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The Mormon Trail of 1846

The trek of the Mormons from Nauvoo on the Mississippi to the valley of the Great Salt Lake, at that time a part of Mexico, is one of the most colorful episodes in the history of the American frontier. Measured in terms of distance traveled and the number of individuals involved, it eclipses the heyday of mule-skinning on the fabulous Santa Fé Trail. For sheer drama it rivals the steady flow of empire-builders plodding westward along the Oregon Trail to the Pacific Northwest. Only the trail of the indomitable Forty-niners can be said to surpass it in point of daring, hardships suffered, and mass movement of pioneers.

Since the first leg of the journey ran across southern Iowa, and since the Mormons established their winter quarters on the west bank of the Big Muddy in the fall of 1846, the highlights of the exodus of these "Children of God" forms an important chapter in that "Year of Decision" which saw Iowa admitted as a state on December 28th.

Although Joseph Smith is said to have seen his first vision as early as 1820, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (commonly called Mormons), was not organized until April 6, 1830, at Fayette, New York. The Mormons, from their very inception, met with rebuff and persecution wherever they formed a settlement, partly because of their claim that they alone were the chosen people. In 1831 they transferred their headquarters to Kirtland, Ohio, where they reared a temple to their God. In 1833 (at the very time Iowa pioneers were staking out their first claims in the Black Hawk Purchase) the Mormons were attempting to settle at Independence, Missouri, where, according to their church teaching, the New Jerusalem was eventually to be built. Unfortunately, the Missourians became so bitter against these "Saints" who opposed slavery and were unusually effective proselyters, that the Mormons withdrew to Hancock County, Illinois. There, on May 9, 1839, Dr. Isaac Galland, a convert to the new faith, had sold to Joseph Smith a large tract of land which included the straggling village of Commerce with some twenty houses.

When the Mormons arrived at Commerce in 1839 they found themselves in possession of a townsite and a good Mississippi steamboat landing located at the head of the Des Moines Rapids opposite Montrose, Iowa. The following year they renamed the town Nauvoo, a Hebraic word

signifying fair, or very beautiful. By 1844 Nauvoo contained at least 12,000 inhabitants and was the "most flourishing city" in Illinois, surpassing Chicago in population. In 1841 the Latter-Day Saints had begun construction of a beautiful temple which cost a million dollars when completed in 1846.

Meanwhile the Gentiles of the surrounding country looked with envy and suspicion on the growing wealth and power of the Mormons. They were disturbed by the persistent rumors concerning the practice of polygamy and they resented the assumption of the Mormon hierarchy that their faith was to become supreme. The non-Mormon population also resented and feared the growing political strength of the Mormons which was emphasized by Joseph Smith's announcement of his intention to become a candidate for the Presidency. Moreover the legislature of Illinois had authorized the enlistment of a "Mormon Legion," a military unit entirely under the control of the Mormon Church.

Armed forces stalked the countryside and acts of violence soon became commonplace. The tense situation finally culminated in the murder of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum by an angry mob on June 27, 1844 while they were awaiting trial in a Carthage jail.

Brigham Young, a dynamic leader and brilliant organizer, succeeded Joseph Smith as head of the

church, and managed to restore order for a time. But hostilities soon broke out again and in the fall of 1845 Brigham Young appealed to the Governor of Illinois for protection, promising that the Saints would leave Nauvoo "so soon as grass would grow and water run" the following spring.

The magnitude of Brigham Young's proposed exodus can be readily demonstrated. Parley P. Pratt estimated that the average outfit for a family of five should include one good wagon, three sheep, one thousand pounds of flour, twenty pounds of sugar, one rifle and ammunition, a tent and tent-poles, from ten to twenty pounds of seed to a family, from twenty-five to one hundred pounds of tools for farming, bedding, cooking utensils, and a few other items. The cost was estimated at about \$250.

