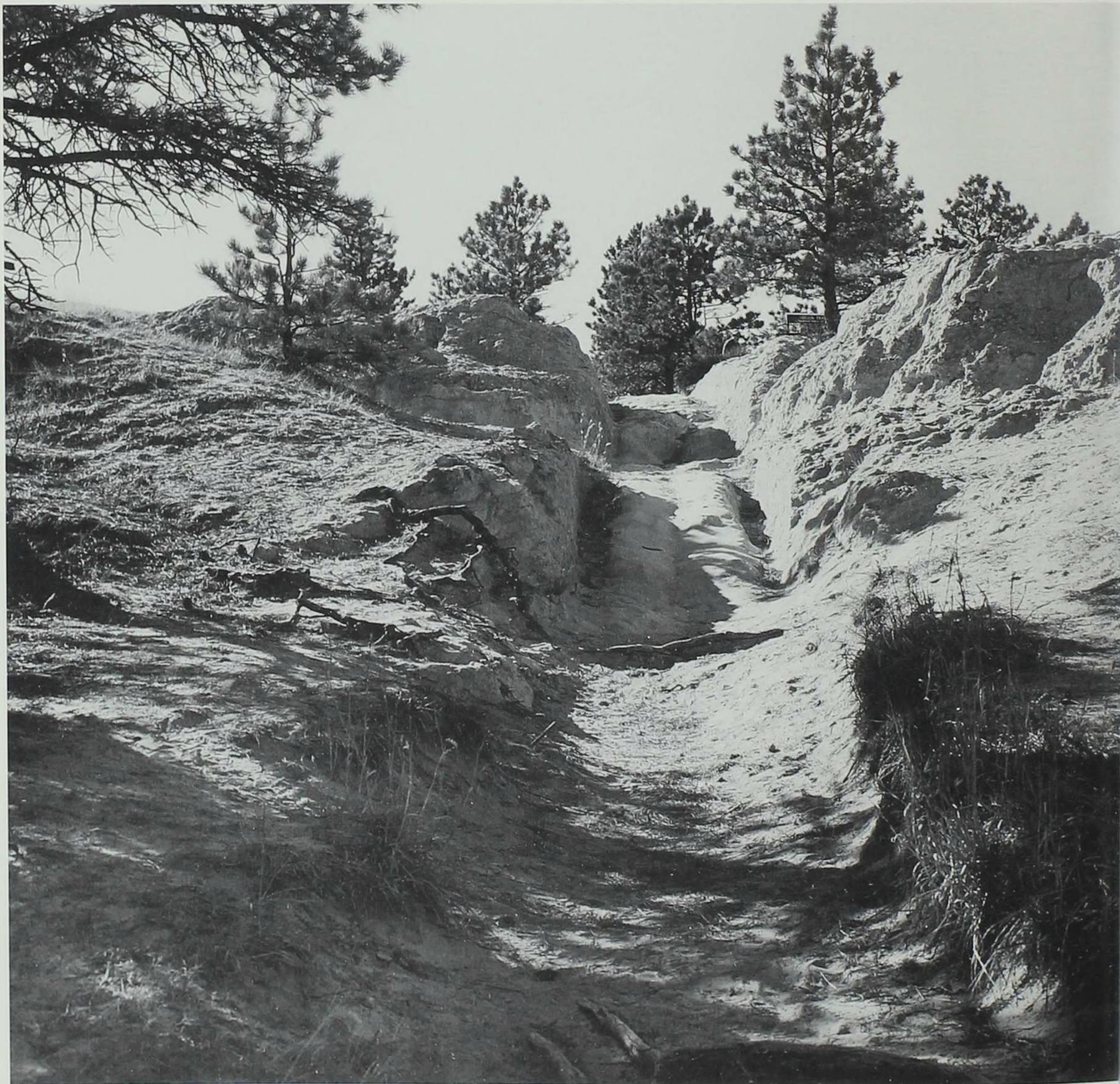
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Deep ruts in sandstone, near Guernsey, Wyoming.

