

## The Handcart Expeditions: 1856

During the summer of 1856 thirteen hundred Mormon converts from the British Isles and European countries arrived at Iowa City, then the western terminus of the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad. Many were wards of the Perpetual Emigration Fund Company which had been organized to assist those unable to pay for their transportation, the immigrants signing contracts to work for the church until the full amount was refunded.

At this time the wave of converts bound for Utah had become so great the Mormon church decided it was impossible to provide wagons and oxen to transport all the needy immigrants from Iowa City to Salt Lake City, although the total cost of bringing one of these poor converts from Europe to Utah was only about sixty dollars. Accordingly, in 1855, Brigham Young evolved the plan of having these hundreds of proselytes journey from Iowa City to Salt Lake City on foot. "The Lord, through his prophet, says of the poor, 'Let them come on foot, with hand-carts or wheelbarrows; let them gird up their loins, and walk through, and nothing shall hinder them.'" To the leader of the Liverpool converts Young wrote:

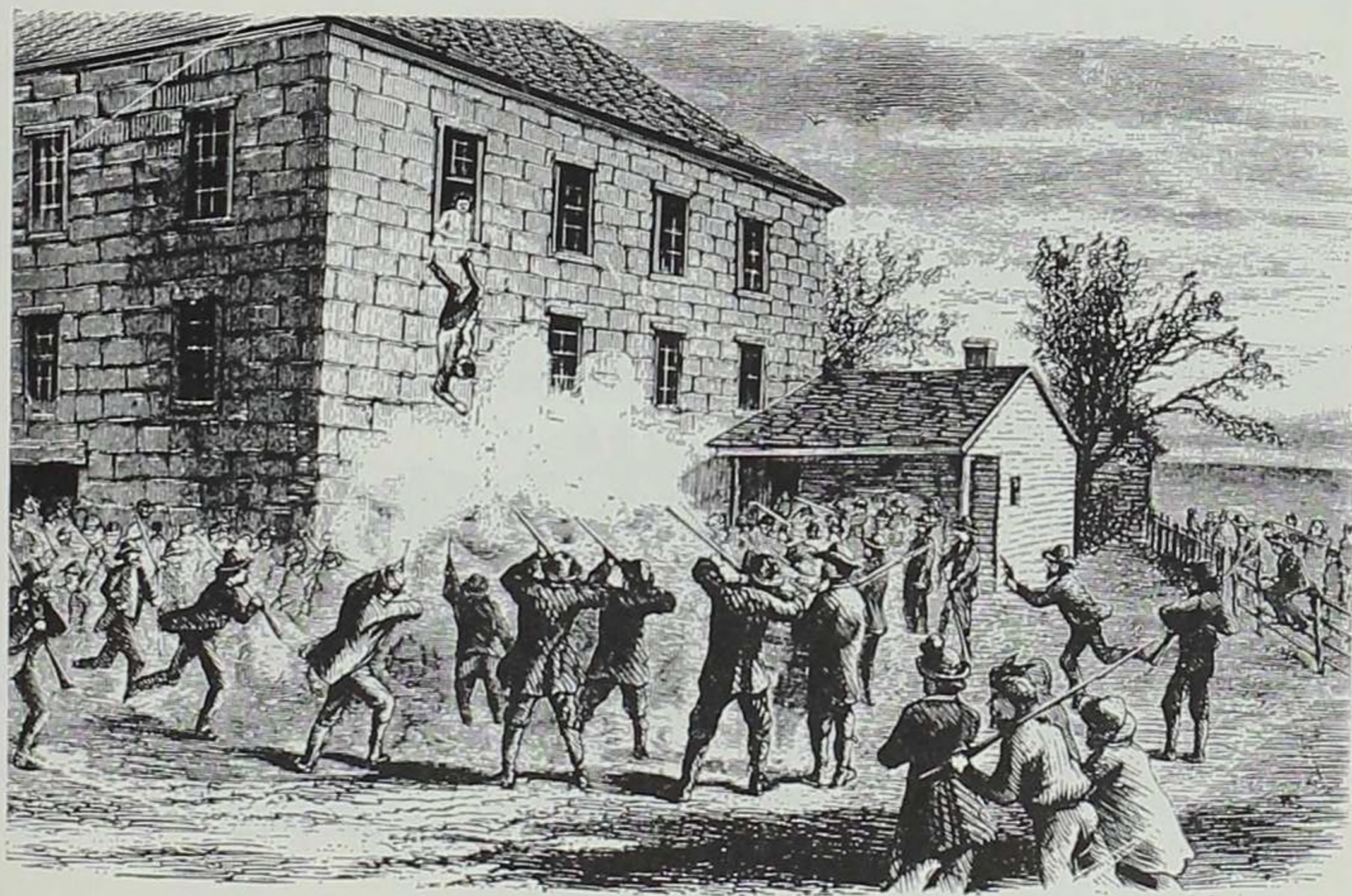




GENERAL JOSEPH SMITH  
Founder of the Church of Jesus  
Christ of Latter-Day Saints



BRIGHAM YOUNG  
"Dynamic leader and  
brilliant organizer"

