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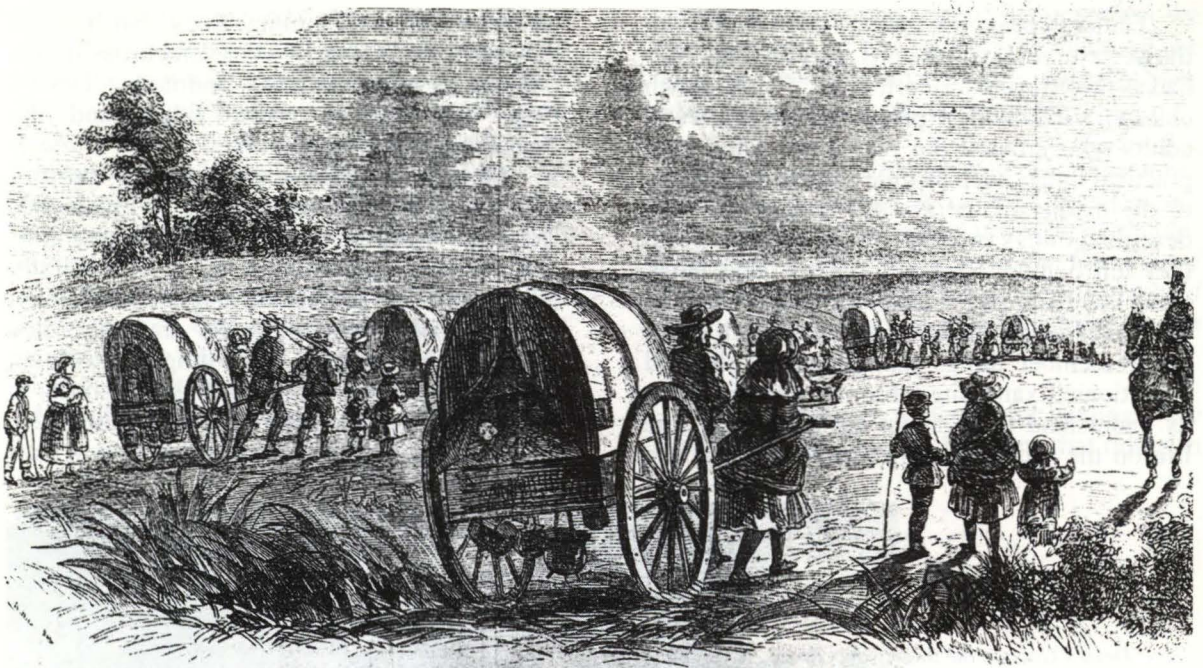
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The Spirit of Pioneering



Engraving from Ballou's Pictorial, Boston, September 20, 1856. USHS collections.

Are We There Yet? The Story of Children on the Mormon Trail

BY JILL JACOBSEN ANDROS

While reflecting on her experience crossing the plains in a Mormon handcart company at age nine, Agnes Caldwell recalled:

(continued from p. 4)

From their departure from Nauvoo in 1846 until the transcontinental railroad reached Utah, more than 70,000 Mormon immigrants traveled to the Salt Lake Valley in well-organized wagon and handcart companies. Their religion sustained them and created a viable group structure on the trail for more than 20 years. Socializing and recreation also contributed much to the success of Mormons moving as villages on wheels.

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Although only tender years of age, I can yet close my eyes and see everything in panoramic precision before me—the ceaseless walking, walking, ever to remain in my memory. Many times I would become so tired and, childlike, would hang on the cart, only to be gently pushed away. Then I would throw myself by the side of the road and cry. Then realizing they were all passing me by, I would jump to my feet and make an extra run to catch up.

When historians look at the period of Mormon immigration to Zion they usually focus on the adult experience, while the stories of the many children who crossed the plains remain virtually unknown. But a thorough study of the journals and memoirs of LDS pioneers who crossed the plains as children reveals that their historical value is actually very great. The accounts of children provide information about trail life in general; they reveal the importance of the family unit in migration and settlement; they entertain and inspire; and they show how experiences on the trail affected children and prepared them for the later challenges and hardships associated with settling the frontier. Studying the trail through the eyes of children gives us a fuller understanding of Mormon migration and settlement.