These ruts show the typical approach to ascending a hill—straight up the fall line. Because the trail was not graded, wagons often tipped over if the drivers attempted to climb hills gently along a contour line. If that kind of ascent was unavoidable, however, ropes were connected to the uphill side of the wagon. Several people walked along the wagon, holding the ropes to keep the wagon as vertical as possible. The usual reason for climbing a hill like this would be to get across a ridge to the flattest route possible. River bottoms were used for campsites because of their proximity to grass and water, but the trail was usually well away from the banks. Water levels could change considerably during a migration season, wiping out sections of trail during high water.



Emigrant grave and power plant, Douglas County, Wyoming.

A. H. Unthank is believed to have died of cholera or dysentery and was buried here. The date on the headstone reads July 2, 1850. One week earlier he had carved his name on nearby Register Cliff, where it is still visible.

There was a general outbreak of cholera in the United States about this time, and it was intensified on the trail because of unsanitary water and water holes used by both humans and animals. Cholera could strike quickly. A person might show the first symptoms in the morning and be dead by nightfall.

Most emigrants were not buried with this much care or with a carved headstone and footstone. A more typical grave was a shallow trench about 18 inches deep, covered with a single layer of random rocks and marked with a wooden stake or cross. Another common technique was to bury the dead on the trail without a rock covering, and to then drive wagons over the site. This confused the scent for coyotes and wolves, and erased signs of digging for grave robbers after the clothing. This had mixed success; diaries comment on seeing scattered bones and freshly opened graves along the trail.

The county road visible here is on top of the trail.





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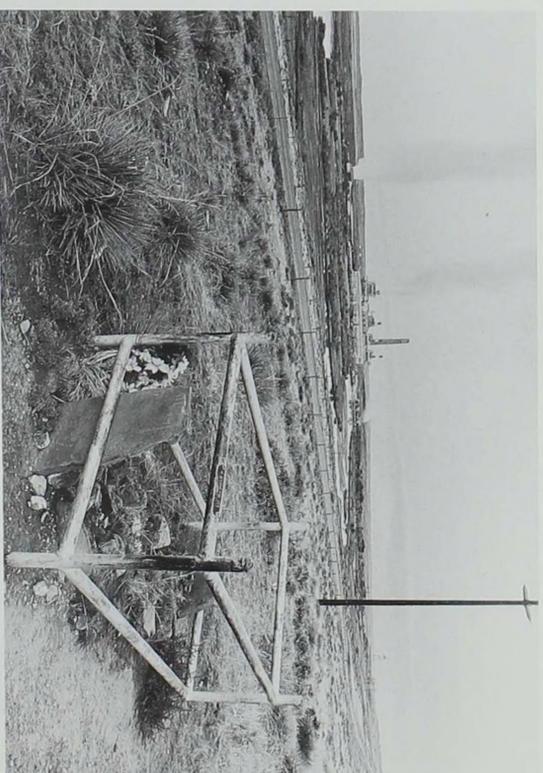
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View from the top of Independence Rock, Wyoming. "Milo J. Ayer, age 29, 1849" graffiti.

Independence Rock is a turtle-shaped granite rock, 200 feet high and a quarter-mile long. It looms above a high arid region, flat until this point. Its name reflects its importance as a milestone along the trail. If the rock was reached by the Fourth of July, emigrants knew they were on schedule to arrive in California before the Sierra snows began. The entire surface of the rock is peppered with graffiti, still visible today. Because the trail joined the Sweetwater River here, this was a major campsite, giving emigrants ample time to add their initials to Independence Rock.