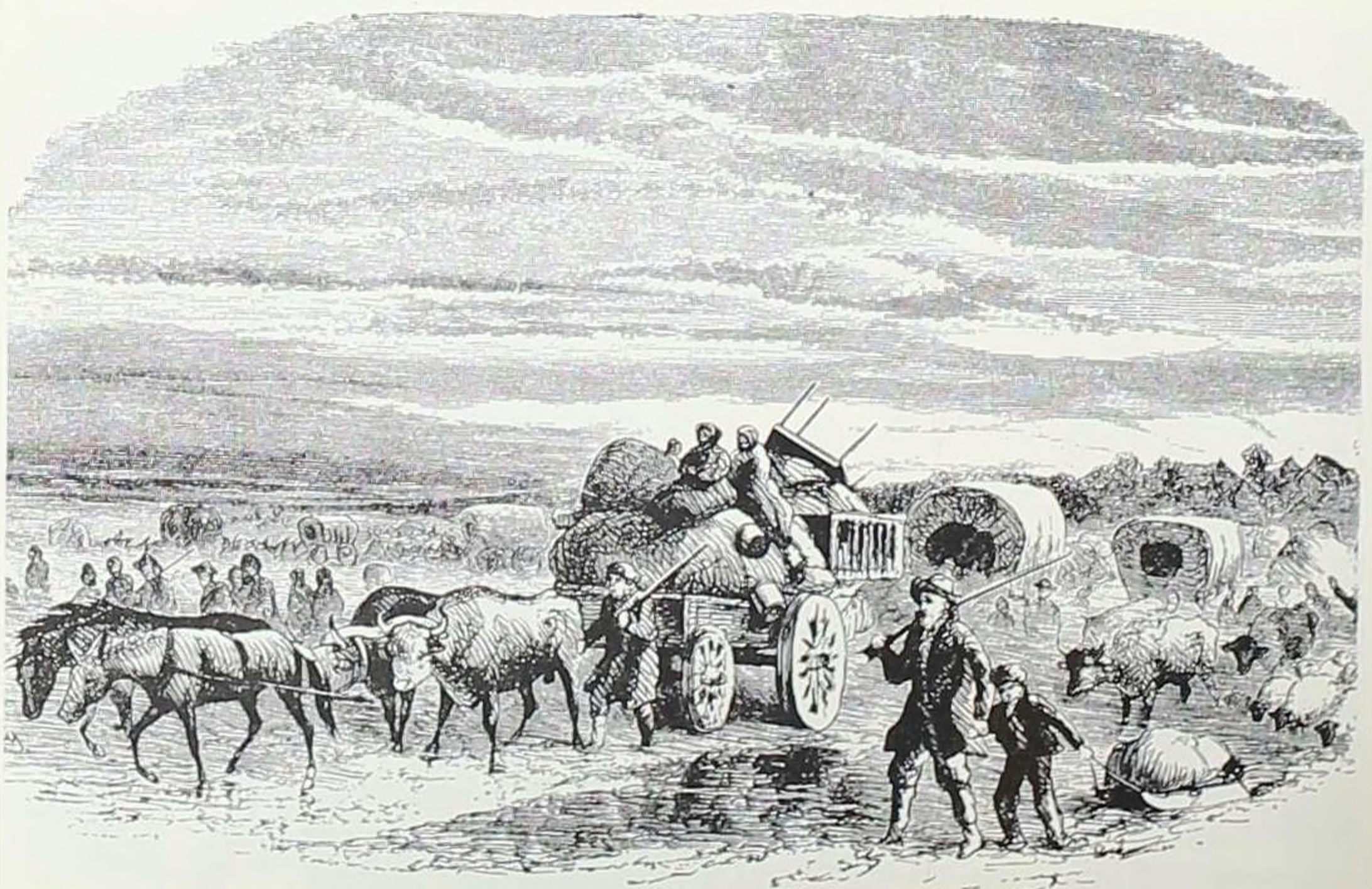


The Assassination of Joseph Smith by a Mob at Carthage, Ill., June 27, 1844





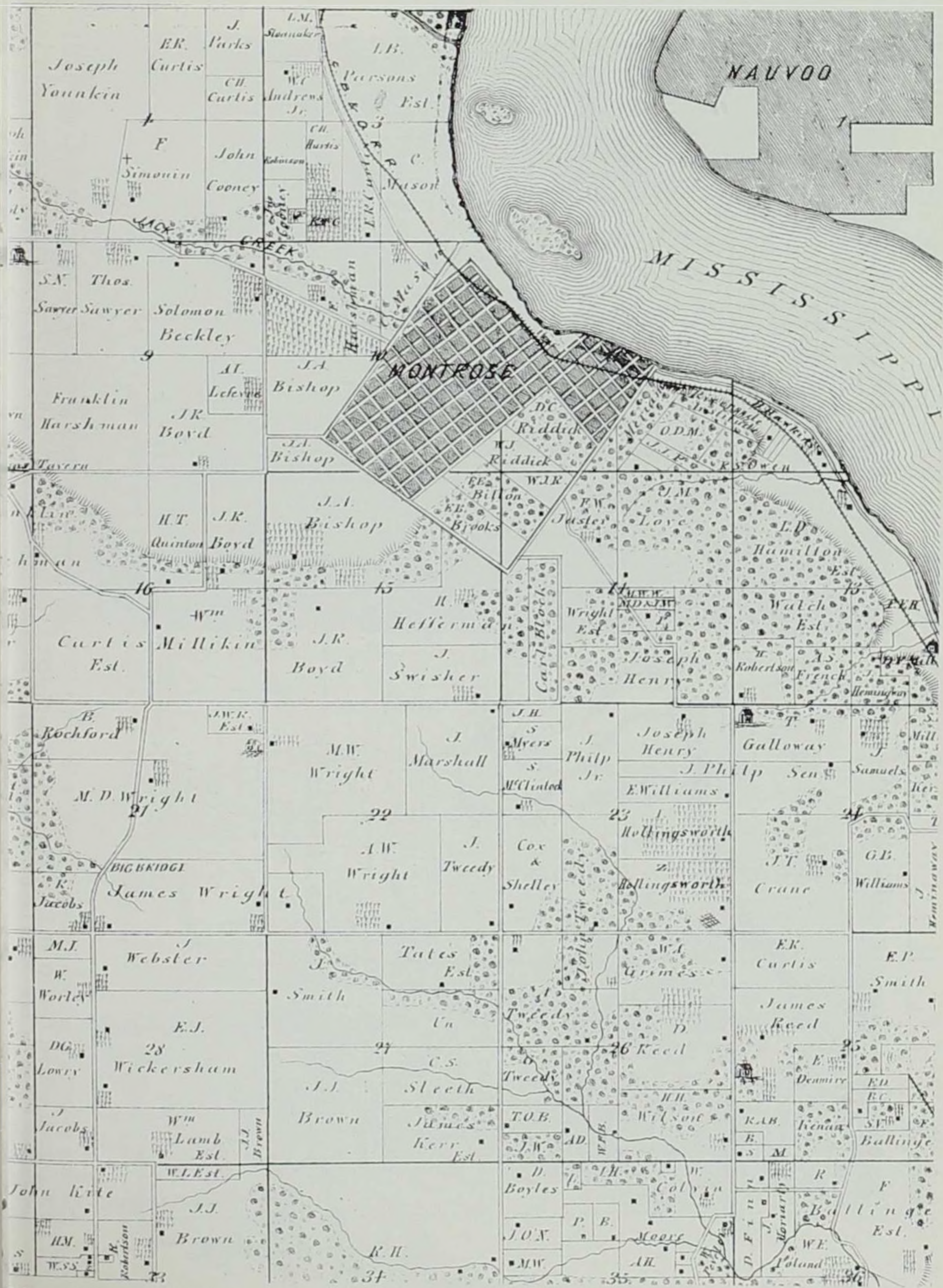
The Mormon Legion on the March



The Exodus from Nauvoo, Ill.

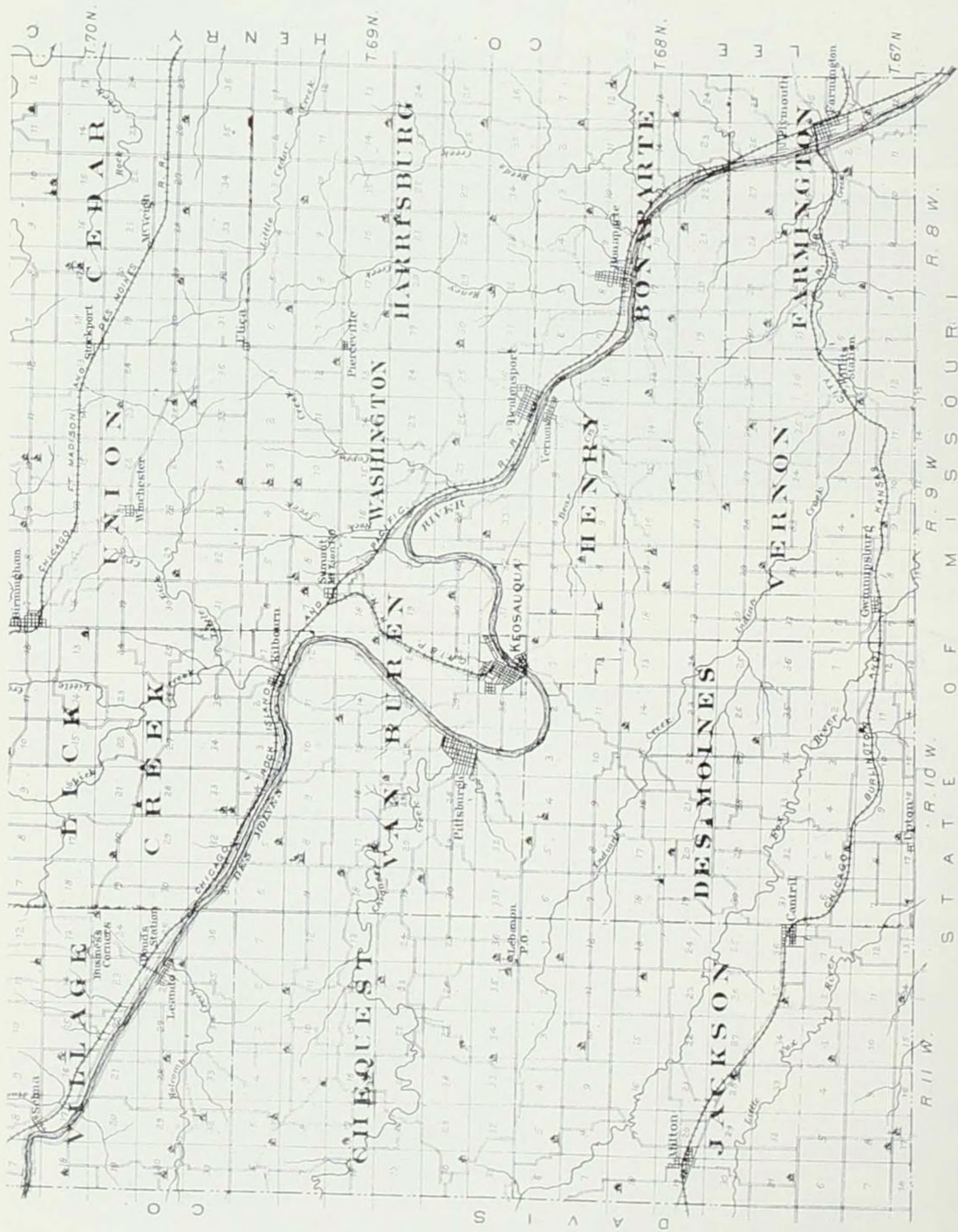
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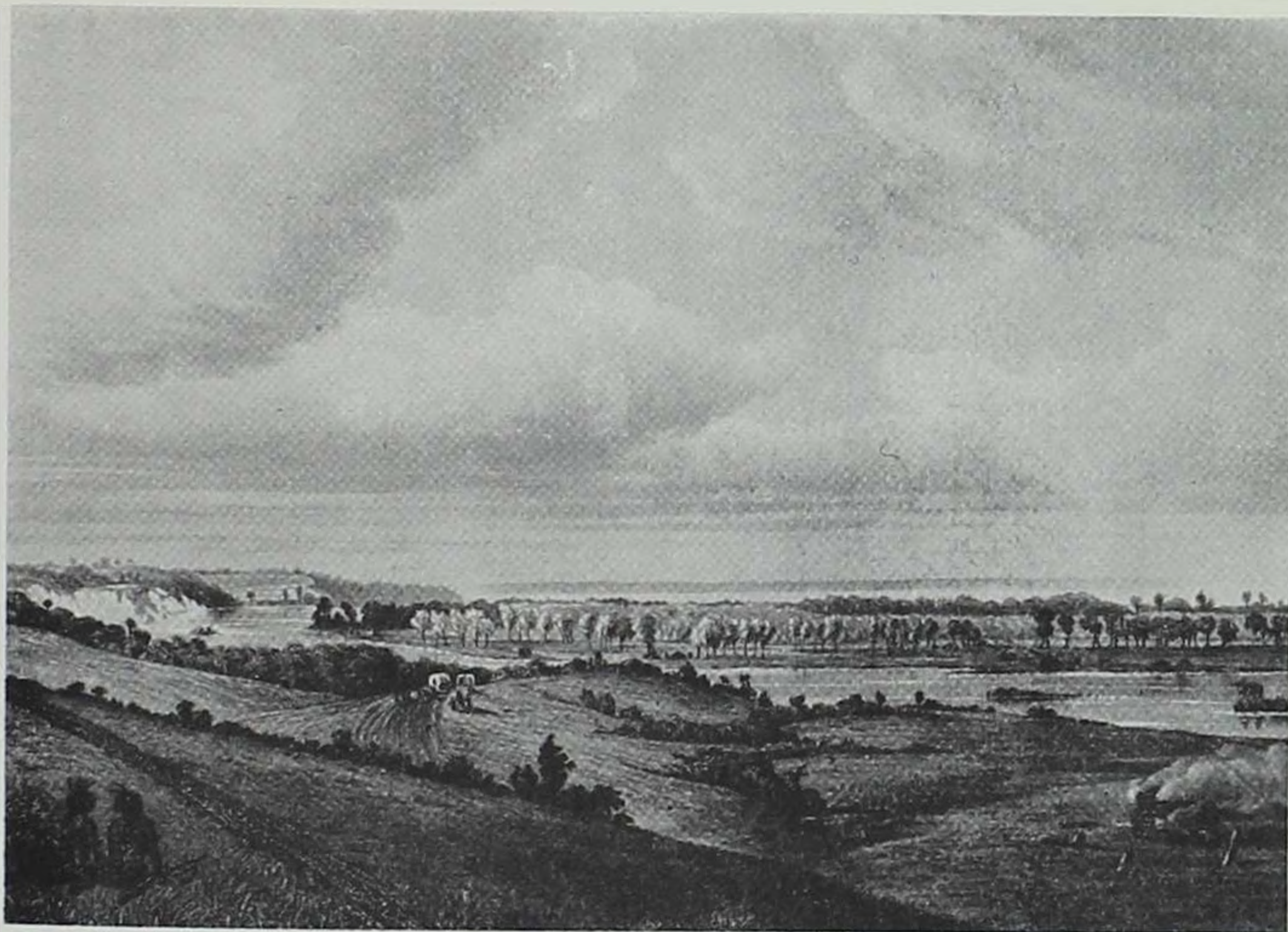
Map of Montrose Township through which the Mormon exodus of 1846 passed in their flight from Nauvoo. Sugar Creek lay a few miles to the west of the western portion of the map. From A. T. Andreas' *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Lee County, Iowa.* (1874)





