On Sunday, 26 July 1846, at sunrise, Wilford Woodruff commenced taking his stock from Nauvoo, Illinois, in a skiff across the Mississippi River to Montrose, Iowa, as he headed west. The day was hot; and because of a shortage of help, Woodruff had to assist the ferryman in rowing the craft. They could take only five or six animals at a time, so it took several trips to get his twenty cows and oxen over. The ferryman tore open the belly of one of his best oxen necessitating the additional labor of sewing it up. When all were across, Woodruff finally collapsed on a hill above the river and later wrote, “This was one of the hardest days work of my life . . . . [W]hen I got through . . . I felt hardly able to stand up.” He needed several days to recover.1

The Mississippi was only the first of many water barriers that challenged the first wave of Saints in their movement westward. Traveling through southwest Iowa alone, the first refugees coming from Nauvoo built thirty-four bridges on their way to the Missouri River. At one point, within seventeen miles, there were four creeks to cross—the Plum, Ash, Cedar, and a twelve-foot-wide creek at the bottom of the Bluffs near the Platte. Other waterways allowed fording or required ferrying according to the swiftness and depth of the water and its width, but all had to be crossed to continue the journey.

Through diary entries and the reports of those who have studied the trail and water navigation, this paper will reveal how the Saints met the challenges of the waters and how their crossings aided others who followed in their wake.2

The Overland, or Mormon Trail, particularly in early spring and in the eastern portion, presented frequent obstacles in the form of rivers, creeks, streams,
sloughs, and mudholes. As the travelers moved farther west, the spring runoff slackened, and the country became more arid. The Mormons chose to follow the Platte along the north side, which avoided most river crossings except the Loup Fork and the Green River. Still, the entire route proved challenging as livestock, heavy wagons, and tired emigrants came upon the various water barriers.

Most of the men were familiar with the different methods of traversing water in the East. Flatboats, rafts, canoes, and dugouts proliferated as a means of navigating waterways and were easily constructed from abundant trees lining the shores. The Mormons employed all these techniques as they moved west.

Entrepreneurs abounded on the larger rivers ferrying travelers for a fee. These ferries featured all kinds of craft, but the most common was the flatboat, which carried over 90 percent of river commerce in the Jacksonian era. A flatboat is basically a floating bridge that can be drawn across the water by means of oars, poles, or ropes. The most basic were equipped with oars or poles to move into the current and steer through to the other side. The stern oar, measuring about forty to fifty feet, was used in calmer currents, while a “gouger” in the front guided the craft through more rapid water. The side oars were also used to take the boat into the current or to assist in landing it on the other side.3

On other rivers, a rope-and-pulley contraption propelled boats across. Sarah Pratt described crossing the Cedar River in Iowa in 1852 on a “log ferry” of this
sort. Travelers carried as much as a thousand feet of hemp rope, two-and-a-half inches in diameter for this purpose. A man would be sent on horseback or would swim across the river and anchor the rope on the other side. Then, another rope was looped over the first or strung on a pulley attached to it, and the ferry could be pulled across manually or by horse power. This method worked well as long as the rope could be kept from sagging too much.

The best documented ferries were those at the Mormon crossing on the Missouri and near present-day Casper on the Platte. At the middle Mormon ferry on the Missouri, teams pulled the wagons on board and then were unhitched and tied to the rear wheels of the wagons. Then, the big flatboat attached to a hemp cable stretched a half-mile down river to the other side was pushed out of the dugway into the water. The current of the river propelled the craft to the lower Nebraska dugway. After the boat was unloaded, it was poled back to the upper dugway to take another load.4

In 1846, the ferry was moved up river, and a different method was used to propel the boat. An 1853 traveler observed that it took six or eight “stout fellows” to row the Council Bluffs ferry across.

![Emigrants to Utah & California crossing the Elkhorn River by George Simons Council Bluffs Public Library Collection](image-url)

During the busy years of migration, all along the trail, crowds of Saints and others moving westward often waited in line at water crossings. At the
Bonaparte ferry in May 1846, there were forty wagons waiting. James Brown, who traveled Iowa in May and June, wrote, “At every creek we found campers.” In fact, at the Genoa Ferry, Brown chartered the ferry boat; and he and those traveling with him manned the craft themselves, putting in fifteen hours of hard labor to get their fifty-nine wagons over and to swim their numerous loose stock across.6

Dugouts, canoes, and log floats were also used to cross rivers. A log float consisted of fastening a large, dry log on each side of the wagon. The oxen would be forced into the river and guided across by the driver swimming at their side.