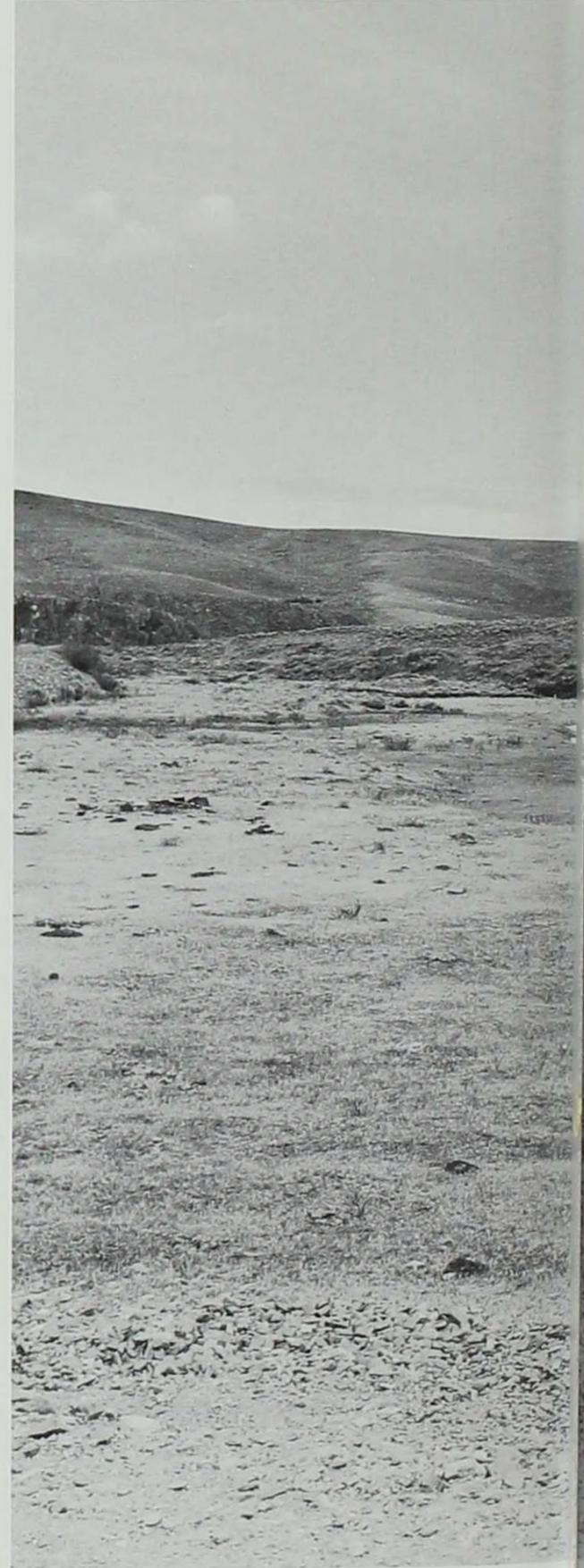
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Devil's Gate, Natrona County, Wyoming.

Devil's Gate is just eight miles from Independence Rock. The Sweetwater River cuts through this gorge, but the trail took a short detour around it. Apparently almost all who passed took the brief walk off the trail to peer into the 500-foot-deep gap. The area has several graves, and emigrant names are cut into the rocks. Diaries frequently mention this site.

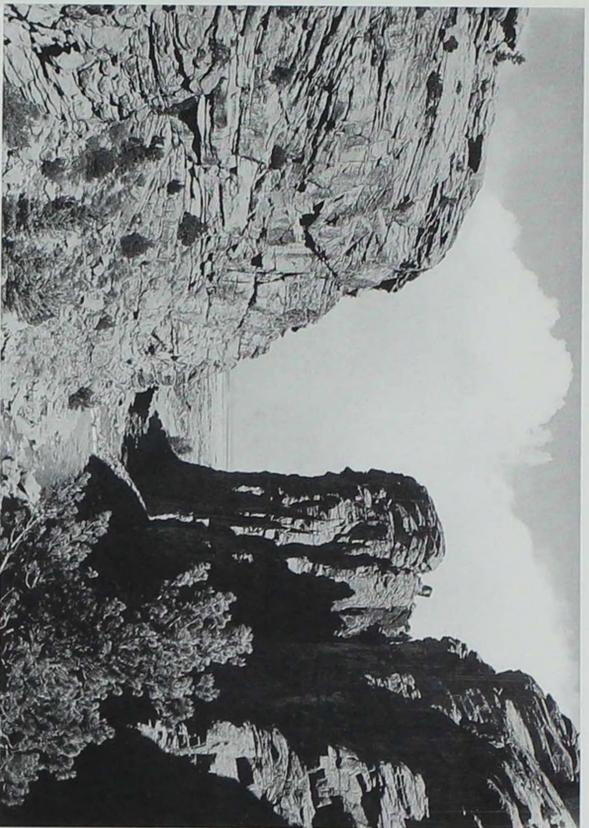




Handcart disaster site, Rock Creek crossing, Wyoming.

On this peaceful creek bank, 67 members of the James G. Willie Company froze to death when heavy snows started in October 1856. Over the captain's objections, this handcart company of some 400 emigrants had decided to begin their trip despite a late start.