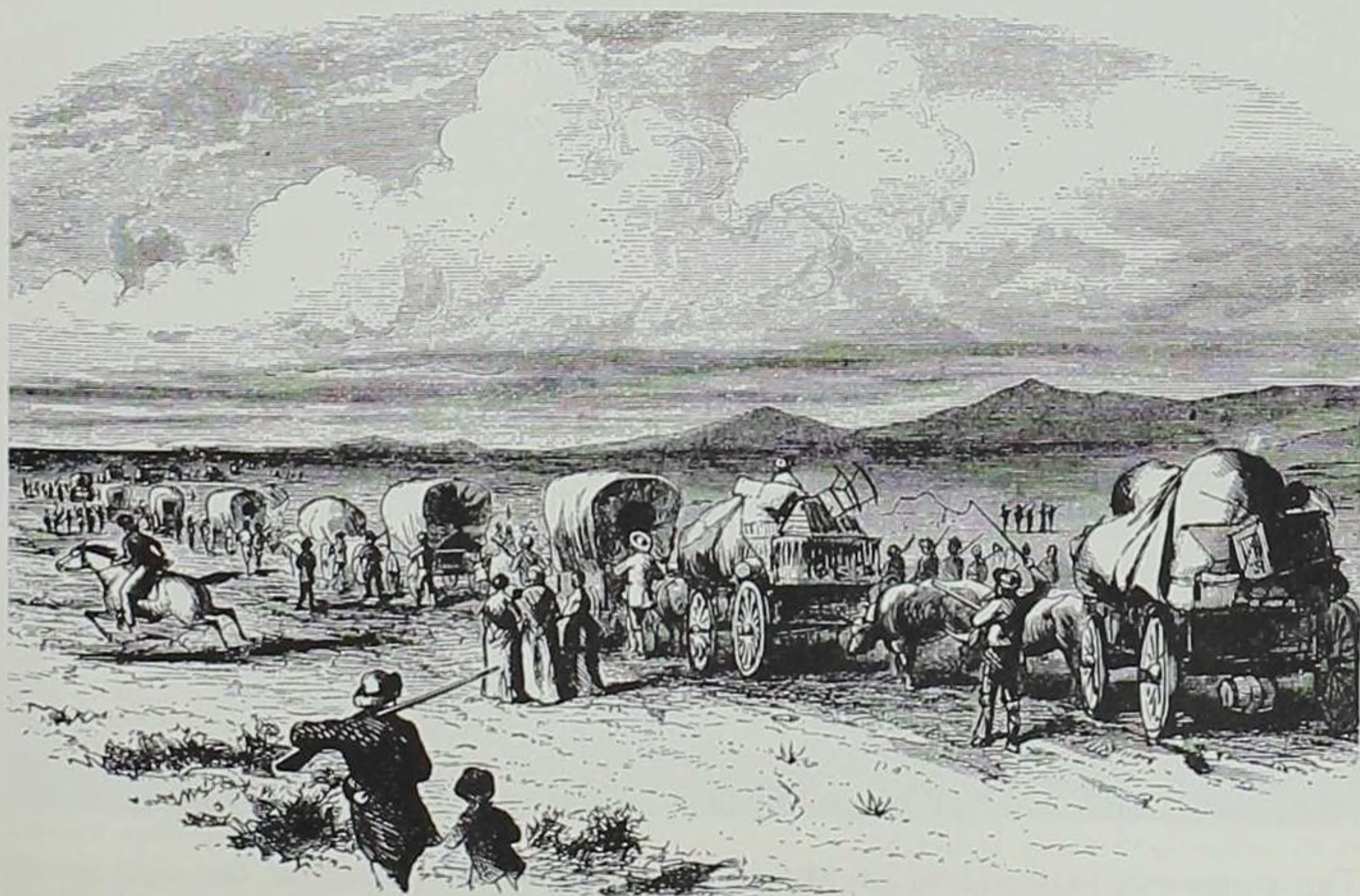
Leaving their encampment on Sugar Creek on March 1, 1846, the Mormons toiled through Van Buren County. They gave a band concert at Farmington, crossed the Des Moines River at Bonaparte's Mills, and encamped on Indian Creek, a few miles south of present-day Keosauqua. The outline map is from *Platbook of Van Buren County, Iowa*. (1897)





"View of the Missouri River & Council Bluffs, from an elevation."

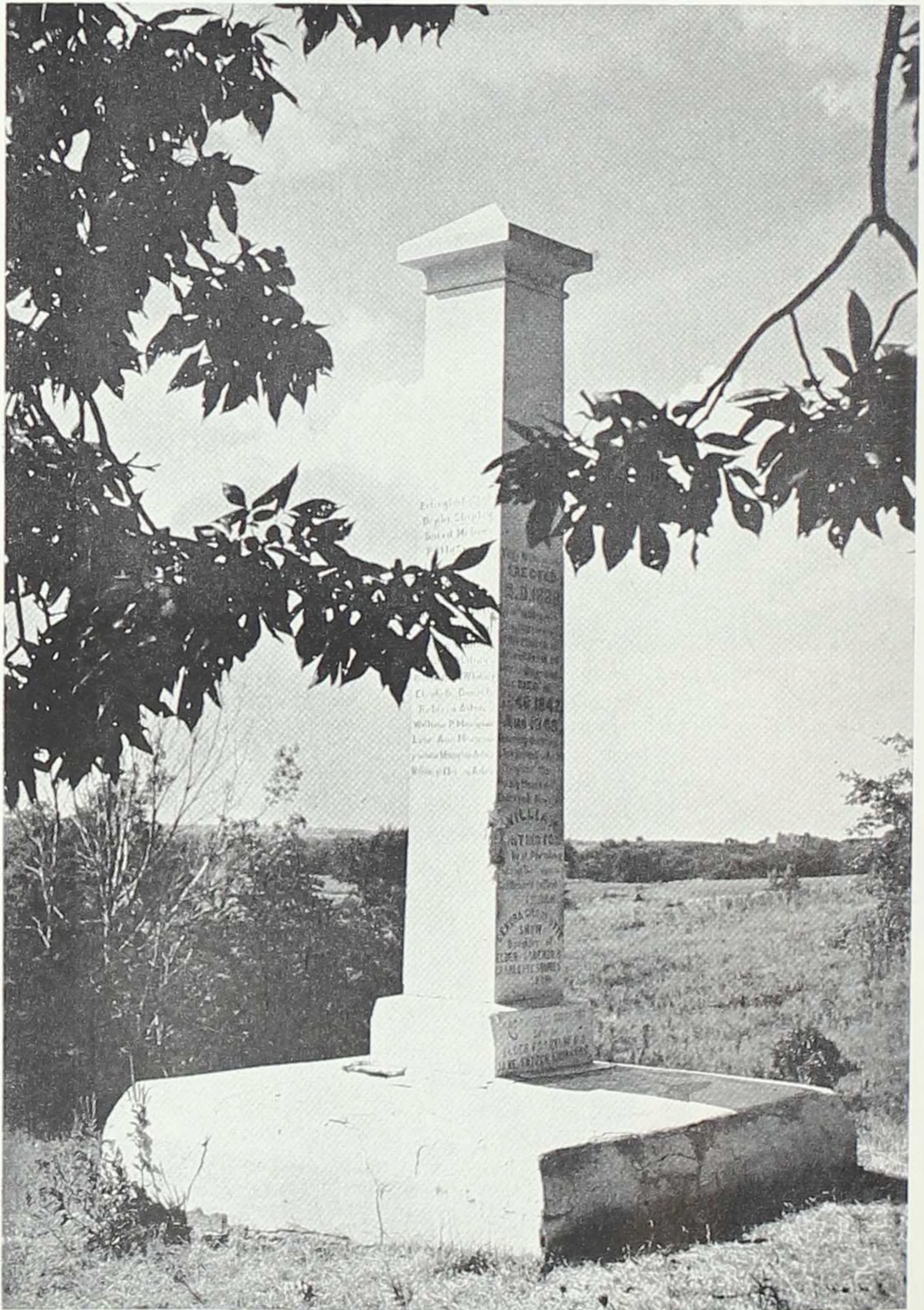
(A steel engraving of a sketch by Frederick Piercy for *Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley*, edited by James Linforth.)



