

A Peep at the Far West

Between 1856 and 1860 Mormon immigrants traveled overland on foot from Iowa City to Salt Lake City. The first expeditions, with only handcarts to carry their supplies, suffered terribly, but later companies with ox teams and wagons endured the fifteen-hundred-mile walk with less misery. This description of the country and experiences of an anonymous Englishman who accompanied a Mormon wagon train across Iowa is here reprinted from The National Magazine, Vol. 13, pp. 335-440, October, 1858. — The Editor.

I left Chicago for Iowa, crossed the Mississippi at Rock Island in a steamboat, and thought I was near the termination of my wanderings to the westward. A couple of stout, low horses, or mules, for my luggage, one for my own riding, a rifle of the most approved make, a species of holster before me to carry the means of destruction and of life, in other words, a revolver, and something to refresh the inner man, and I should find myself ready for a start to any distance.

There had been three or four Europeans with me in the train, one of whom was from the "Old Country", a Dorsetshire man, who was bent upon making his way to California, without any other

idea of the distance or direction than that it lay far to the west, and "it was easy to get all the information necessary on the subject as he got along."

The rest of the party were "rig'lar Yankees", as might be known by their conversation through the nose, and the continual repetition of the words by which in England we are prone to describe our trans-Atlantic brethren. Another of our party I could not fathom. Secluded, taciturn, replies in monosyllables, and an evident desire to be uninterrupted, as if to brood over something evil or good, as the case might be, caused me to imagine he had left home for no good cause, and was pleased to keep moving; the sure mode in this vast continent to escape recognition. I hope I did him wrong, but his extraordinary reserve must bear the blame if I did, since the lines rushed upon my mind irresistibly:

Nature made man's breast no windores
To publish what he did within doors,
Nor what dark secrets there inhabit,
Unless his own rash folly blab it.

Our taciturn fellow-traveler who dealt in monosyllables, and had such a "great taste for silence," as the Frenchman said, having found no letters for him at Iowa [City], complained of the irregularity of the post in America. "I guess you are

very particular," observed one of our Yankee companions; "we go along pretty well, howsomever. When I was upon Red River I got a letter once in eight months, and thought I was well enough off. When one don't hear, one don't trouble oneself about other people, who know how to take care of themselves. There's a place down west where a post-office was never heard of, and the folk did not know what a letter was. 'Why, master, what is a letter? Is it anything in the truck line?'

'No,' says I, 'it consarns the paper trade.'

'O,' says he, 'I guess it will be some time before it's worth while to open shop for such articles here, where yet we deals only in logs and lumber betwixt and between ourselves.' "

Iowa is a country with an undulating surface, and has not a population of more than a hundred and fifty thousand. The city of Iowa stands upon one of those plateaux by the riverside, running in the same direction, which mark a higher water level than that of the present river of the same name, and there is another plateau above that, and a third higher still. The impression is, that the land has risen above the early river level, or the river receded, which is scarcely possible. I observed in several instances on the banks of American rivers the same apparent subsidence of the stream, the banks taking the form of steps. I be-

lieve geologists have before noticed this terrace-like appearance.

There was nothing inviting in Iowa City, which appeared to be the germ only of the metropolis of a State which time alone can populate. Yet one of its inhabitants vaunted of the Capitol, or public hall, and wanted us to see "a really fine thing". It is a square, good-sized building, perhaps twice the size of one of our new London churches, having a cupola, too small in proportion.

Two or three of my companions, I found, were Mormons, or Latter-Day Saints, who were proceeding to what they called their camping-ground, some little way beyond Iowa [City]. We crossed the river of that name on a floating bridge, having several wagons in company. By camping-ground was intended a temporary establishment of the brethren who were going westward over the prairies, and had encamped in tents upon that spot in order to purchase oxen, wagons, mules, or horses, to carry them on their journey to the Great Salt Lake city.