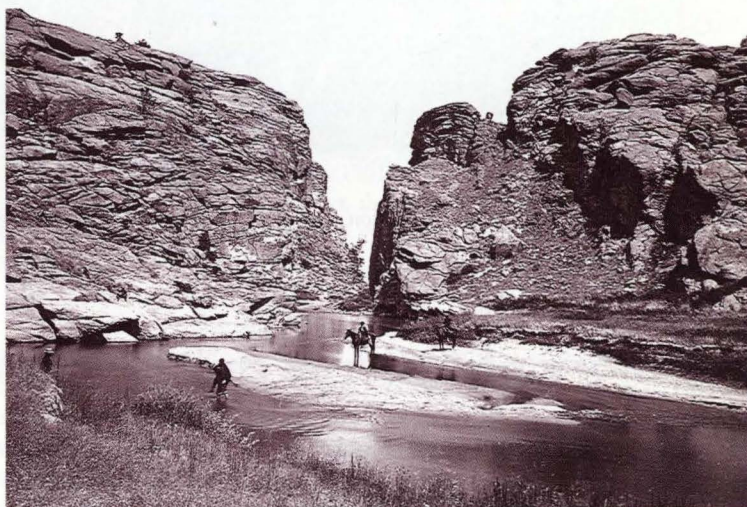
Children bring the trail to life as they share the perceptions, impressions, and feelings they had as they traveled. Elliott West, a well-known children's historian, explains that the diaries of adults who crossed the plains are filled with practical things such as miles covered, weather, or the quality of the grass. Furthermore, they described things in terms of the familiar world they left behind. Children, on the other hand, were literalists and sensualists. They wrote of their experiences literally and tended to notice and remember things that produced physical sensations. Examining these impressions helps us understand more about the geography and life on the trail and allows us to see trail life

Devil's Gate and Chimney Rock, but because they are so literal they were sometimes disappointed by these famous landmarks: Devil's Gate was only a rocky ridge, and the Sweetwater River tasted bitter.

Another common experience on the trail was death. Because the passing of loved ones was a fairly common, some historians say children became accustomed to it. It naturally hardened them somewhat and prepared them mentally and emotionally for tragedies they would encounter later in settling the frontier. Elliott West wrote that parents did little to shield children from the deaths of others. He says that youngsters accepted death very mat-

Devil's Gate on the Sweetwater River.

Children found many landmarks disappointing: Devil's Gate was just a rocky ridge, and the Sweetwater tasted bitter. USHS collections.



through different eyes.

One aspect of the trail that impressed children and is commonly mentioned in their accounts is the newness to them of many natural wonders, including buffalo, lightning, thunderstorms, and geographical landmarks. For example, William B. Ashworth wrote of the time he saw "what looked like a black cloud which soon showed itself to be a herd of hundreds of buffalo." He also recalled a dramatic storm: "The lightening and thunder increased terrifically and the good women lifted up their dresses and covered us completely with their full skirts.... We boys were crying as hard as we could." By comparing this description with that of an adult we see how the sensualist and literalist nature of children adds a new dimension to the way we view trail life. For example, adult accounts depict storms in romantic metaphors, describing them as a "natural meteoric exhibition" of "electric fluid" or a "hellish blast that severed pole from pole." Children, however, describe them in terms of how the storms made them feel.

Children also told of landmarks such as

ter-of-factly and that journal entries concerning death "sit calmly beside notes of the ordinary." This is seen in the accounts of Mormon children over and over. For example, Elizabeth Pulsipher told of the death of her baby sister:

She died the third day after we had started, and as there was no one to take care of her body, I had to bathe her and put a little dress on her, and sew a cloth around her body to be buried in as there was no coffin. As small as I was, no one came to help me and mother was not able to do anything.