Handcarts were used by the second major wave of Mormon migration—some 3,000 European converts from 1856 through 1860. In general, the Mormon migration was highly organized, from the recruiting efforts in the East and Europe, to the relay teams in Salt Lake that brought supplies to companies on the trail. In contrast, California and Oregon travelers were left to their own resources and had about twice the distance to go.



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South Pass summit, Continental Divide, Lincoln County, Wyoming.

South Pass, the Continental Divide on the trail in Wyoming, was discovered in 1812 by trappers heading east from Astoria, Oregon. The land is almost flat here, and the original trail was five or six ruts wide. The large marker in the foreground was carved and placed by Ezra Meeker in 1906. He had traveled west as an emigrant 56 years earlier and made this return trip with a mule-drawn wagon to promote and popularize the trail. The distant marker, placed in 1916, reads, "Narcissa Prentiss Whitman, Elizabeth Spalding. First white women to cross this pass, July 4, 1836." They were in a missionary party heading to Oregon.



Excauation of Mormon wall, Fort Bridger, Wyoming.

After crossing South Pass summit of the Continental Divide, the Mormon trail headed south to Fort Bridger. The fort began as a trading post; in 1855 the Saints purchased it, and it became an important defense and resupply station for them. The dry cobblestone strip in the foreground is part of a defensive wall, all that remains of the 1850s fort.



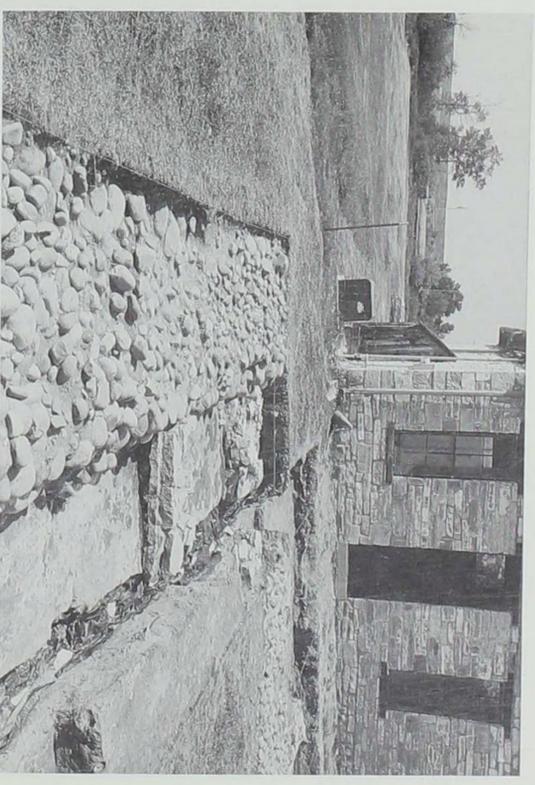
Rock arrow and trail, west of Fort Bridger.

This unusual rock formation in the shape of an arrow and sunk into the soil (lower right) was recently discovered on the early section of the trail leaving Fort Bridger. Pointing west and just to the right of the trail, it could have been created by Mormons, other emigrant parties, the U.S. military, or Native Americans. No mention of it has yet been found in emigrant diaries.