The vanguard company carried a leather boat called the “revenue cutter,” which was mounted on wheels to serve as a wagon that carried supplies overland and across rivers and also was used to explore waterways. It may have been similar to “bull boats” made from bull hides.

After the vanguard company reached the upper crossing of the North Platte, they tried several methods of crossing, including an old, dried-up raft. Finally, several men were sent upriver where they felled two large cottonwood trees that were hollowed out to make rough canoes. Another group chopped “slabs and puncheons” to top the boats. All was lashed together, and wagons could then be pushed onto the raft and ferried over the river.

While the vanguard group was still at the crossing, a group of Missourians bound for Oregon requested assistance in getting over. They became the first to utilize a ferry service run by the Mormons, which operated at various times through the next few years. A sign erected at Deer Creek, twenty-eight miles from the crossing, alerted travelers to the “good and safe ferry. Manned by experienced men.”7

Bridges from very rustic to new and solid transported the Saints over some water areas. At Wood River, Piercy noted they crossed on “a very bad apology for a bridge composed of branches of trees and foliage thrown into the river, which [was] about 2 feet deep and 3 or 4 yards wide.”8 At Papillon or Papea Creek, native Americans operated a bridge, charging a toll of fifty cents.

High water washed out a bridge over the Nishnabotna in June 1846. The brethren immediately began to rebuild it and another on Indian Creek. On 1 July, “all hands went to work at the bridge,” which was finished by sundown. The next day, someone observed that it didn’t look like the bridge would last long. The Indian Creek bridge was finished, too, but was also unreliable and came near to breaking down. The brethren strengthened both to make them safe.9 In their efforts to repair and throw up bridges quickly, they often used flood wood that may have brought the bridges down in the first place.

In his article “River Crossings,” Ross Marshall wrote that “One of the most dangerous and frustrating features of any of the wagon train experience was the constant necessity of crossing rivers, streams and creeks.”10 Weather, tired animals, and makeshift bridges and ferries all contributed to frequent mishaps.
William Fredrick Porter reported:

Arriving at one of the branches of the [Nishna] Botna, which was bridged by a pole floor, and it having rained only a short time before, the team . . . became frightened and began pushing on the yoke, when the floor of the bridge parted and the front yoke, or leaders, slipped through the bridge and hung suspended by their necks until Brown, grasping an axe, drove the staple out of the wooden yoke, and the cattle thus freed, fell into the water below, a distance of thirty feet.

Brown was so involved with saving his provisions that it was some time before he looked for his oxen. He found, “to his utter astonishment,” they were calmly grazing by the river side.”11

At the Elkhorn River crossing, a company loaded horses and wagons on a raft to ferry them across. “While in midstream the rope broke and the raft was carried downstream for a quarter of a mile. It required twenty yoke of oxen to draw it back upstream to the place of landing.”12

When Erastus Snow’s family crossed the Mississippi, about two-thirds of the way over, a mishap pitched five-year-old Sarah into the icy river. Snow jumped into the water to save her but couldn’t see her. He almost panicked until he spied her colorful pinafore and was able to grab her. Some of their belongings
were ruined, but Snow thanked God his daughter was spared.13

The Saints must have thought the Lord’s curse on the waters given in August 1831 (D&C 61:4-5) was still in effect as time after time mishaps occurred in their attempts to move across waterways. One woman recalled that when her father neared the Platte River, his two thirsty yoke of oxen and one team of cows pulling the wagon, sensing the water ahead, broke and ran.