"A thousand miles over the trackless Nebraska plain and rugged Wyoming mountains."

on Indian Creek, a few miles south of present-day Keesauan. The entire map is from *Platby Book of Van*  
 Pierce County, Iowa, 1852.





*Courtesy Olav Smedal*

The monument to the dead at Mount Pisgah in Union County is the outstanding Iowa memorial of the great Mormon Trek of 1846. Mount Pisgah was one of fifteen Camps of Israel set up by the Mormons across southern Iowa.

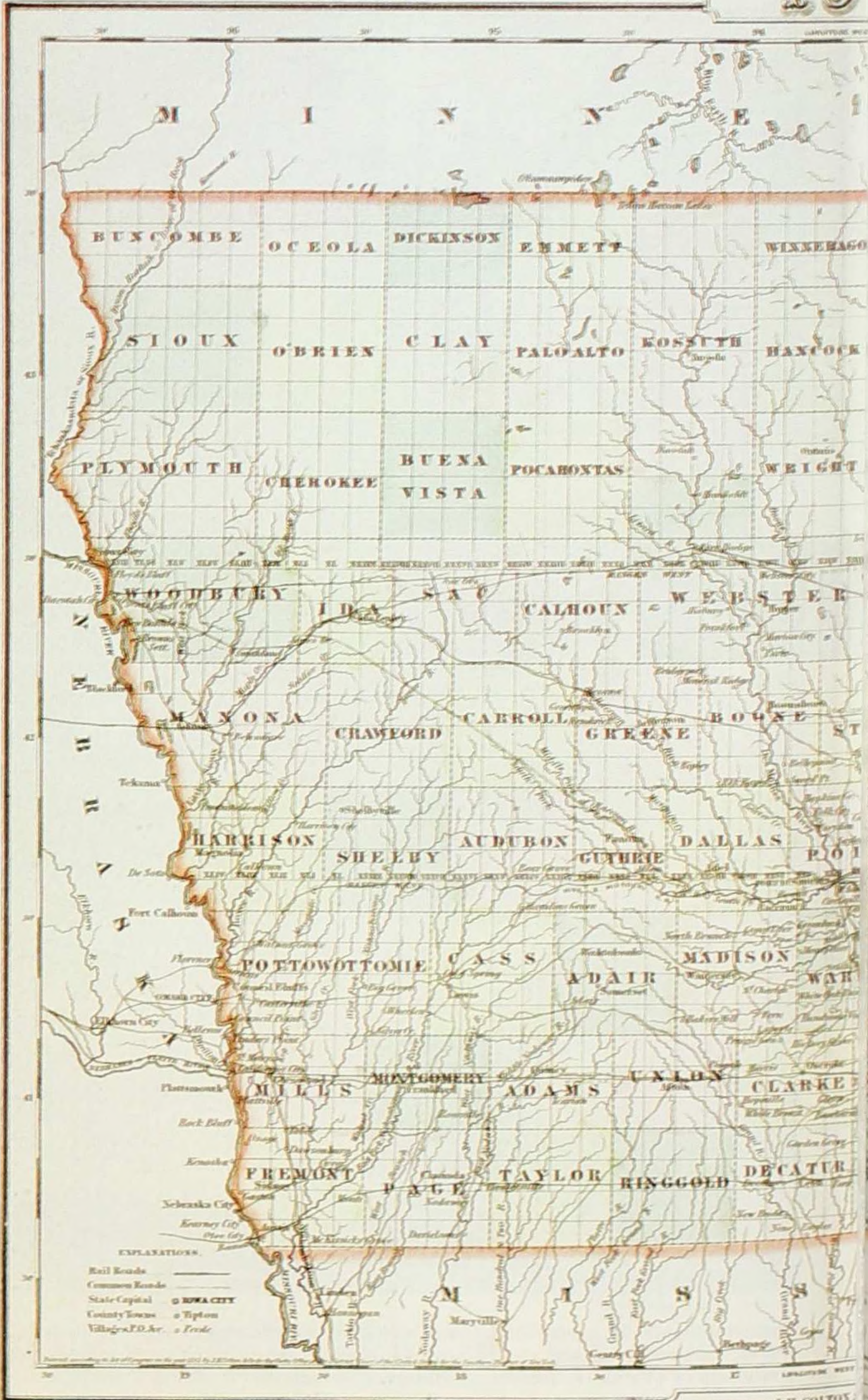




*Nebraska Game Commission Photo*

Once the wide Missouri River was reached the Mormons used as their main base a site in Nebraska known as "Winter Quarters." More than six hundred died that first winter on a site now known as Florence, a suburb of North Omaha.