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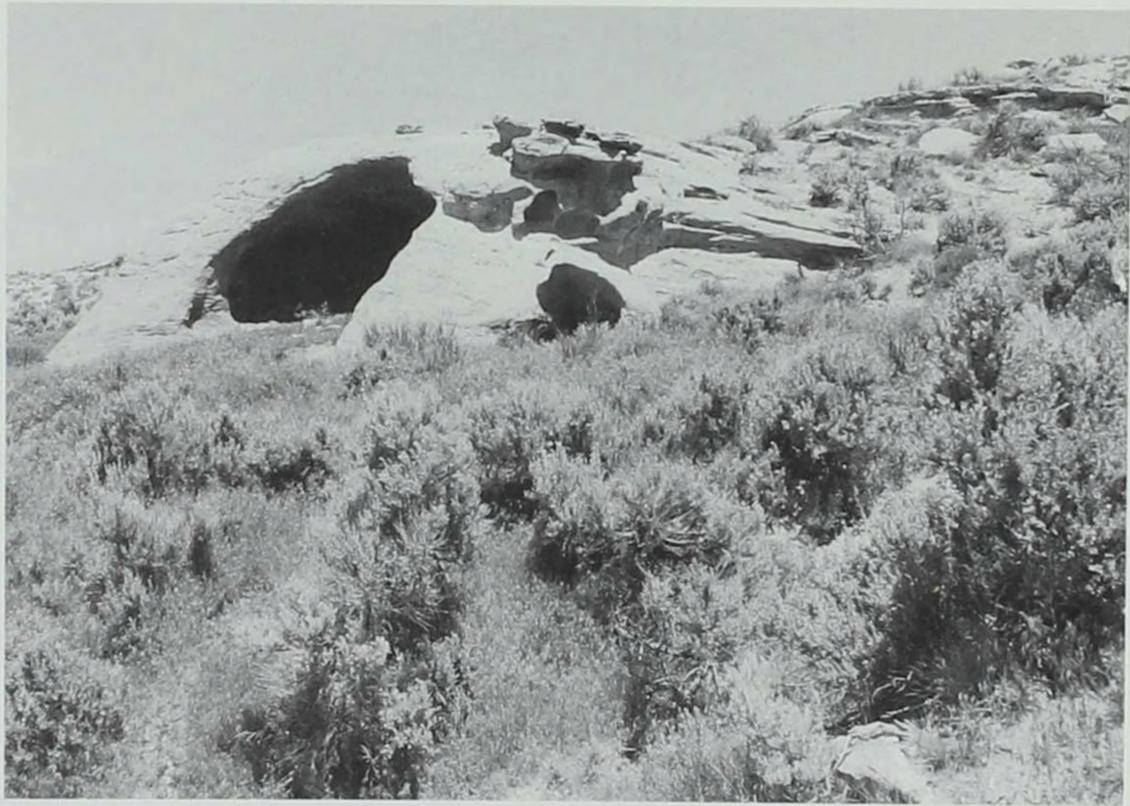
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Trail through The Needles on Coyote Creek, Uinta County, Wyoming.

About 50 miles west of Fort Bridger, The Needles takes its name from the unusual rock formations in an otherwise treeless and featureless landscape. In Mormon history this site was named "Sick Camp" after Brigham Young became ill here on July 12, 1847, and had to delay travel.

This section of trail had been opened the year before as the infamous "Hastings Cutoff" to California. The shortcut turned out to be a "long cut" and cost the Donner-Reed Party two extra months of travel and many lives. Practical as far as the Great Salt Lake, the trail became the main Mormon route in the area.



Cache Cave, Summit County, Utah.

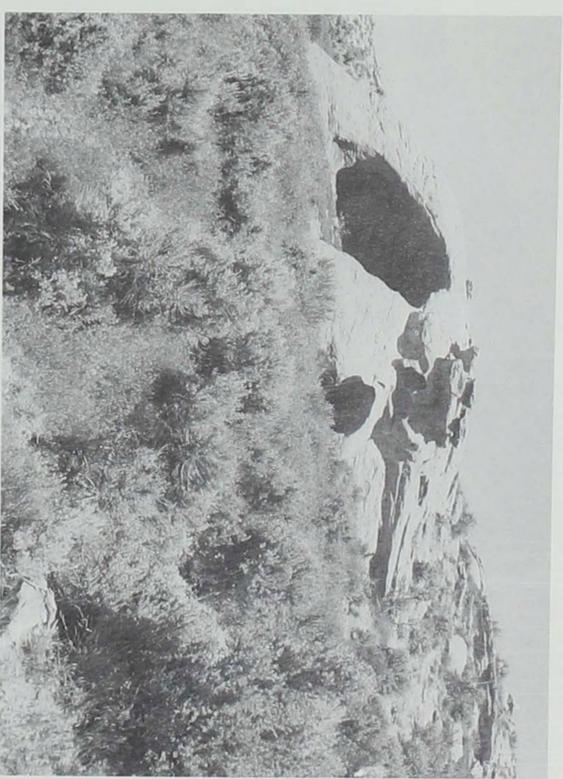
A unique feature on the flat terrain of western trails, this cave was named after the practice of early trappers to cache their extra supplies. In 1847 Mormon emigrants passed by; several noted it in their journals. Carved in and around the cave are 150 names dating from the 1820s to the 1870s, and the cliffs nearby bear many more names, including members of Brigham Young's Pioneer Company.