The cows and one yoke of oxen dropped off the 20-foot embankment and hung from the tongue with the remaining team holding the wagon from dropping into the river. The driver immediately cut the two teams from the wagon. They swam around for some time until several men in the company were able to guide them to a low bank where they could get out.14

At shallower waterways, the emigrants forded their wagons across. But even these could be difficult to ford. The Platte serves as a good example. Wilford Woodruff wrote that the Platte was different from any river he had seen before. The mile-wide river bed advanced and retreated according to the wind. When the south wind blew, it pushed the water to the north shore. When the wind shifted, a man could leave the north shore and walk two-thirds of the way across
Audrey M. Godfrey: All Are Safely Across

Thomas Bullock agreed. He called the Platte a “totally useless and insignificant” river. It couldn’t be ferried; there was no timber for bridges; and it was difficult to ford. One day a person could wade across in knee deep water, and the next day, there would be a dry sand bank. His fellow traveler crossed in water to his arm pits. The next evening, it was only knee deep. “All that was needed to move the water was a mild breeze.”

Steep riverbanks also made fording hazardous. Sometimes the men cut away the bank to make the descent and ascent easier. At such dangerous crossings, a common measure was to unhitch teams, often empty the wagons, and let them down the banks with ropes attached to the rear of the vehicle. On the other side, the ropes were moved to the wagon’s tongue to hoist the wagon up to level terrain. At Salt Creek and the Chariton, diarists mention using such ropes.

At Muddy Creek, the descent down the steep bank was called by one the “worst to cross on the route.” As the wagons started down, there was a sudden pitch that left the wagon in mud to the hubs. The driver then gave a sudden “haw” to spur the oxen up the opposite side “almost wrenching the wagons.”

At Beaver Creek, the men stood on the west bank with a long rope hooked to the wagon tongue to assist the teams in pulling the wagons up the bank. And, at Prairie Creek, all the wagon riders were ordered out before driving the teams down a steep bank and across a narrow bridge. One woman, asleep in a wagon, never heard the order; and, as the wagon crossed the narrow bridge, it fell off into the creek. The woman woke and screamed, throwing the men into a panic as they envisioned her pinned under the wagon. They jumped into the water and, upon raising the wagon, realized she was trapped inside. One of the men ripped the cover with his knife and pulled her out.

One method of crossing a steep-sided channel with a stream bed having a muddy bottom, or one where the depth in places might be troublesome, was unique. When additional oxen were added, the lead teams could be across the channel before the wagon came to that point, providing solid footing to help the wheel team and wagon across.

The danger of not adding oxen and of using an inexperienced driver is illustrated in the following incident. When Mrs. Jane Harris reached the North Platte River holding her baby in her arms as she lay in the wagon, her driver refused to follow the course marked by her husband, Captain William Martin Harris. Instead of going with the current and directing his course to the opposite bank at an angle, he started straight across. Harris looked back in midstream and saw the man’s error. By then, the lead yoke was apparently drowning in a deep hole. The driver, sensing his folly, quickly stopped the second yoke. Harris raced to the rescue. Getting on the wagon tongue, he unhitched the chain of the lead team, and the other men drove them around and hitched them to the rear of the wagon. He stayed with the second yoke to keep them from going forward,
and the wagon was successfully pulled back out of danger.19

A forty-five-degree slope toward the Elkhorn River also required special precautions. “By putting one or two yoke of oxen aft, they led the wagons down the wide landing road that started from a shady campground.” Then, they cut through thick scrub on the steep slope toward the river. Even with their careful maneuvering, some of the wagons got away from them.20

Sloughs, mudholes, and quicksand also required the ingenuity and muscle power of the emigrants. Patty Sessions noted the sloughs were so bad they couldn’t keep in the trail. They went upstream and made a bridge of grass to cross. According to James Brown, both men and women waded in the mud to their knees to assist double-teamed wagons through the miry mess. He observed that when the women put their shoulders to the wheels, the men doubled their efforts.21

Wilford Woodruff put in another exhausting day when, after his loose stock had run away in Black Jack Grove and while he was trying to get them out, the oxen broke the tongue of his carriage. He mended that and the group started again. They had not gone far until “Father drove into A mud Hole & the oxen mired down. We put on 8 yoke of oxen to draw the waggon out & we broke 4 chaines And had to dig the waggon out. At last We finally got camped. . . . And I was vary weary at night.” They had gone only four miles.22

At “Rock Koonfork” near the Des Moines River, Lewis Barney hit a “slew” whose water became deeper even as they crossed it. They took one wagon across and went back for another. “By this time the water in the slew was knee deep and by the time we crossed the third wagon the water was midside the horses.”23

Barney also mentions another hazard that beset those crossing rivers—quicksand. His company made several attempts to cross the Loup Fork of the Platte and finally found a place that looked good. They took a trial horse and carriage over, which mired in the sand halfway across. Over twenty men rushed in and dragged horse and carriage to the opposite shore. After some deliberation, they decided to hitch eight or ten teams with “four or five span to a wagon.” Plunging and miring along with the assistance of fifty to sixty men, the first crossed all right. By the time the last wagons went over, they needed only one span. They discovered what many did—that after a few horses and wagons went over, the sand became more stable.24

When Porter Rockwell came upon quicksand, he humorously wrote, “A man on a horse standing a few minutes in one place will settle in and if they do not exert themselves immediately, they will sink, to rise no more in the resurrection of the just or the unjust.”25

The conditions at the Loup Fork were noted by many travelers. John Pulsipher wrote that this place was the most difficult crossing on the plains. “Its banks were soft, and although it was shallow, the shifting quicksands and muddy swift water made it treacherous.” They forded with doubled teams, eight yoke to
a wagon, and wound up and down following sand bars for about a mile in two to three feet of deep water.26

Erastus Snow described the Loup crossing as being divided by a sand bar in midstream, water three to four feet at its deepest, a rapid current, and a width of three hundred yards. The vanguard company got into trouble at the onset when two wagons got stuck in the sand and had to be rescued. They unhitched the horses, removed the loads, and pulled the first wagon to the opposite side. The second wagon was unloaded on the sand bar and made it through the “second stream.” Two more also made it that day, but the next day they found a better route to cross over. As was the practice when taking wagons through deep water, they put rails on the bolsters under the wagon beds to raise them above the water line, hitched on additional teams, and then proceeded to cross, a task that took them all day.27

Another hazard, which occurred mostly in the first part of the journey west, was ice. Although some early Saints found the ice on the Mississippi a boon that enabled them to cross, to others it proved more hazardous. Eliza Partridge Smith Lyman left Nauvoo on 9 February 1846. Large chunks of ice threatened to sink her boat. George Washington Bean also left as the ice was breaking up. He saw a white horse trying to stand on an “ice boat.” Men on shore saw its dilemma and called to the horse as it neared the shore. A roper threw a loop and pulled the horse onto the bank, saving its life.28

Crossing the Missouri from Ferry Point to Winter Quarters, a company found the Missouri had been frozen for some time, and several teams had passed over safely. But when Charles Lambert’s wagon was taken over with a team drawn by a rope, he and his wife Mary watched from the Missouri side. The ice broke, and he and Mary, who was six weeks from delivery, saw all they owned disappear. When news of their misfortune spread among the other Saints, volunteers plunged into the icy water and retrieved the Lamberts’ belongings. Others on the river’s edge loaded the items on hand sleds and pulled them ashore.29

Ice on the Missouri so impressed a five-year-old girl that years later she remembered the large cakes of ice that floated down. To keep them from striking the boat she was on, the men pushed them away with poles.30

And what about the thousands of animals that came with the pioneers? In most cases, loose livestock swam across rivers. Drivers with whips and sticks forced them into the water, taking care to have some of the strongest cattle ahead. Finding it impossible to avoid the water, they plunged in. Thomas Kane observed such a maneuver. He wrote that on that occasion a boatload of cattle was taken to the opposite shore, and then the herd, sometimes numbering a thousand, were driven upstream and forced into the water. At this point, young herd boys climbed onto the backs of the animals and, using prods or slapping the sides of the animals’ heads, guided them through the current to the other side.
The boys’ dexterity and courage and their lack of the use of profanity impressed Kane.31

Some others boys were not so lucky. In 1868, a group of boys from Sanpete County was called to help immigrants come to Utah. When they reached the Green River, as the loaded wagons were being ferried across, the cattle stampeded and the group was swept down the river. Six of the boys perished and were later eulogized by the survivors in verses set to the Civil War song, “Just Before the Battle, Mother.”32