An unusually mild winter led to great optimism, and the first family of Mormons crossed the Mississippi on February 4, 1846. Two days later the George Miller family was ferried across with six wagons. In a few days the work of transporting the Saints across the Mississippi was going on day and night. A few accidents occurred, such as the sinking of one ferryboat, but in general the Mormons were fortunate in getting over safely. A camp was formed on the west bank of the river opposite Nauvoo and when Brigham Young and the twelve apostles crossed on February 15th the entire contingent traveled inland nine miles and

established their first "Camp of Israel" on Sugar Creek in Lee County. Every halting place of the president and his twelve apostles was called a "Camp of Israel" and fifteen of these were established across southern Iowa during the Mormon trek of 1846.

The Mormons were no strangers to the Iowa pioneers. In 1839 they had bought for their church a part of the town of Keokuk and the whole of the townsite known as Nashville. Mormons had also acquired a part of the town of Montrose, together with some thirty thousand acres of land in the Half-breed Tract. In a letter dated January 4, 1840, Governor Robert Lucas had described the one hundred Mormon refugees who had fled to Iowa to escape the wrath of the Missourians as "industrious, inoffensive, and worthy citizens."

Unfortunately this high opinion was destined to change in Lee County, for long before the Mormon exodus began in 1846 the Danite Band had become *persona non grata* to most of the pioneers in southeastern Iowa. Larceny, horsestealing, counterfeiting, assault, and several murders, including that of Colonel George Davenport, were attributed to Mormons or to persons harbored by the Mormons. It is not surprising, therefore, that Brigham Young should feel it necessary to petition Governor James Clarke on February 28th, imploring protection for the Saints while journey-

ing through the Territory of Iowa to a land of exile, or while remaining in Iowa "working for an outfit, or raising a crop on rented or unclaimed land, in case necessity should force any of them to do so."

No sooner had Brigham Young and his twelve apostles arrived on the west bank of the Mississippi on February 15th than a drastic change occurred in the weather. Snow began to fall, the thermometer plummeted to 20° below zero, and the Mormons suffered intensely because of improper clothing and shelter. Although they had been warned to provide themselves with sufficient food for themselves and their stock, many of those encamped on Sugar Creek had failed to do so. Fortunately some were able to buy the surplus food and fodder of Lee County settlers; others obtained funds with which to replenish their store by cutting timber and husking corn for the Iowa pioneers.

It was not until Sunday, March 1st, that the Mormons were able to break their camp on Sugar Creek and continue their journey. After traveling five miles in a northwesterly direction, they halted, scraped away the snow, and pitched their tents upon the frozen ground. Large fires were built and before the Mormons retired to their beds on the frozen earth prayers were offered to their Creator.

The following day Apostle Orson Pratt re-

corded that the detachment moved on over ground so rough and bad that some of the wagons were broken. In the evening the travelers encamped on the east bank of the Des Moines River, four miles below the little village of Farmington, and probably about midway between Croton and the northern boundary of the Half-breed Tract. On March 3rd the Mormons followed the general course of the Des Moines River for eight miles and pitched their camp on a muddy site in the vicinity of present-day Bonaparte. The following day they remained in camp because of the mud, spending their time mending broken harnesses and repairing their wagons. At the "earnest solicitations" of the citizens of Farmington, the band of musicians from the Mormon camp returned to that community and gave a concert.

On March 5th most of the people in the camp forded the river at Bonaparte's Mills. The roads in many places were almost impassable on account of the mud. According to Orson Pratt some teams were unable to draw their loads in bad places without help and many wagons were broken. A portion of the group was forced to stop on account of the roads while the others proceeded on about twelve miles to Indian Creek, encamping a few miles south of the site of present-day Keosauqua.

Two days later a detachment, including Orson Pratt, moved about twelve miles westward and encamped on the Fox River, probably just west of

where it crosses the Davis County line. The main body of Mormons encamped about three miles to the east. Here the Mormons halted two or three days, at a place called Richardson's Point, and here they established a permanent Camp of Israel.

On March 10th they were once more on the move, toiling ten miles over "exceedingly bad" roads to the center of Davis County near Bloomfield. "We are very much scattered at the present. Many are engaging work in the thinly scattered settlements, to obtain food both for themselves and their animals. It was found necessary to exchange our horses for oxen, as the latter would endure the journey much better than horses. Many have already exchanged."