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Cache Cave, Summit County, Utah.

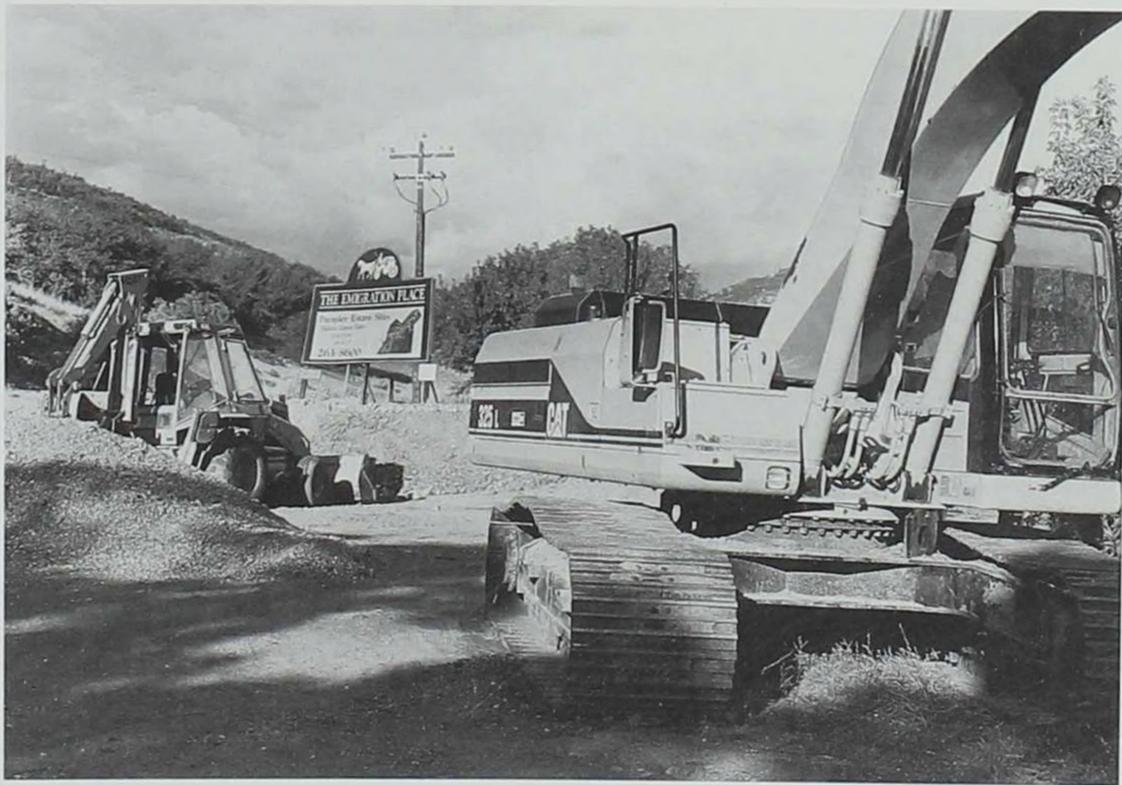
A unique feature on the flat terrain of western trails, this cave was named after the practice of early trappers to cache their extra supplies. In 1847 Mormon emigrants passed by; several noted it in their journals. Carved in and around the cave are 150 names dating from the 1820s to the 1870s, and the cliffs nearby bear many more names, including members of Brigham Young's Pioneer Company.



Mormon breastwork above Interstate 80, Echo Canyon, Utah.

In this "narrows" section of Echo Canyon, Mormons placed this pile of rocks (in foreground) as they prepared for a federal invasion in 1857. A similar breastwork is located on the opposite side of the canyon. The Mormons also planned to dam up the small creek in the canyon to create a lake, reasoning that federal troops could be stopped easily and fired upon from this position.

Non-Mormons had stirred up the conflict through their false reports of a Mormon revolt against U.S. law. Outright bloodshed was averted, but the federal government did send troops that occupied the Salt Lake basin.



Construction site, Emigration Canyon, Utah.

Emigration Canyon was the final down slope into the Great Salt Lake Valley. This is near where Brigham Young is said to have declared, "This is the place." The mouth of this canyon is where Charles Savage photographed emigrant wagon trains nearing the Great Salt Lake.