I agreed to accompany them to their camping-ground, at a distance from the city. Here I found a motley assemblage of men, women, and children, the larger part from England. There were a few covered wagons used at night for sleeping in. These were all that had yet been procured, but the

majority of the assemblage, not less than eight hundred or a thousand in all, were in tents, which, during the day were intensely warm, so much more so than I ever felt it in England, that I went into the woods and lay in the shade during the hours when the sun had the greatest power. I rose at half past four, A. M., and retired to rest at twelve. Thus sleeping in the heat of the day in the shade, I contrived to pass the time without the inconvenience that many sustained. To my regret and astonishment, I found my countrymen so utterly impractical, as to move about with the thermometer at 100° in the shade, and the women positively frying pancakes when the sun's rays could not have given a heat of less than 120° . Nothing would make them alter their mode of action in a climate so different from their own. One or two, they told me, had died of sunstroke, but no warning was taken from their fate, and several were laid down with bilious fever.

I found no confusion, but good order among the brethren, who were civil, and indeed kind, to the poor "Gentile" who had ventured among them. To give the managers their due, they seemed to possess extraordinary influence, and to use it beneficially. Nor did their authority appear to be a sinecure, for the flock of self-named saints they were leading to the promised land did not yield

obedience in all cases as they should have done. It was evident they were grossly ignorant, the larger number; and the impression upon my mind was that the certainty of getting the ownership of a little land for their families, of which they could never have the least hope at home, the chance, in short, of obtaining property by labor, was a strong bait to embrace the most extraordinary, because the most absurd, imposture that has ever been promulgated among the thousand-and-one religions which have appeared in the world. I do not mean as to doctrine, but in the lame story of the gold plates, translated by inspiration out of a language that never had an existence, by a man who knew none but his own. After the revelation was promulgated, Smith seems to have felt that he had no chance of becoming a great man by the invention of a new revelation, if he had not kept up a strict morality of life; it was his only chance of success to act up to his profession. He insisted that his disciples should preserve the marriage-tie sacred — one wife and one husband.

The conduct of those who persecuted and murdered Smith fixed the creed of the Latter-Day Saints; borne out in all its atrocity by the United States government, who suffered his murderers to go free and pocket the plunder of his followers with perfect impunity. In vain did they petition

for redress. Young saw his time, and, full of ambition to be a leader, pretended to all sorts of revelations that suited his purpose, aspired to be both a spiritual and temporal ruler of Smith's flock, led them where he could manage them uncontrolled, and by getting a tenth part of their labor or its product, sent out elders, as they were styled, into the States and into Europe to obtain an accession of strength, and raise himself to that consequence to which he aspired. It was he who declared he had a revelation to practice polygamy, which Smith had opposed. His followers from Europe were of the lowest and most ignorant class, their state of poverty naturally leading the larger number to consult their imaginary temporal benefit under the cloak of becoming followers of the new creed. Many educated persons, who are forever seeking novelties in faith, and who cannot imagine a religion without a deep mystery, joined and became elders.

Young, uniting the temporal and spiritual rule, and leading the plundered people to the Rocky Mountains, established his authority there. A strong party of his envoys, sent to Europe, converted many, in the hope of bettering their circumstances. Thus he got them to look up to him as the Jews did to Moses. Emigrants went to America in flocks, as in the present instance, in-

creasing the number of his followers so greatly, that he has at length set his country's rulers at defiance, and is said to be in open rebellion. To put him down there would have been no necessity; he would never have arisen had the murderers and robbers of the Latter-Day Saints in the bandit State of Missouri been promptly punished, as they would have been in any European nation. Yet the United States boasts of toleration, and violates it in practice. The consequence has been, the government will have to put down a rebellion at an enormous cost of money and life, which an honest adherence to their own laws, and to the laws of common civilization all over the world, would have rendered unnecessary.

After these remarks, which seem demanded by the references which may arise in the sequel, it is needless to state, for the reader will presume as much, that the party into which I had fallen near Iowa City consisted of an emigration of these people, the greater part English and Scotch, who had been led to abandon their own shores in the hope of peace, plenty, and an interest in the soil of America — a fee-simple interest. The adherence to a particular faith from worldly motives prevails in all religions — in some more than others — and therefore the Latter-Day Saints did not stand alone in the practice. How the contest will termi-

nate cannot yet be seen. If Young is only as successful as he is cunning — if it be only for a time — he will tell his followers that Heaven fights on their side. If he is beaten, it will still not diminish the followers of Smith's doctrines, for it will be regarded as a war of persecution, after the unre-dressed murders and robberies practiced upon these people when living on their own lands upon the Mississippi — crimes, the perpetration of which drove them from their homes to the mountains.