An incident which is recorded as having occurred near Richardson's Point reveals the simple faith of the Saints and the sorry condition of their draft animals. A horse was "violently" attacked by some disease and lay as if dead. The Saints believed in healing by the "laying on of hands," but they questioned the propriety of using this method in the case of an animal. However, some one quoted the Prophet Joel as having said that "in the last days the Lord would pour out His spirit on all flesh." This quieted their scruples and six men accordingly placed their hands on the horse, "prayed for his recovery," and commanded the evil spirit to depart. The horse "rolled over twice, sprang to his feet, and was soon well."

On Friday, March 20th, the Mormons were once more on their way, starting out with the temperature ten degrees below freezing, and making ten miles before pitching their tents in western Davis County. The next day they traveled about twenty miles and encamped on the west bank of the Chariton River, pitching their second permanent camp in a large body of timber not far from Centerville. Thus far they had traveled approximately ninety-four miles, averaging a little over three miles per day after leaving Sugar Creek.

Nor were their troubles over! On Sunday and Monday, March 22nd and 23rd, Orson Pratt recorded in his journal the movement of the pioneer units to the banks of Shoal or Locust Creek in southeastern Wayne County, where another permanent camp was located.

"The day is rainy and unpleasant. Moved only seven miles. The next day went through the rain and deep mud, about six miles, and encamped upon the west branch of Shoal Creek. The heavy rains had rendered the prairies impassable; and our several camps were very much separated from each other. We were compelled to remain as we were for some two or three weeks, during which time our animals were fed upon the limbs and bark of trees, for the grass had not yet started, and we were a number of miles from any inhabited country, and therefore, it was very inconvenient to send for grain. The heavy rains and snows, to-

gether with frosty nights, rendered our situation very uncomfortable. Our camps were now more perfectly organized, and captains were appointed over hundreds, over fifties, and over tens, and over all these, a President and Counsellors, together with other necessary officers. Game is now quite plentiful. Our hunters bring into camp more or less deer, wild turkies, and prairie hens every day." Nine days later, on March 31st, clear weather enabled Elder Pratt to record the position of their camp on Shoal Creek — $40^{\circ} 40' 7''$ north latitude and $90^{\circ} 59' 50''$ west longitude.

During such scenes of adversity the Mormons did not lose faith in their God. On Sunday, April 5th, Orson Pratt observed that a portion of the camp met together to offer a sacrament to the Most High. The next morning was April 6th, a significant day in the Mormon church calendar, and the Saints did not fail to observe it. According to Orson Pratt: "This morning, at the usual hour of prayer, we bowed before the Lord with thankful hearts, it being just 16 years since the organization of the Church, and we were truly grateful for the many manifestations of the goodness of God towards us as a people. The weather is still wet and rainy. Nine or ten wagons, with four yoke of oxen each, have started this morning for the settlements to obtain corn. In the evening we were visited by a heavy thunderstorm, accompanied by a high wind and hail. Most of

the tents which were pitched upon high ground were blown down, and the inmates exposed to the fury of the storm. The water in Shoal Creek arose in a very few minutes several feet in height, and threatened to overflow its banks, and disturb our tents." To add to their misery, most of the wagons that had been sent to the settlements returned empty, and the Mormons found it difficult to sustain their teams, even though the oxen were not working.

It was not until Thursday, April 9th, after spending sixteen days encamped in the mud and cold of Shoal Creek, that the Mormons determined to move on slowly. After a tortuous day's journey Orson Pratt ruefully recorded:

"With great exertion a part of the camp were enabled to get about six miles, while others were stuck fast in the deep mud. We encamped at a point of timber about sunset, after being drenched several hours in rain. The mud and water in and around our tents were ankle deep, and the rain still continued to pour down without any cessation. We were obliged to cut brush and limbs of trees, and throw them upon the ground in our tents, to keep our beds from sinking in the mire. Those who were unable to reach the timber, suffered much, on account of cold, having no fuel for fires. Our animals were turned loose to look out for themselves; the bark and limbs of trees were their principal food."

From their camp on Shoal Creek the route of the Mormons veered in a northwesterly direction. On April 14th some scanty feed began to make its appearance on the wettest portions of the prairie but it was still too cold for the grass to grow well. On April 19th they were able to hold their first outdoor meeting since they left Nauvoo. On April 24th Elder Orson Pratt recorded:

"Yesterday we traveled about eight miles, to-day, six miles. We came to a place which we named Garden Grove. At this point we determined to form a small settlement and open farms for the benefit of the poor, and such as were unable at present to pursue their journey further, and also for the benefit of the poor who were yet behind."