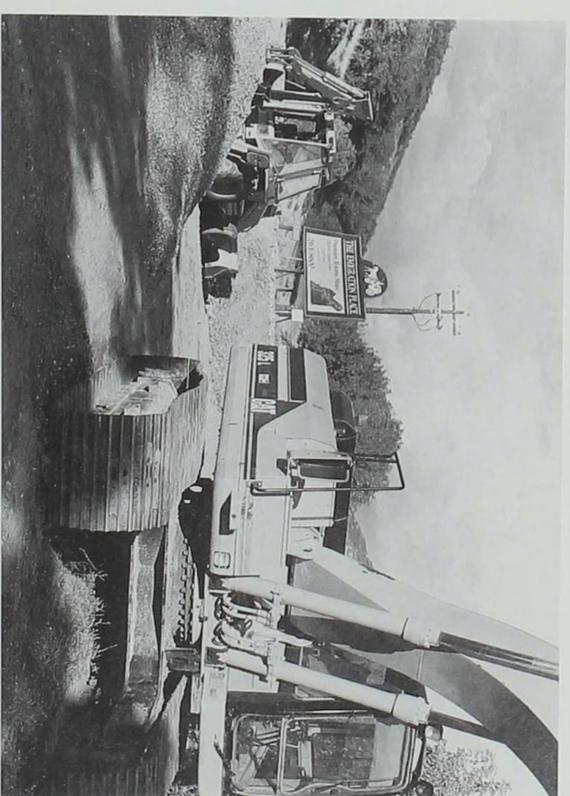
Here under construction, "The Emigration Place" advertised on the sign is among many new developments built on top of the Mormon Trail in its final five miles.



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Mormon Temple and fountain, Salt Lake City, Utah.

For members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a temple is not a public place for worship, but an expression of sacred space for giving sacred ordinances and endowments. The special nature of a temple indicates why the Saints completed the Nauvoo Temple, at a great cost of time, labor, materials, and money, even while knowing they would abandon the site within a year.

Selection of the site for the Salt Lake City temple in 1847 was one of the first acts of Brigham Young after reaching the valley. Construction began in 1853. After 40 years, again with tremendous expenditures in the face of adversity, the temple was dedicated. Although several architects were involved in the design, many of the main features were from the direct orders of Brigham Young.