There appeared to be an excellent organization in the camp. The elders, or leaders, had to provide for the multitude — a multitude consisting of men, women, and children, always apt to grumble upon the slightest ground; but the interference of the majority siding with the leaders, had uniformly restored harmony. The elders mounted guard in the camp at night, and did not seem to spare themselves, for they were compelled to show the people how to harness their bullocks and to load their teams, and harassed enough they were. How they preserved order was to me wonderful. At all hours of the day and night one might walk among their tents in peace. Not an oath or curse was heard, and everything was conducted with decency and order. I saw no trace of immorality, and there was a great cheerfulness notwithstanding.

ing. To myself, a Gentile, they were civil and kind in the fullest degree. It was evident that the mass were under the impression of a religious sentiment, and where that is the case, let the creed be what it may, if it is to be a creed of serious morality, the impression will rule the mass and overawe those who are only nominal believers in it.

I was so pleased with what I saw, that I asked my fellow-travelers whether I might be admitted to accompany the cavalcade some part of the way. I thought of proceeding across the Missouri River with them, and then returning by way of Saint Louis, and so up the Ohio to Pittsburgh. The reply I received was a hearty welcome. There were more than a score persons in the camp who were going all through with the brethren. It was only necessary to conform to the rules observed for the general advantage, in resting, and in the order of march. I confess this kind of camping had a charm for me. I felt a sort of freedom and hilarity in the open air which made me anxious to enjoy more of it; perhaps it was the internal spirit of freedom, which slumbers in the inhabitant of cities, but carries its full energy in the savage of the wild — the man of nature.

I now secured a couple of mules, an Indian pony, a buffalo-skin to sleep on, and a species of umbrella tent, very light. I have before alluded to

the necessary appurtenances, but I also engaged a youth, one of the brethren, to take care of my luggage, which was light, and consisted principally of articles absolutely necessary for refreshment and subsistence. Altogether my mules had not to carry more than two hundred and fifty pounds' weight between them.

The camp was divided into tens. Six of these composed a band. The vehicles were for the most part wagons, drawn by two, four, and six oxen each, according to their load, oftentimes too wild for the yoke. The wagons were some of them divided into sleeping and traveling apartments. The leaders of these people were certainly endowed with wonderful patience — a patience, I should have thought, incompatible with their ignorance and prejudices as to creed. Under the blazing sun I saw the leader of a band of sixty wagons toil up and down his train six or seven times in an hour or two to keep them together, help on the drivers unaccustomed to their work, and themselves whipping up the half-broke cattle. Several of them rode mules, it is true, but an equal number proceeded on foot, "learning to endure", as they phrased it. I wondered how they stood it; and they had no wagon to rest in at night.

The west of America must be a healthy country, except where the land is low or near sluggish,

mud-banked rivers, for there intermittent fevers prevail as well as elsewhere. There seemed in the midst of the excessive heat a power of exertion, a springiness not at all like the faint, relaxing sensation of a very hot English summer's day. I speak of the dry prairies of the west. The air was always clear, dry, and exhilarating beyond idea.

On one tolerably high spot where we once rested in the bosom of nature's own wildness, the scenery noble yet scarcely picturesque, I stood on a steep bank and saw the great river, the broad Missouri, sweeping majestically along until it was lost in the distance — that prodigious stream, at such a vast distance from the ocean! — now lost for a moment, then bending and sweeping onward until it disappeared in the bosom of the hills, or "bluffs" as they call them, that bounded the horizon.

The mode in which the brethren travel to their Paradise Regained is slow and tedious, but has its advantages, for it admits of the traveler getting out and walking whenever he pleases; and if he has a saddle-horse, mule, or Indian pony in addition, nothing better could be desired by the lover of nature in her wild mountain or prairie attire, where the pure air is the elixir of life. In low grounds, and on the banks of sluggish streams, the mosquitoes are a torment, but they are little

felt on what are called the high prairies, those interminable wastes. There is dust, it is true, quite enough, but on horseback the effect of the wheels and feet of the oxen in this regard are avoided. There is a feeling of freedom in scouring those vast plains on horseback which I never felt before, a species of soul intoxication which came upon me, and has increased since I left Iowa City about two hundred and sixty miles behind. The scenery before that was tame, but grew finer every day afterward.