Garden Grove was one of the most important Camps of Israel established by the Mormons in Iowa. Here, on the banks of the Grand River, Brigham Young proposed to fence in a large field, build a number of log cabins, plow some land, and put in a spring crop. He also proposed to select certain men and families to take care of the improvements while the rest of the camp proceeded westward.

On April 27th, at the "sound of the horn," the emigrants gathered to organize for labor. The council had found 359 laboring men in camp, besides trading commissaries and herdsman. From these, 100 were chosen to fell trees, split them into

rails and make zig-zag fences. Ten were appointed to build fences, forty-eight to build houses, twelve to dig wells, ten to build bridges, and the remainder to clear and plow the land, and plant crops. "There was no room for idlers there," one authority declared. "The camp was like a hive of bees, every one was busy. And withal the people felt well and were happy."

At one of the outdoor meetings Brigham Young said: "We have set out to find a land and a resting place, where we can serve the Lord in peace. We will leave some here, because they cannot go further at present. They can stay here and recruit, and by and by pack up and come on, while we go a little further and lengthen out the cords and build a few more Stakes." By the month of May, hunger and personal responsibility had reduced President Young so greatly in flesh that a tight fitting coat in which he started from Nauvoo "lapped over twelve inches!"

On May 11th Brigham Young and many of the Mormons left Garden Grove and continued their northwesterly trek with their long wagon trains. They reached the middle fork of the Grand River on May 18th and found Parley P. Pratt encamped there. On a hill nearby Pratt had found "a mass of grey granite, which had the appearance of an ancient altar, the parts of which had fallen apart in various directions as though separated by fire." This was considered the "more remarkable" since

there was no rock in that area and Pratt accordingly had called the place Mount Pisgah. One of the leading Camps of Israel in Iowa was located near Mount Pisgah in what is now Union County. Some eight hundred burials at this camp stand as a mute reminder of the sojourn and suffering of the Mormons. A camp was maintained here until 1852.

Towards the end of May "most of the Twelve, with large companies, proceeded in a westerly direction" into present-day Adair County whence they journeyed westward along a route approximately that of State Highway 92 between Greenfield and Council Bluffs. In this area the Potawatomi Indians still lingered, but they were friendly and helpful.

Brigham Young left Mount Pisgah on June 2nd, reaching the Missouri River within the present limits of Council Bluffs twelve days later. It had taken five long months to make the 300-mile journey (according to modern highway measurements), an easy eight-hour drive on the paved roads of 1956. To the Mormons encamped on the banks of the Missouri River came news of the dedication of the Temple at Nauvoo overlooking the Mississippi.

At Miller's Hollow, later Kaneshville, and now Council Bluffs, the Mormons built a ferry boat which was launched on June 29th. Before the last Mormons evacuated Nauvoo on September 17th,

the pioneer groups were being ferried across to their main encampment, which became known as Winter Quarters, a point located on the northern outskirts of modern Omaha. In April of 1847, the first company of 143 men, 3 women, and 2 children, started west from Winter Quarters under the leadership of Brigham Young. After traveling a thousand miles over the trackless Nebraska plain and rugged Wyoming mountains they entered the valley of the Great Salt Lake through Emigration Canyon on July 24, 1847, a day that has ever since been observed as Pioneer Day in Utah. A year later this valley became part of the territory of the United States.

The exodus of the Mormons across southern Iowa was of lasting significance to the Hawkeye State. In July of 1846 fifteen thousand Mormons were said to be encamped or toiling westward along the Iowa trails, with 3,000 wagons, 30,000 head of cattle, horses, and mules, and a vast number of sheep. The trails they left were noted by surveyors later on, just as were the streams, creeks, woods, and other physical landmarks. Garden Grove, Mount Pisgah, and Lamoni are but a few of the modern reminders of this great trek. The Mormon trail-blazers of 1846 hold the honor of marking the first great route across Iowa from the Mississippi to the Missouri.

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