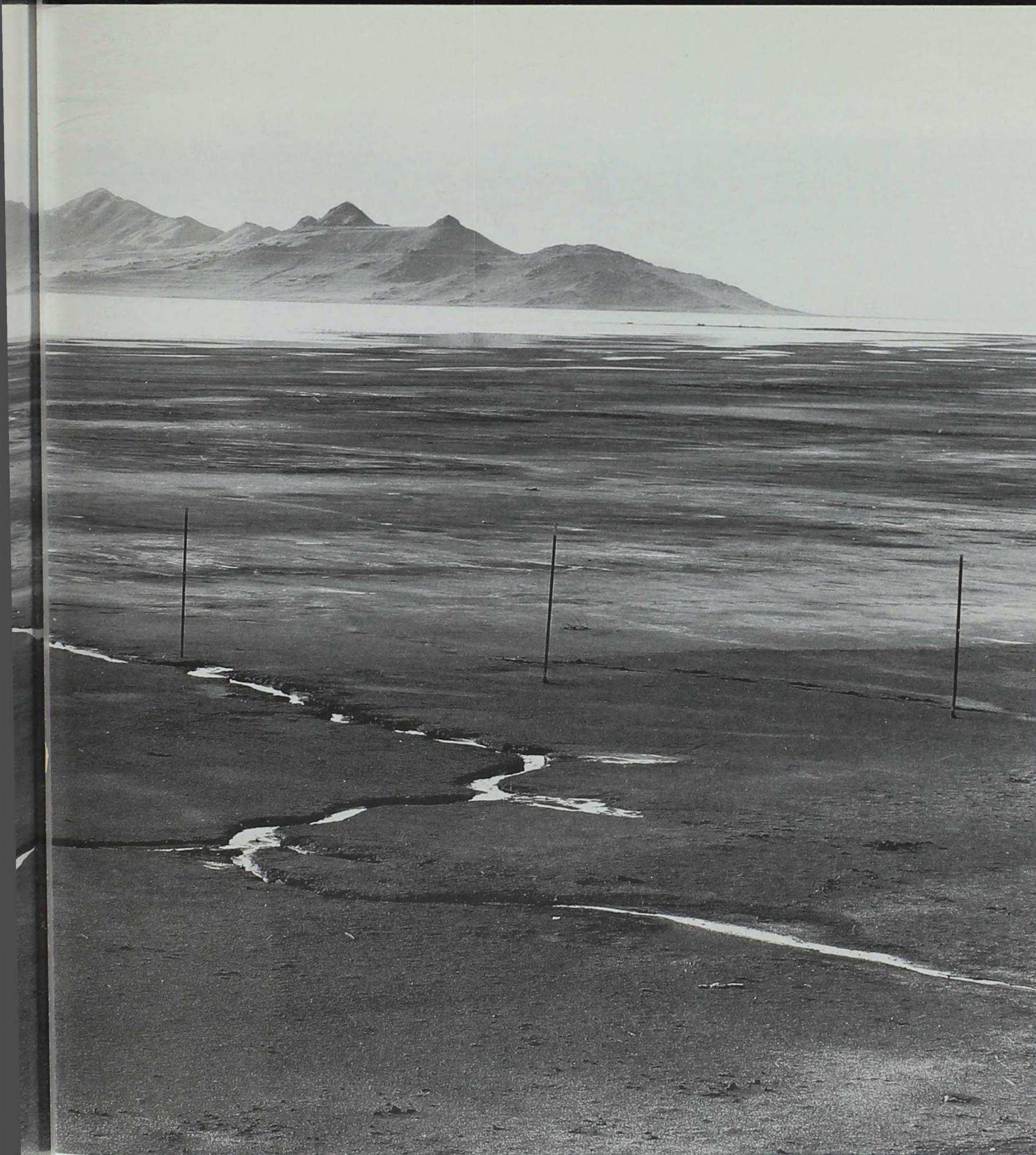
NOTE ON SOURCES

Several guide books provide ample information on locating and following the trail in a standard automobile; see William E. Hill, *The Mormon Trail, Yesterday and Today* (Utah State University Press, 1996); Greg Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited* (Patrice Press, 1988); and Peter H. Delafosse, ed., *Trails of the Pioneers, a Guide to Utah's Emigrant Trails* (Utah State University, 1994). For reaching sites located on private land, assistance was provided by members of the Crossroads Chapter of the Oregon-California Trails Association.

For more on Iowa trail sites and a self-guiding tour brochure, contact the Iowa Mormon Trails Association, Delores Birkland, president (PO Box 174, Moravia, Iowa 52571, phone 515-724-3777). See also Susan Easton Black and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Iowa Mormon Trail: Legacy of Faith and Courage* (Orem, Utah: Helix Publishing, 1997); and John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979, 1993). See also Summer 1996 *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*.

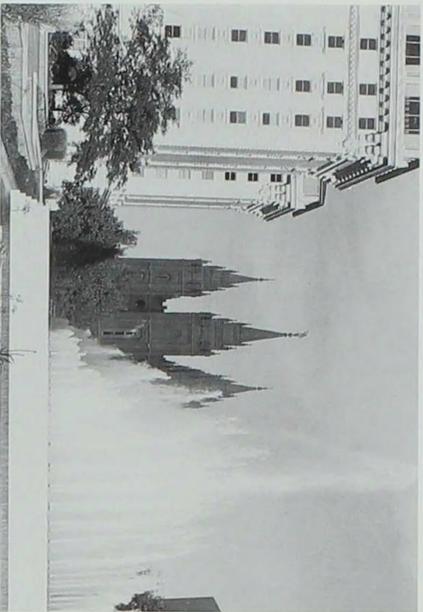


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View of Great Salt Lake and Antelope Island, looking west.

The Great Salt Lake Valley signified the end of the trail for some 70,000 Latter-day Saints who traveled along the Mormon Trail from 1846 to 1869. The enormous lake moderates the temperatures of an otherwise very hot region of the West. Westerly winds cross the lake, cool, and then graze Salt Lake City. From the Wasatch Mountains, several substantial rivers descend into the valley, bringing fresh water. With time, the Wasatch range also became a back stop and trap for the smog created by that same city. Nevertheless, today—as 150 years ago—this unusual congruence of natural resources makes an ideal location for a city in an otherwise hostile land. ❖



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