Thus I jogged on with these strange religionists to Council Bluffs. I found them pleasant people enough, both men and women, orderly, decent in conduct, and strict in their ideas of devotion. They had early prayer when they rose. I do not think worse of them for that. They are poor; that they cannot help; but they *can* help their ignorance. They often sang hymns, the poetry of which was not much better than Sternhold and Hopkins, or Tate and Brady, but the tunes old and familiar, and the notes, borne on the gentlest of breezes, came home to the heart, for they were those we recognize in church and chapel at home. Coming sweetly upon the ear, for they were sung correctly — sounds being much more easy to impress inerasably upon uncultivated ears than sense upon untaught minds — I was borne back upon

the wings of memory to the shores of old England.

A sensation of melancholy passed like a cloud across my soul, but was dissipated by the cry, "There are the Bluffs!" in other words, the hills coming down to the Missouri, which formed the termination of one of the early expeditions from the United States, and where a council was held by the party to palaver the poor Indians. Since then those Bluffs are become but the frontier to the "Far West". There is now an improving village at this remote spot.

I found one or two persons suffering from intermittent fever, and ventured to prescribe for them with complete success. I wonder there was not more of this among them before leaving the lower country. Now, or shortly after, on the high prairies there could be no fear of such attacks. On the whole, I am persuaded that with a little care on the higher ground, that is, at one or two hundred feet above the river, the west country here is healthier than the eastern part of the continent to the north of the fortieth or forty-second parallel.

It was now the moment when it was needful I should return to Iowa City. Once across the Missouri, and on the high prairies, the emigrant party had a journey of a thousand miles before them. I had already seen more of the west country than most Englishmen who visit America. I was

pleased with the wild gipsy kind of life I had led thus far, though only making distances of a dozen miles a day. In ninety days I might visit the headquarters of the Latter-Day Saints, a thousand miles from the Bluffs. Should I proceed, free from ties as I happened to be both at home and in America? It was necessary I should determine promptly.

One of the brethren decided me, by saying I might enjoy the chase of the wild buffalo on my way, get a shot now and then at a prairie wolf, and, perchance, fall in with a tribe or two of Indians, and see mankind much in the state of our first parents. There was nothing better in the way of food than the grilled marrow-bones of a buffalo, and I should find, notwithstanding the sameness of the scenery, both an increase of health and of amusement if I proceeded. If I reached the Salt Lake Valley I should find the brethren kindly, as I was a sober man and neither cursed nor swore, as the people from the East did, and that made a great difference; that, though a "Gentile", I should be brought to confess that their religious friends were not such a set of mad fools and enthusiasts as their enemies would fain make them out to be. "We have been driven so far away by the persecution we suffered in the west, for no reason but that we would not join in the drunkenness, rioting,

and swearing of those around us; that we had morning prayer every day, and worked hard for our bread, set our faces against slavery, (a crime in Missouri, that worst of all the States,) and interpreted the Scriptures in our own way."

Not a word did this man say of the Book of Mormon, of which I am told their leaders are getting shy, as the trick by which it was produced was too glaring for any but the most ignorant to swallow. Their first rough-hewed creed will, I believe, be smoothed and polished in time, like many others, to suit existing habits by pruning early extravagances. I hesitated, resolved, hesitated, and then determined to pay a visit to this singular valley, I confess more for the pleasure of the journey than any I expected to derive from the sight of the settlement itself.

My resolution fixed, Council Bluffs was the place where necessaries were generally stored up for the journey. I purchased a wagon and a couple of oxen to carry the burden before borne by my mules, one of which, for the lad I have before spoken of, I retained, as well as my pony. In the wagon I placed my tent, ammunition, and stores of tea, coffee, sugar, bacon, hard biscuit, flour, and similar articles, and having secured one of "the brethren" as a driver, upon very reasonable terms, I joined the cavalcade. After crossing the Mis-

souri, with the thermometer at 100°, and getting clear of the muddy river and its bluffs, we were soon upon the vast undulating plains watered by the river Platte.