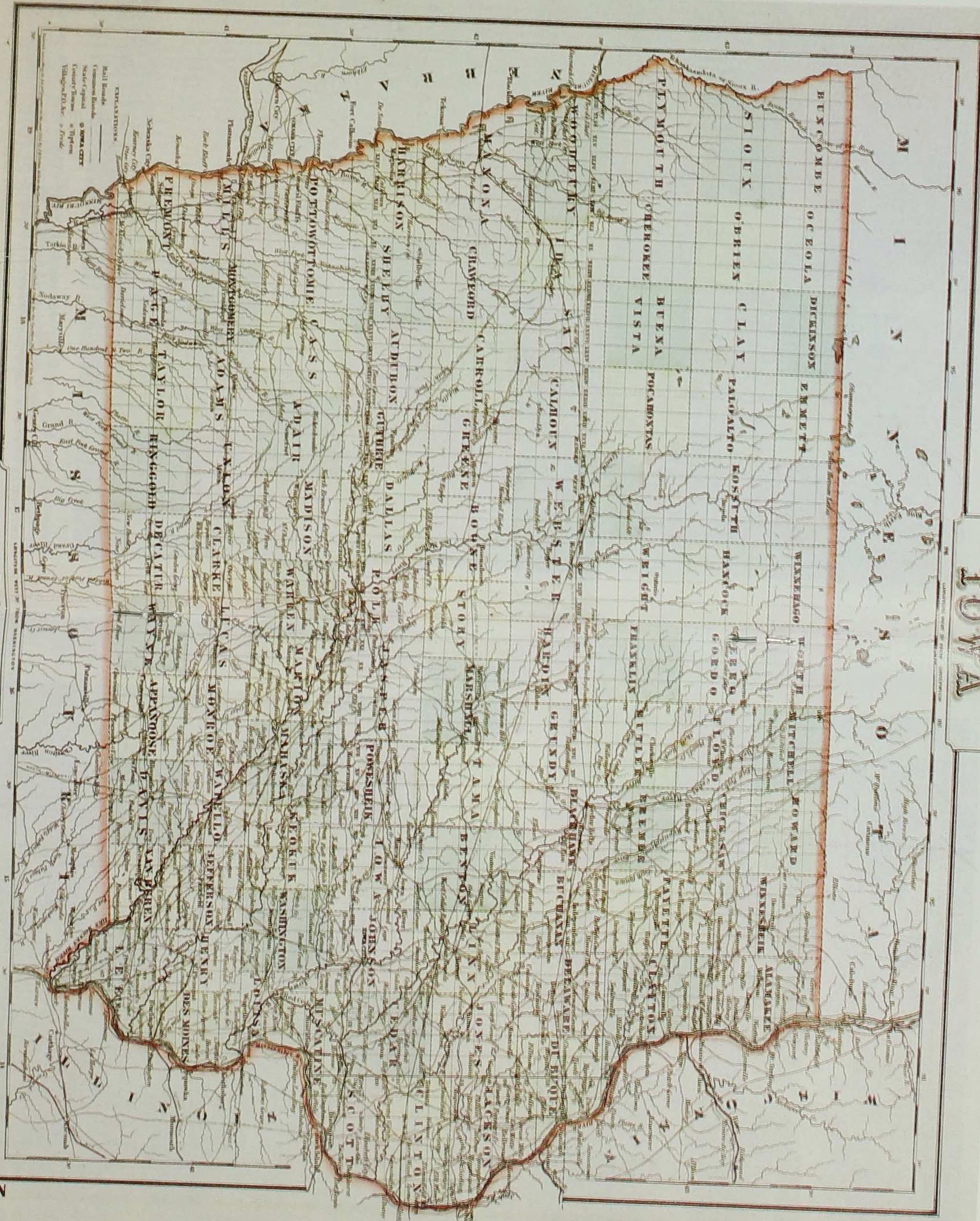


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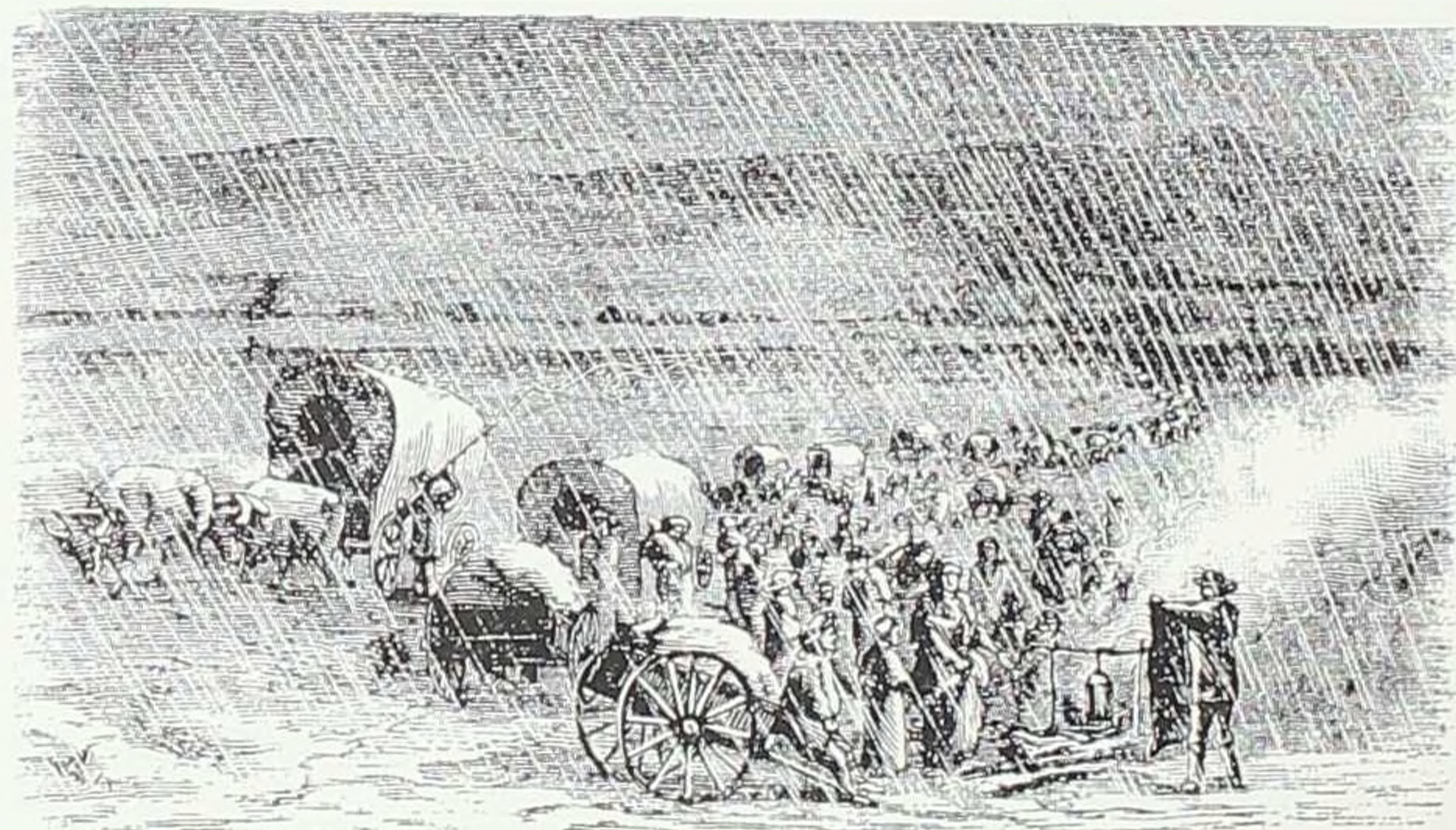


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The Handcart Expedition was cheered as it crossed Iowa.



Crossing the Platte River.



"Came to me and begged Bread."





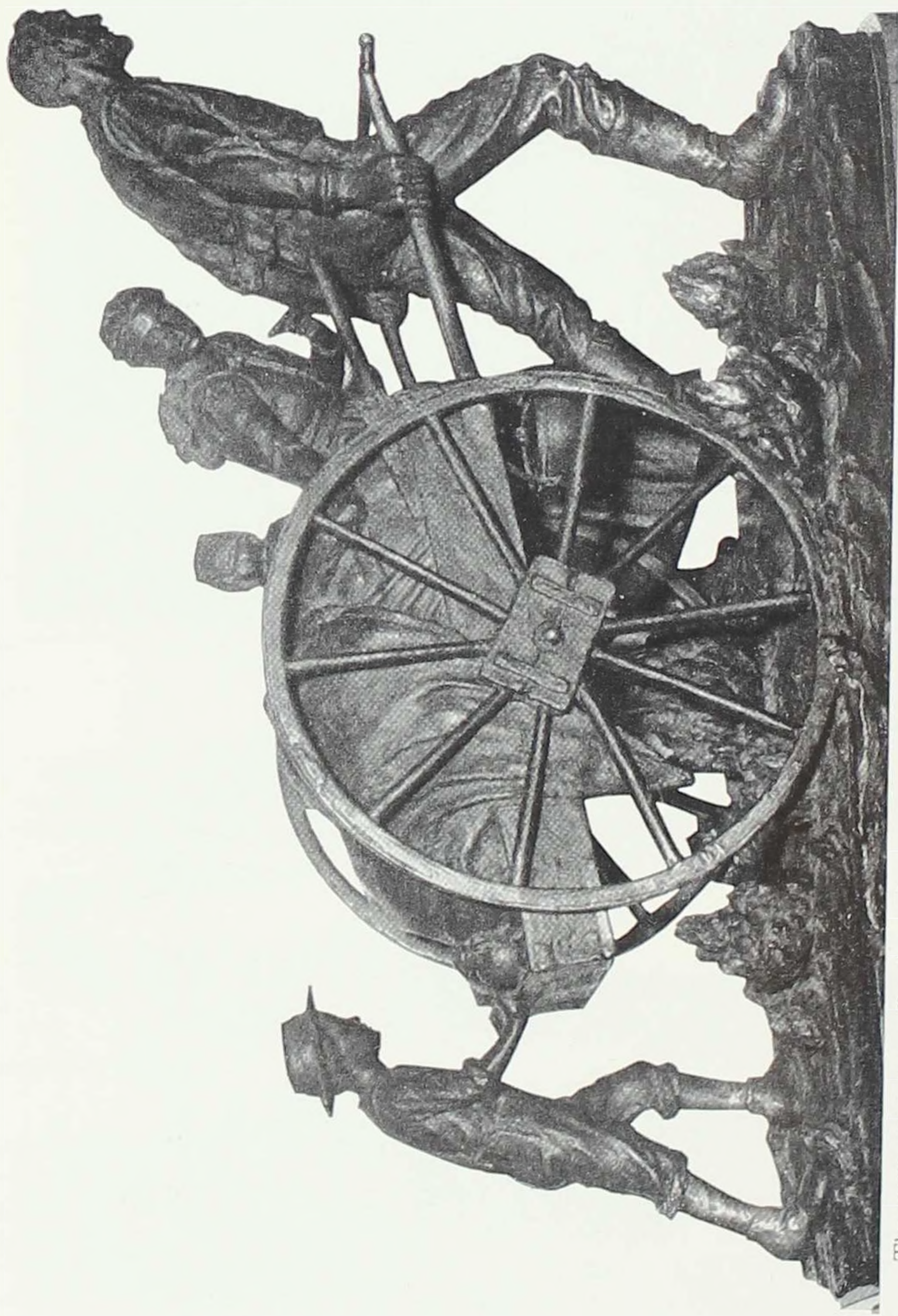
*A painting by O. A. A. Christensen.*

Mormon Handcart Expedition fording a stream.