Draft animals, when a wagon was ferried across, were usually fastened to the downstream side of the craft. When pulling a wagon over, oxen (which were not driven by a driver seated in the wagon) were joined and guided through the water by their masters. At the Platte and Green Rivers, Moses and Nancy Tracy held on to the ox bows to take their teams across.33

One youthful ox team driver, following a wagon that became stalled on a sandbar in the Green River, decided to pass it as his leg hurt terribly from standing in water up to his waist so long while he waited. The captain saw him and commanded him to stop. Twenty more feet and the boy, wagon, and team would have gone down the river, as the bar on which the wagon was stalled was not wide enough for two teams to pass each other.34

Handcart pioneers faced the same water barriers as those in wagon trains. Their crossings are often too arduous to comprehend. Normally, an accompany-
ing wagon went into the water first, and then several handcart pullers grabbed hold of the wagon with one hand and the handcart with the other and be pulled across. On the other side, they built bonfires to dry their clothes. Women and children were often carried through deep water but waded through the shallow streams. In the early part of the journey, it was less hazardous physically because of the availability of ferries to carry them and bridges to traverse the water. But females in the Edward Martin Company were harrassed by hoodlums who ran ahead of the company to the next crossing and then ridiculed them as they raised their dresses to wade the streams.35

The strong helped the weak. Sarah Ann Haigh, a nineteen-year-old girl, carried sixteen people across the north branch of the Platte. When her company came to the Sweetwater, Eliza Staker crossed it three times one evening. First, she took her son Joseph on her back, put him down on the other side, and turned to go get her sister. But he was so frightened he tried to follow her, so she tied him to a tree. After bringing the girl across, she had to make a third trip to get the handcart. She spent part of the night drying clothes, as the weather was freezing.36

Getting her children over the Platte was equally difficult for Elizabeth Bradshaw, a very small, dainty woman. She took her son, Richard, a boy of six, on her shoulders with his legs around her neck and him holding onto her head. They were caught by a strong ripple in the water and carried a distance downstream. When it looked like she would be pulled under, several on shore called, “Let the boy go from your shoulders or you will both be drowned. Save yourself and let him go into the water.” But she continued to struggle and finally reached the other side. However, the bank there was very high and steep, and she couldn’t climb out. Men came to her aid, one reaching down and pulling Richard from her shoulders and the others helping her to safety. Even though she was exhausted, she raised her right arm to the square and witnessed to the crowd that God had protected and save both her and her son.37

Reaching the Platte near Fort Kearney, Josiah Rogerson found the wagon had already taken the aged and children over. Making it on his own, he found his siblings were not there. He left his provisions in charge of a woman, rolled up his trousers, and waded back across the cold river, slipping on the smooth stones and boulders in the deeper water. Reaching the other side, he found his brother too weak and afraid to undertake the crossing. Josiah climbed into the rope harness on the lead cart, and with his brother in the shafts and his sister at his side, they waded waist deep in places and made the crossing again without accident.38

All along the trail, the Mormon emigrants, on foot or in wagons, built bridges, established ferries, and forged a path through water as well as through forest and plain. Crossing the waterways was just as dangerous and difficult as traversing hills and sandy and rocky ridges. Many Saints were injured or lost
their lives in these crossings, while others experienced no problems. All played a major role in determining routes, bridge, ford, and ferry locations—a sort of road map that aided later Mormon emigrants as well as Oregon and California pioneers.

**Notes**

1. Wilford Woodruff, Journal (1839-1846), 26 July 1846, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Historical Library, Salt Lake City, Utah, hereafter referred to as CHL.
2. The author is aware that from year to year, the over landers’ experience varied according to time of year and weather conditions at each crossing. This paper seeks only to cite some of the experiences of those who met water barriers as they headed west. It would be erroneous to suppose that circumstances would be the same for every group at the specific sites mentioned.
5. Frederick G. Piercy, *Route From Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley*, James Linforth, ed. (Liverpool: Franklin D. Richards, 1855), 81.
11. Life of William Frederick Porter,” microfilm, 22, found in Harold B. Lee Library Archives, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, hereafter cited as Lee Library.
17. Ibid., 214.
20. Arrington, 189.
24. Ibid., 35.
25. Found in Reed Durham’s notes on the vanguard band, copy in possession of author.
27. Larson, 134-35.
38. Ibid., 367.