Other children also told about death with the same lack of emotion. Caroline Pedersen Hansen, age seven, wrote about the hot weather and sunburns and the problems of crossing the rivers; and in between these seemingly trivial things she inserted one sentence about waking up one morning and finding her brother lying beside her, dead. Hyrum Weech who crossed the plains at age eleven described how a man in his company was accidentally shot in the leg while hunting buffalo and added simply:

"The weather being very warm, they could not save him and he died and was buried there. Out of all the men who went, they got only one buffalo." Although Hyrum's account might have shown more emotion if he had recorded it at the time it occurred, the fact that he still remembered getting only one buffalo indicates that grief and shock probably had not affected him a great deal.

Other historians argue that children did show a great deal of emotion and sorrow at deaths on the trail. This is seen in an account by Heber Robert McBride who traveled in the Martin handcart company:

hardships the pioneers endured, but when we read accounts of the suffering of children we begin to feel the force of the struggles they faced. John Stettler Stucki recalled:

I have never forgotten how when I, a nine-year-old boy, would be so tired that I would wish I could sit down for just a few minutes. How much good it would do to me. But instead of that, my dear, nearly worn-out father would ask me if I could not push a little more on the handcart.

B. H. Roberts remembered feeling very tired during the journey. He knew that riding in



C. C. A. Christensen's painting of Mormon immigrants shows children in several different roles. Photograph in USHS collections.

...I went to look for Father and at last I found him under a wagon with snow all over him and he was stiff and dead. I felt as though my heart would burst[.] I sat down beside him on the snow and took hold of one of his hands and cried oh Father Father[.] there we was away out on the Plains with hardly anything to eat and Father dead.

Heber's six-year-old brother, Peter, viewed the same death a little differently. He, too, showed great emotion at the death of his father and during his burial ran away crying. When someone tried to console him, he cried more and, reflective of his youth, said, "My father had my fish hooks in his pocket and I want them."

Just as children's feelings of fright merit interest, so do their descriptions of fatigue. Adult accounts give us an idea of the extreme

the wagon was not allowed but climbed into the wagon anyway and found a barrel he could hide in. He was surprised to find as he lowered himself into the barrel that it contained three or four inches of molasses at the bottom: "The smarting of my chapped feet almost made me scream with pain, but I stifled it. Too tired to attempt to climb out, I remained and gradually slipped down and went to sleep doubled up in the bottom of the barrel." He had to face laughter from the other immigrants when he later came out from his hiding place dripping with molasses, but the rest had been worth it.

In many accounts children mention hunger. Some in the less fortunate handcart companies had their rations reduced to a mere two ounces of flour per day and nothing else. Heber Robert McBride wrote: "then was the time to hear children crying for something to eat nearly all the children would cry themselves to sleep every

night my 2 little Brothers would get the sack that had flour in and turn it wrong side out and suck and lick the flour dust." Some children would find a piece of rawhide and chew on it all day to alleviate the hunger pains.

Although children experienced intense suffering on the trail, their journals and personal histories also contain many references to the fun times they had as they traveled. As some pioneers reflected on their experiences, the enjoyable times stood out the most in their memories. Evan Stephens, who made the journey in 1866 at age 12, said: "The journey across the plains was such an experience of pleasure to me, that I found it difficult to sympathize with the pioneers who thought it a hardship." Members of the Martin and Willie handcart companies, on the other hand, suffered tremendously and did not write about fun or pleasure.

Adult perceptions of the frontier were affected by the pull of the society behind them and fears of what lay ahead. Children, however, did not look far into the future or remember the past as vividly. Their world of thought extended only to the farthest landmarks within their sight. Because children focused in the present—their minds uncluttered by the past and future—they were able to view their immediate surroundings with a clarity their parents could not. Life on the trail helped to prepare children for what lay ahead. They learned to push forward despite extreme fatigue and hunger, to endure other hardships, and to be resourceful in trying to solve problems. Furthermore, children had to confront their fears. Whether the object of their fear was death, separation, Indians, or some other aspect of trail life, they learned to face it head on. These hard-won skills undoubtedly prepared them for the struggles involved in making homes in the wilderness.

While trail life was molding children in these ways, one can also see that young people had a great impact on trail life. Just as frontier settlement is credited to the family, successful immigration should also be credited to the family, with children playing an integral part. The duties they performed and the responsibilities they held contributed to the success of Mormon immigration.

The most common job given to children was collecting buffalo chips for fuel. Every night when the companies made camp the adults were usually busy pitching tents and organizing while children and often women gathered buffalo chips to make fires for cooking. Understandably, it was not the most enjoyable task, so children would sometimes make a game of it by having contests to see who could

collect the most. Edwin Alfred Pettit, who crossed the plains at age 13, remembered all the children going out to collect buffalo chips "and some of the daintier sex, instead of picking them up with their hands, used tongs to gather them with. Before we had gone very far, they got very brave over this, and would almost fight over a dry one."

Older children were often left with the more challenging responsibility of caring for younger brothers and sisters and even their parents at times. When parents became ill and could not take care of the family, children often shouldered those responsibilities. Heber Robert McBride told of his experience:

...The team was give out intirely and we had to take more load on our carts and had to haul Father and Mother sometimes we would find Mother laying by the side of the road first then we would get her on the cart and haul her along till we would find Father lying as if he was dead then Mother would be rested a little and she would try and walk and Father would get on and ride and then we used to cry and feel so bad we did not know what to do....

Elizabeth Pulsipher had a similar experience. She recalled: "Being the oldest child the responsibility of the family rested upon me, and nearly every night I had to be up with the sick baby." She added: "Many a night I have lain and held a quilt over mother to keep the rain off her." Margaret McNeil Ballard, who crossed the plains at age 13, walked with her sick four-year-old brother strapped on her back the entire journey. She would sit up alone at night and hold him in her lap.

Because children worked so hard along the trail—cooking, caring for sick and feeble family members, gathering fuel, pushing handcarts, and driving teams—families were able to complete the journey successfully. Children played a vital part in westward migration as they performed the essential daily tasks on the trail. And certainly the emotional support they gave to their families was also important.

Diaries and memoirs reveal that children viewed the whole experience in terms of the family, especially in terms of their mothers. They mentioned their mothers far more frequently in the accounts than any other common aspect of trail life such as Indians, buffalo, fatigue, or hunger. Looking at the references to mothers and also fathers, we see the interdependence of children and their parents and thus the importance of the family unit in Mormon migration to Utah.

Spiritual strength and physical determination are recurring themes in the various accounts. Parents often set examples for their children that helped them as they struggled through the trials of pioneer life. Mary Jane Mount Tanner was particularly impressed by her mother's fortitude. Halfway through the journey their driver quit, leaving Mary's mother to drive the team. One of the oxen was particularly unruly and would not learn to hold back when going downhill. Mary recalled:

...She had to hold his horn with one hand and pound his nose with the other to keep him from running into the wagon ahead of him, a feat which would astonish some of our belles of the present day, and yet she was reared as tenderly and as little accustomed to hardship as any of them. Many times the bushes caught her dress, and she had no choice but to rush on, leaving it in pieces behind her.

Children seemed especially sensitive to the suffering of their mothers. Mary Ann Stucki Hafen, age six, recollected: "By this time Mother's feet were so swollen that she could not wear shoes, but had to wrap her feet with cloth....She would get so discouraged and down-hearted...." Likewise, John Stettler Stucki, her nine-year-old brother, recalled:

My dear mother had a little baby to nurse, and only having half enough to eat and to pull on the handcart all day long, day after day, she soon got so weak and worn out that she could not help father anymore. Nor was she able to keep up with the Company. Sometimes when we

camped, she was so far behind the Company we could not see anything of her for quite a while, so that I was afraid she might not be able to get to the camp.

This sensitivity can be attributed to several factors. First, for a Mormon child traveling to Utah life was very unstable. These youngsters had come from different countries, crossed unfamiliar waters, traveled unfamiliar terrain, moved from house to house, and then had no house on the trail. Mothers provided the one element of stability in their lives, someone they could always count on. So if a mother became ill or suffered hardship, thus threatening the one stable part of their life, children became concerned. As Elliott West explains, all children suffer from separation anxiety; they fear the loss of their main source of comfort and protection—usually their mother.

While we generally think of children as dependent upon their parents (which they are), trail accounts show us that often the roles were reversed and parents depended upon their children. Obviously they relied on them to perform their usual daily chores. In addition, there were often circumstances that required children to assume adult roles at an early age. Young boys in fatherless families found themselves driving teams during the day and standing guard at night. Elliott West tells of one 13-year-old girl with 10 brothers and sisters whose parents could not meet all of the challenges of the trail. One fellow traveler wrote of the girl: "They all depend on her. The children go to her in their troubles and perplexities, her father and mother rely on her, and she is always ready to do what

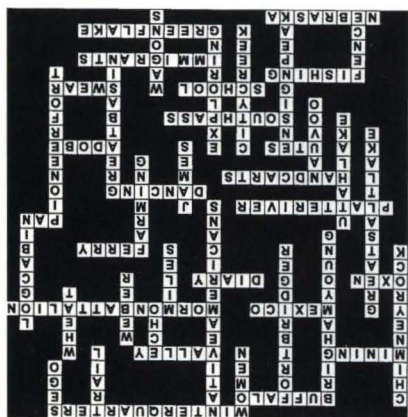


Reenactment of the Mormon migration. Sign on handcart says: "Handcart Pioneer, 1856-60. Family of Archer Walters as they left Iowa, June 7th, 1856. Children walked 1200 miles." USHS collections.

she can.” As noted earlier, Heber Robert McBride and his siblings had to load their worn-out parents on the handcart and pull them along. This interdependence of children and their parents shows the significance of the family in western migration and settlement. Family members supported each other, and the hardships of trail life taught them to rely increasingly on each other. This bonded the family and strengthened it to endure later struggles.

The contributions children made as they traveled along the trail were great indeed. Youngsters provided physical and emotional support for their families and left illuminating accounts of the trail and the lifestyle on it. At the same time, the trail was a introduction to the kind of life they would lead on the frontier. Ahead of these children lay the challenges of building homes and farms on the varied land that would become Utah. Frontier life would require children to deal with demands and pressures of adult proportions. The overland trail served as a training ground for children who would soon face these challenges. Their experiences as they traveled west taught them to work, strengthened their emotional endurance, often boosted their confidence, encouraged resourcefulness, underscored the importance of cooperation, and gave them a determination to achieve. Endowed with these skills, children were better prepared to successfully face the challenges that awaited them.

Mrs. Andros presented a version of this paper at the 1996 meeting of the Mormon History Association. Sources include Kate B. Carter, ed., *Our Pioneer Heritage* (Salt Lake City: DUP, 1958-77); Susan Arrington Madsen, *I Walked to Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994); manuscripts, journals, and autobiographies in the Lee Library, Brigham Young University; and Elliott West, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).



(Solution to puzzle on back cover.)



Green Flake. USHS collections.

Those Pioneering African Americans

BY MIRIAM B. MURPHY

The names Green Flake, Hark Lay, and Oscar Crosby are inscribed on monuments and remembered by Utah school children as the three African American slaves who came to Utah with the first company of Mormon pioneers. Beyond that, most children and adults know little about the three men and even less about the free blacks, members of the James family, who also immigrated to Utah in 1847.

Green Flake was born in Anson County, North Carolina, ca. 1828. In 1841 he traveled with his owners, James Madison and Agnes Love Flake, to Kemper County, Mississippi, where the family cleared land for a farm. During the winter of 1843-44 Madison, as he was called, and Agnes were baptized as members of the Mormon church and so was their servant Green. When the Flakes decided to join the main body of the church in Nauvoo, Green accompanied them. For a time he served as a bodyguard for Joseph Smith.

According to historian Leonard J. Arrington:

When Brigham Young organized the pioneer company in the spring of 1847, Madison Flake volunteered to send Green and his fine white 'mountain' carriage to carry the leader. Green was instructed to build a nice log house for the Flakes during the winter and have it ready for occupancy by 1848 when the family