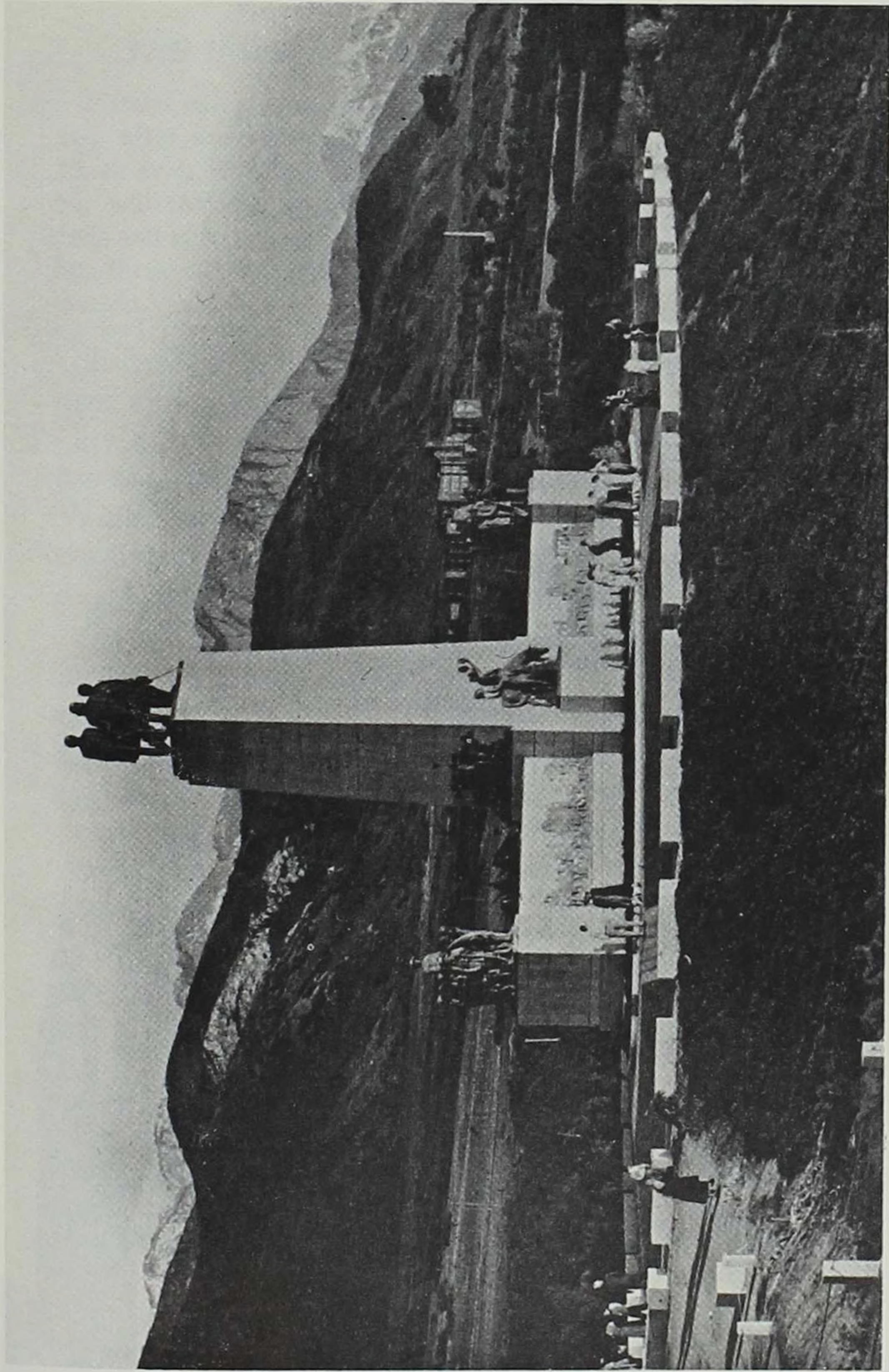
*"They woke to find the snow a foot deep, their hungry cattle had strayed away . . . and five of the company had died."*





“ . . . The carts were generally drawn by one man and three women each, though some carts were drawn by women alone. There were about three women to one man, and two-thirds of the women were single. It was the most motley crew I ever beheld. Most of them were Danes, with a sprinkling of Welsh, Swedes, and English, and were generally from the lower classes of their countries. Most could not understand what we said to them. The road was lined for a mile behind the train with the lame, halt, sick, and needy. Many were quite aged, and would be going slowly along, supported by a son or daughter. Some were on crutches; now and then a mother with a child in her arms.”





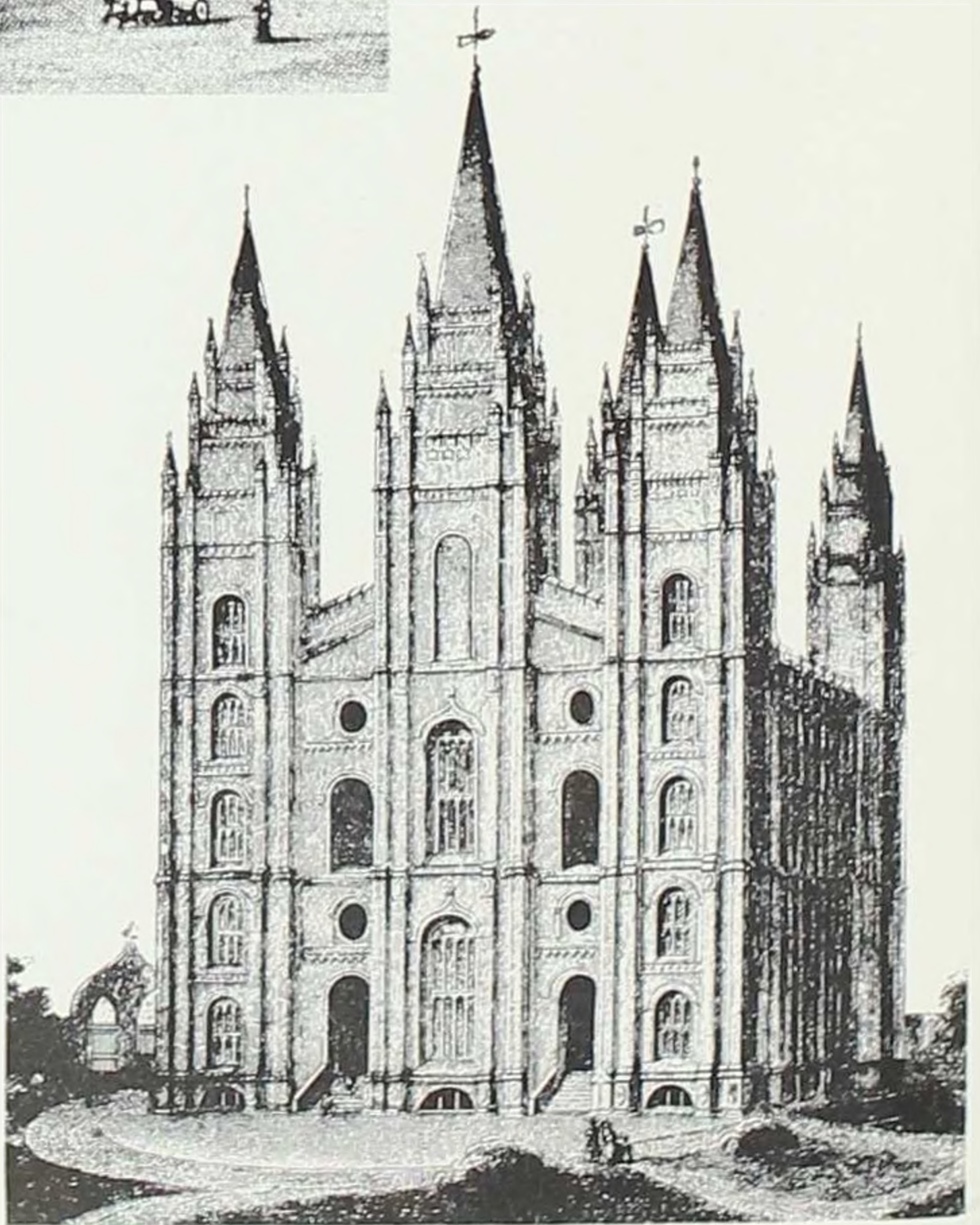
"This Is The Place" Monument, Salt Lake City, Utah. Dedicated on July 24, 1947, this monument is located at the mouth of Emigration Canyon. It was near here that Brigham Young, looking into the valley, said, "This is the Place."





The Mormon Temple at  
Nauvoo, Ill.

The Temple at  
Salt Lake City, Utah  
*"The Valleys of the  
Mountains in the  
land of Zion."*





Fifteen miles a day will bring them through in 70 days, and, after they get accustomed to it, they will travel 20, 25, or even 30 with all ease, and no danger of giving out, but will continue to get stronger and stronger; the little ones and sick, if there are any, can be carried on the carts, but there will be none sick in a little time after they get started.

Lured by this rosy picture the thirteen hundred tired and bewildered converts had arrived at Iowa City during the summer of 1856 to find their outfits not ready and their handcarts yet to be made. While waiting for their equipment, the newcomers encamped two miles west of Iowa City at present-day Coralville.

Finally, after several weeks delay one detachment after another got under way for the first leg of the journey — the trip from Iowa City to the Missouri River. The first company left Iowa City on June 7, 1856, with two hundred and twenty-six people; the second, with about the same number, started two days later; and a third and smaller company, composed largely of Welsh converts, began their march on June 23rd. Since these three companies were small and started fairly early in the summer, they arrived safely at Salt Lake City before the cold weather began. The fourth and fifth companies suffered untold hardships and death before they reached their Zion.

Let us follow Archer Walters as he crossed the Atlantic and then pulled his handcart from Iowa



City to Salt Lake City. A 47-year-old carpenter from Sheffield, England, Walters was accompanied by his wife (Harriet Cross Walters) and children Sarah, 18; Henry, 16; Harriet (daughter), 14; Martha, 12; and Lydia, 6. Baptized into the Mormon faith in 1848, Walters had declared he would give his life if he could reach "the Valleys of the Mountains, in the land of Zion, with my family, that they may grow up under the influence of the Gospel of Christ."

The ship *Enoch Train*, on which the family embarked from Liverpool for New York on March 22, 1856, carried 534 Saints representing the following countries: England 322, Scotland 146, Wales 18, Ireland 17, and five other nations. They were actually the first Utah bound emigrants transported overseas by the Perpetual Emigration Fund in 1856. F. D. Richards had served as Brigham Young's agent in England but Orson Pratt and Ezra T. Benson, an Iowa City paper reported, had arrived in Alton, Illinois, "destined for Great Britain to take the superintendence of the Mormon affairs in that country."

After a long and harrowing voyage across the stormy Atlantic, accompanied by sickness, lack of food, and death, the Walters family reached New York on May 2. The following day the Mormons left New York for Iowa by train, reaching Rock Island on May 10. The Davenport *Gazette* noted the arrival of 520 English Mormons on May 13.



All day Sunday baggage wagons were transporting their trunks and boxes from Rock Island to the depot of the M. & M. R. R. They were the lowest class of English, squalid and illiterate, just the kind of people that one would suppose the most apt to embrace the peculiar tenets of the Mormons.

Such unfavorable comments were destined to follow the Mormons as they proceeded across Iowa.

After crossing the Mississippi, Walters and his Mormon friends boarded the Mississippi & Missouri railroad train whose tracks had been laid as far as Iowa City. Upon their arrival in Iowa City, where they were "temporarily lodged" in the railroad building, Walters recorded in his diary:

Dragged our luggage about 2 miles to camp ground [near Ezekiel Clark's Mill, now Coralville]. Fixed some tents that was made aboard ship. It rained and it was cold. My wife and daughters got into a tent. Henry and me slept in a tent but was very cold.

Between May 13 and June 7 Archer Walters recorded the activities of the Mormons — the "American Fever" (apparently fever and ague), lack of nourishment, frequent religious meetings, and the birth and death of children. His wife and oldest daughter hired out to neighboring farmers in order to supplement the family larder. When he was not working on the handcarts he was making coffins for those who died in camp. On June 7 they made a sporadic start, on June 8 they journeyed three miles but were delayed when the cat-



tle strayed back to the old camp ground. The following excerpts from Walters' journal reveal the travails of the first Mormon handcart expedition as it crossed Iowa.

- June 11th, 1856 — Journeyed 7 miles. Very dusty. All tired and smothered with dust and camped in the dust or where the dust blowed. Was captain over my ten of 18 in number but they were a family of Welsh and our spirits were not united. Had a tent but Bro. Ellsworth would not let me use it and had to leave my tent poles behind.
- 12th — Journeyed 12 miles. Went very fast with our hand carts. Harriet still very ill. . . .
- 15th — Got up about 4 o'clock to make a coffin for my brother John Lee's son named William Lee, aged 12 years. Meetings Sunday as usual and at the same time had to make another coffin for Sister Prator's child. Was tired with repairing hand-carts the last week. Went and buried them by moonlight at Bear Creek.
- 16th — Harriet very ill. Traveled 19 miles and after pitching tent mended carts.
- 17th — Traveled about 17 miles; pitched tent. Made a little coffin for Bro. Job Welling's son and mended a handcart wheel. . . .
- 21st — Traveled about 13 miles. Camped at Indian Creek. Bro. Bowers died about 6 o'clock; from Birmingham Conference. Went to buy some wood to make the coffin but the kind farmer gave me the wood and nails. It had been a very hot day and I was never more tired, but God has said as my day my strength shall be.
- 22nd — Got up at break of day and made the coffin for



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Bro. James Bowers by 9 o'clock and he was buried at 11 o'clock. Aged 44 years 5 months 2 days. His relatives cried very much after I lifted him in the coffin and waited to screw him down. 11 o'clock washed in the creek and felt very much refreshed. Meeting Sunday 2 o'clock until 7.

24th — Traveled about 18 miles. Very hot. Bro. Ellsworth being always with a family from Birmingham named Brown and always that tent going first and walking so fast and some fainted by the way. . . .

26th — Traveled about 1 mile. Very faint from lack of food. We are only allowed about  $\frac{3}{4}$  lb. of flour a head each day and about 3 oz. of sugar each week. About  $\frac{1}{2}$  of a lb. of bacon each a week; which makes those that have no money very weak. Made a child's coffin for Sister Sheen — Emma Sheen Aged  $2\frac{1}{2}$  years.

27th — Got up before sunrise. Cut a tomb stone on wood and bury the child before starting from camp.

28th — . . . Rose soon after 4 o'clock. Started with high wind. Short of water and I was never more tired. Rested a bit after we camped then came on a thunder storm, and rain, blowed our tent down. Split the canvas and wet our clothes and we had to lay on the wet clothes and ground. . . .

29th — Rather stiff in joints when we rose. . . . Busy all day. My wife and Sarah mending. Short of provisions. Children crying for their dinner.

30th — Rose in good health, except Harriet, and started with our handcarts with but little breakfast . . . but never traveled 17 miles more easily. . . . Sleep very well after prayers in tent.

July 1st, 1856 — Rose soon. It looked very cloudy and



began to rain. Traveled about 15 miles. Walked very fast, — nearly 4 miles an hour. Bro. Brown's family and some young sisters with Bro. Ellsworth always going first which causes many of the brothers to have hard feelings . . . my children cry with hunger and it grieves me and makes me cross. I can live upon green herbs or anything and do go nearly all day without any and am strengthened with a morsel. Repaired handcarts.

3rd — Ever to be remembered. Bro. Card gave me  $\frac{1}{2}$  dollar for making his daughter's coffin. Start with my cart before the camp as others had done but was told not to and had to suffer for it. Went the wrong way; about 30 of the brothers and sisters, and went  $10\frac{1}{2}$  miles the wrong way. We put our three handcarts together and made beds with all the clothes we had and laid down about  $\frac{1}{2}$  past 10 o'clock. 11 o'clock Brother Butler who had charge of the mule teams came with the mules and wagon to fetch us. Got to camp when they were getting up. Laid down about an hour and started with the camp.

5th — A deer or elk served out to camp. Brother Parker brings into camp his little boy [age 6] that had been lost [3 days]. Great joy right through the camp. The mother's joy I can not describe. Expect we are going to rest. Washing, etc., today. Jordan Creek. Made a pair of sashes for the old farmer. Indian meal; no flour. Slept well.

6th — Made 2 doors for . . . 3 dollars and boarded with farmer.

7th — Harriet better. Lydia poorly. Traveled about 20 miles.

8th — Traveled a round about road about 20 miles.



Crossed the river Missouri and camped at the city of Florence. Very tired; glad to rest. Slept well. Lydia better and Harriet. All in good spirits. Expect to stop some time. . . .

Such were the experiences of the Handcart Expedition as it crossed Iowa along present-day U. S. Highway 6 through Homestead, Marengo, Newton, Des Moines, Adel, and on beyond the frontier through Fairview (later Morrisburgh) and historic Dalmanutha in Guthrie County whence they followed the old stage road in a southwesterly direction, joining the Mormon Trail of 1846 at Lewis in Cass County. Proceeding to Council Bluffs, they veered north to cross the Missouri at Florence, Nebraska. The new Mormon Bridge at North Omaha stands as a symbol today of their crossing.

At Brush Run west of Homestead two girls deserted the group, hiding in the woods until the party had left. They were sheltered by the settlers and ultimately married young men in the Iowa County area where their descendants still live today. As they passed through Newton on June 20th an editor described them as the "lowest order of human beings."

During their thirty day trek across Iowa the Handcart Expedition passed through towns just as quickly as possible to prevent their women and girls from meeting men. The following from the Fort Des Moines *Citizen* is typical:



Our citizens were somewhat surprised on yesterday morning at the sudden appearance of about five hundred Mormons in silent procession through our streets. They presented at once a singular and revolting spectacle, as they moved along in Indian file drawing their carts which were laden with the necessaries of the journey. It was truly an inhuman sight to see women hitched like so many cattle to rude vehicles, sometimes two and two while the men were walking along idle, sometimes a man and woman, and frequently a man and two women. — They were altogether an extremely hard looking set. An old gentleman who was in their camp the previous evening informed us that there was at least one hundred women who were almost frantic to escape, but were deterred by the threats of their friends. On their foremost waggon was perched their banner, bearing these words: "The chosen People of the Lord, bound for the promised Land."

Miserable, deluded people! Our heart almost bled for these poor women, and children as they trudged along covered with dust, and the sun at a temperature of about one hundred degrees beating upon them. — There were doubtless many of them, who had left homes and friends in the old world, who would gladly give all their future prospects to return. There is yet a journey of some twelve hundred miles between them — nearly two hundred miles of which lies through a habitless, waterless desert. It must not be otherwise but that some of them must fall by fatigue and disease. There was about three women upon an average to one man. — There were also a great many children. — These people were all from Europe — mostly from England. About seven hundred more are expected through this evening or to-morrow.

Despite such comments in the press, the people of Iowa gave food to the hungry wayfarers and



urged them not to attempt the long trip overland, especially so late in the summer. The converts, however, were new to the difficulties of prairie travel; they were inspired by the hope of seeing the new Zion, and thoroughly under the influence of their leaders who constantly warned them against the Gentiles. Relatively few of the company withdrew.

On August 18, 1856, the first detachment left Florence, Nebraska, westward bound. If the trip through Iowa had been full of hardships that now before the immigrants was appalling. In Iowa food was more plentiful and charity frequently supplemented the regular rations. But on the plains there was no opportunity to secure clothing or bedding as the nights grew chill, no settlers' shanties where food might be secured if their own supply gave out. There was food, it is true, in the herds of buffalo, but these European working men were totally unfitted to secure it.

The carts were more heavily laden than before, bedding and warm clothing being discarded for lack of room, and a ninety-eight pound sack of flour added, nearly doubling the original burden. The flour ration, however, was increased to a pound a day, fresh meat was issued occasionally, and each hundred had three or four milch cows.

As they traveled westward they sang their favorite handcart song to the tune of *A Little More Cider*. The words were as follows:



Oh, our faith goes with the hand-carts,  
 And they have our hearts' best love;  
 'Tis a novel mode of travelling,  
*Devised by the Gods above.*

## CHORUS:

Hurrah for the Camp of Israell!  
 Hurrah for the hand-cart scheme!  
 Hurrah! hurrah! 'tis better far  
 Than the wagon and ox-team.

*And Brigham's their executive,*  
 He told us the design;  
 And the Saints are proudly marching on,  
 Along the hand-cart line.

Who cares to go with the wagons?  
 Not we who are free and strong;  
 Our faith and arms, with right good will,  
 Shall pull our carts along.

As they traveled across Nebraska with their heavy loads the handcarts were frequently breaking down and the axles worn from the constant grinding of the dry sand. Men like Archer Walters not only pulled their carts all day but worked late repairing the rickety carts. In addition to heat and dust, violent storms added to their miseries. On July 26th Walters recorded:

Passed over the ferry — Lucke Fort. Traveled about 6 miles. As soon as we crossed it looked very heavy and black. We had not got far and it began to lightning and soon the thunder roared and about the middle of the train of handcarts the lightning struck a brother and he fell to rise no more in that body. By the name of Henry Walker, from Carlisle Conference, aged 58 years. Left a



wife and children. One boy burned a little named James Stoddard; we thought he would die but he recovered and was able to walk, and Brother Wm. Stoddard, father of the boy was knocked to the ground and a sister, Betsy Taylor, was terribly shook but recovered. All wet through. This happened about 2 miles from the ferry and we then went 2 miles to camp. I put the body with the help of others, on the handcart and pulled him to camp and buried him without a coffin for there were no boards to be had.

27th — The next morning, Sunday 27th, 1856, four miles west of Luke Fort Ferry. Rose about 4 o'clock. Put a new axle tree to a cart that was broke yesterday. Traveled about 2 miles to a better camping ground.

28th — Traveled about 18 miles. Harriet much better; for such we feel thankful.

29th — Traveled about 15 miles. Met a company coming from California. A child born in camp. Sister Doney. My birthday.

To add to their difficulties a herd of buffalo stampeded their cattle near Wood River on August 2nd and thirty of the oxen were lost. The one yoke remaining for each wagon was unable to pull the loads of some 3000 pounds over the rough roads and the beef cattle, cows, and young stock were put under the yoke. Even then another sack of flour had to be added to each cart to lighten the weight of the wagons.

On August 4th they camped on the Platte; on the 6th Walters recorded thousands of buffalo "so thick together they covered four miles at once



. . .” On the 7th they had to “dig for water and it was very thick. Our hungry appetites satisfied by the buffalo.” On the 10th they traveled fourteen miles. “All or most of the people bad with diarrhea or purging, whether it was the buffalo or the muddy water.” Despite their illness, men were sent out almost daily to shoot buffalo which the hungry emigrants devoured eagerly. In his journal Walters recorded:

11th — Traveled about 17 miles. Four men sent to shoot buffalo. Harriet much better; very weak myself. I expect it is the short rations: three-fourths lb. of flour per day. It is but little but it is as much as the oxen teams that we have could draw from Florence. Forded over two creeks. Met a man coming from California by himself; going to the states. One of our cows died. Buffalo killed.

12th — Rested while some of the brethren with Captain Ellsworth went and shot two more buffalo and we dried the meat.

13th — Traveled 12 miles. Forded a large creek.

14th — Traveled 18 miles; crossed three creeks. Last herd of buffalo seen.

For approximately three weeks they traveled along the north bank of the Platte. On August 21st they encamped four miles beyond Chimney Rock on the Platte. On August 24th Walters recorded:

Rested from travels but had to repair handcarts, meeting at night. Received the Sacrament. Spoke at the meeting. Brother Ellsworth spoke some time and said we had made great improvement. That last week there had been



less quarreling and those that had robbed the handcarts, or wagons, unless they repent their flesh would rot from their bones and go to Hell.

When they arrived at Fort Laramie on August 27th they found that some promised supplies had not arrived. It was decided to reduce rations from a pound to twelve ounces for working men, nine ounces for women and old men, and from four to eight ounces for children, and to make every effort to travel faster. They traveled 18 miles on the 27th, 15 miles on the 28th, 25 miles on the 29th, and 30 miles on the 30th. On August 31st Walters complained of being "faint and hungry" but despite this they covered 22 miles. His journal for September, 1856, reads as follows:

- 1st — Rested from travels. I mended carts. Meeting about flour and paying for extra that was brought in the wagons, 18c per lb. Harriet getting quite well and walks all the way.
- 2nd — Platte River. Traveled 19 miles. Walter Sanderson, aged 56, died.
- 3rd — Met 4 wagons; Henshaw from Nottingham, John Barnes from Sheffield. Traveled 15 miles.
- 4th — Traveled 10 miles.
- 5th — Rested. Rained all day.
- 6th — Lost Cattle.
- 7th — Traveled 26 miles. Bro. Nipras died. Left on road.
- 8th — 11 miles. Had dinner at Devils Gate.
- 12th — Sarah very poorly. Harriet quite well.
- 13th — Traveled 28 miles. Camped at Paciffick Springs. Tucked a blanket with a brother from the valley



who came from Rotheham, named Goldsmith, part of Bro. Banks' wagon company.

14th — Traveled 3 miles. Camped to mend handcarts and women to wash. Sister Mayer died.

The journal of Archer Walters ends abruptly on September 14th. Twelve days later the first handcart detachment reached Salt Lake City where they were met by a delegation of church officers, a large number of citizens, an escort of cavalry, and the Nauvoo legion band. Despite the intense sufferings endured along the way church officials considered the "divine plan" of transporting converts a great success.

Archer Walters had gained "the Valleys of the Mountains" but he was not destined to personally share the joy of his new home in the "land of Zion." A fortnight after his arrival in Salt Lake City he died from dysentery caused by "eating cornmeal and molasses aggravated by his weakened condition and lowered resistance resulting from exposure, under-nourishment, and physical exhaustion." His five children, however, married in the Church and their descendants live on to bless his name.

The two later companies were not so fortunate. The fourth detachment, commanded by James G. Willie, was detained at Iowa City for three weeks while the carts were being made for them and did not leave until the middle of July. The fifth and last company for the year '1856, led by Captain



Edward Martin, began its long march on July 28th. The trials and vicissitudes through which members of the fourth and fifth handcart expeditions passed are among the most harrowing in the history of the West. The old, the weak, and many of the young were frozen to death as they stubbornly attempted to cross South Pass in the towering Rocky Mountains. Sixty-seven of the fourth company perished while the fifth and last detachment lost even more heavily: about one-fourth of the party died enroute, most of them in crossing the mountains. The heavy death toll inflicted on the handcart expeditions of 1856 led to their discontinuance after 1860.

It should be observed in closing that Mormons were leaving by other routes and by other means of transportation between 1856 and 1860. The *Burlington Daily Hawk Eye & Telegraph* of March 1, 1856, noted the arrival by rail of 450 Norwegian converts and another group of 200 Mormons from Sweden, Norway, and England, all bound for Salt Lake City. On March 31st the same paper noted that eastern exchanges were giving the Rock Island Railroad to Iowa City as the preferred route. The *Hawk Eye* promptly called the attention of eastern editors to their ignorance of distances and geography and urged all immigrants to take the Burlington route.

The flood of converts, westward bound to their new Zion, is one of the most dramatic stories in



the annals of the West. Their courage, faith, and resourcefulness, their spirit of cooperation and their inspired leadership, all combined to spell success for an adventure which most Americans would have marked off from the start as doomed to failure. The history of Iowa is greatly enriched because Iowa City served as the starting point for those bold adventurers — the intrepid souls who made up the Mormon Handcart Expeditions.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN