

V.

We meet many snakes, a goodly No. of which are rattle snakes.

Serpents on the Pioneer Trail

I've bruised the heads of 2, not with my 'heel,' but with my whip.

by Melvin L. Bashore

One had 10 rattles on his tail."<sup>1</sup>

**BRUISED  
& HEADS  
& HEELS**



A. Milton Musser

In writing of his brushes with snakes along the pioneer trail to Utah, A. Milton Musser hearkened back to the scriptural story of the accursed serpent who beguiled Eve. As written in the Book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price, man was given the ability to “bruise” the serpent’s head while the serpent “shalt bruise his heel.”<sup>2</sup> When Isaac Groo was walking through the prairie grass on his way to Utah in 1854, he happened upon a “monstrous” rattlesnake, coiled up in position to strike, so he cut a stick with which, he wrote in his diary, he “bruised” the serpent’s head.<sup>3</sup> In the course of crossing the plains, both heels of people and heads of snakes, in the vernacular of the scriptures, were “bruised.”

The Nebraska plains were thick with prairie rattlesnakes. From Loup Fork on the east to Scott’s Bluff on the west, the ground was alive with vipers. Emigrants had to be wary of where they stepped. Although numerous people and animals received bites during the trek west, there were only two recorded deaths: a mule and a cow.<sup>4</sup> A survey of extant Utah pioneer narratives uncovered seven snake bites of people and five of livestock (mule, cow, horse, and oxen). Considering the frequency of snake encounters, it is to be wondered that there weren’t more.

Nathaniel Fairbanks was the first Mormon emigrant en route to Utah to be bitten by a rattlesnake. Traveling in Brigham Young’s vanguard company in 1847, Fairbanks and several other pioneers climbed into the bluffs above the Platte River.<sup>5</sup> They came upon a large rattlesnake and began teasing it “to make it mad.”<sup>6</sup> Fairbanks was bitten by the snake on the back of his left leg. By the time he returned to camp, he was suffering much with pain. He said he “felt the effects of it all over his body,” mentioning that “three minutes after he was bit he felt a pricking in his lungs.”<sup>7</sup> His tongue was dry, his leg swollen and his vision dimmed, and he complained much of a pain in his stomach. Luke Johnson “immediately applied a corn meal mush Poultrice, with Tincture of Lobelia and... at the same time giving him a Lobelia Emetic.”<sup>8</sup> They also gave him “some alcohol and water.”<sup>9</sup> After being treated with these remedies,

Fairbanks continued to suffer and called upon some of the brethren to give him a priesthood blessing. Heber C. Kimball helped administer to him, writing, “I went over to his wagon, and with President Young and Elder [Ezra T.] Benson laid hands on him.”<sup>10</sup> Wilford Woodruff wrote that he “soon was better.”<sup>11</sup>

A few days before this snake bite incident, Brigham Young heard a snake’s rattle while riding his horse. The horse stepped away from the snake, but Thomas Woolsey, following on foot, missed being bitten by only a few inches when the snake struck. Brigham Young told John S. Higbee to shoot the snake. After killing it, Higbee cut off the snake’s head and kicked it into a nearby creek which President Young named “Rattle Snake Creek.”<sup>12</sup> In succeeding years, both Mormon and non-Mormon travelers referred to the creek by this name as it was so identified in Clayton’s popular Emigrants’ Guide.<sup>13</sup>



1. Amos M. Musser, Diary, 28 July 1857, Microfilm of holograph, Historical Department Archives. Punctuation, capitalization, and spelling have been corrected. All unpublished diaries and journals cited are in the LDS Archives.
2. Moses 4:21.
3. Isaac Groo, Diary, p. 3, 11 May 1854, Typescript.
4. In its death throes, the mule’s bellowing caused the company’s cattle to stampede. Henry Ballard, Journal, 7 August 1864, p. 43, Microfilm of typescript. The snake-bit cow died on Brigham Young’s 1848 journey.
5. The locale was the “Ancient Bluff Ruins,” on the north side of the trail. Clayton’s Emigrants’ Guide advised visitors to be “cautious, on account of the many rattle-snakes lurking round, and concealed in the clefts of the bluffs.” William Clayton, The Latter-day Saints’ Emigrants’ Guide (1848; reprint, ed. by Stanley B. Kimball, Gerald, Missouri: Patrice Press, 1983), 56.
6. Charles Alfred Harper, The Diary of Charles Alfred Harper (1971), 22.
7. Howard R. Egan, [Reminiscences], Pioneering the West, 1846 to 1878, ed. and comp. by William M. Egan (Richmond, Utah: privately printed, 1917), 48.
8. Thomas Bullock, The Pioneer Camp of the Saints: The 1846 and 1847 Mormon Trail Journals of Thomas Bullock, ed. by Will Bagley (Spokane, Washington: Arthur H. Clark, 1997), 164.
9. Egan, Pioneering the West, 48.
10. Heber C. Kimball, Pioneer Journal of Heber C. Kimball, Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine 30 (October 1939): 206.
11. Wilford Woodruff, Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, vol. 3, 1 January 1846 to 31 December 1850, ed. by Scott G. Kenney (Midvale: Signature Books, 1983), 181.
12. Bullock, The Pioneer Camp of the Saints, 158.
13. Clayton, The Latter-day Saints’ Emigrants’ Guide, 54.

In 1848, when Brigham Young was leading a second large company of pioneers to Utah, Eleazer Miller's mare was bitten by a rattlesnake. The captain decided that the entire camp should halt for a day, hoping that the horse would be able to continue traveling the next day. When Brigham Young was informed about the reason for the delay, he advised them that "it would not do to stop a whole co. because a Horse was bitt by a snake." He counseled Miller to mix turpentine with tobacco, to wash the wound, and pray for the animal's recovery. With this treatment and faith, they should be able then to continue on. He reasoned that if the company were to stay until the next morning, "they will likely have More horses bit." Miller had so little faith in President Young's counsel that, in a fit of discouragement, he gave his injured horse to John Wakeley. Wakeley explicitly followed President Young's remedy and counsel to pray in faith and was able to lead the horse to that night's encampment, a distance of 12 more miles over a sandy road.<sup>14</sup>

The sand hills of Nebraska were considered one of the most difficult stretches of the trail. Those not pushing handcarts generally walked in advance of the wheeled carts. Mary Bathgate, an elderly Scottish sister who had worked in the coal pits for years, led the walking troop of Daniel D. McArthur's 1856 handcart company along this sandy stretch of trail. An energetic woman over 60 years old, she marched swinging her cane over her head, shouting "Huree for the handkerts."<sup>15</sup> This feisty ringleader of the walking brigade was a half-mile in advance of the carts when she was bitten on the back of her leg just above the ankle by a large rattlesnake. Within a half hour, her leg had swelled to four times its normal size.<sup>16</sup>

When notified of her accident, some men in the trailing company hastened to administer and care for her. When they reached her she was quite sick, but attested that she knew "there was power in the Priesthood." So they cut the wound open with a pocket knife and squeezed out all the bad blood they could. Sister Bathgate had forethought enough to tie her garter around her leg above the wound to restrict the circulation of the venom in her blood. The brethren "anointed her leg and head," laying their "hands on her in the name of Jesus" and rebuked the influence of the poison, and "she felt full of faith." The men told her she would have to ride in the wagon. For her, it was a point of pride that she had walked the entire distance from the Iowa camp ground. She asked for witnesses to testify "that she did not get into the wagon until she was compelled to by the cursed snake." Although the narratives didn't tell what happened to the snake after biting Sister Bathgate, one can imagine this lively woman may have employed her cane in a bit of pit viper "head-bruising." She was feeling well long before they reached the valley and it was Captain McArthur's testimony that "nothing but the power of God saved" the feisty Scotch woman.<sup>17</sup>

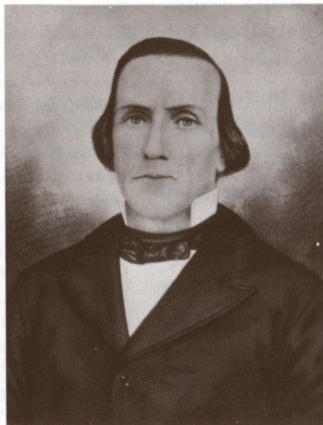
In the Willie handcart company, Ellen Cantwell, a 7-year-old girl, was bitten on the first two fingers of her right hand by a large rattlesnake while playing in the sand. Her father wrote that they "had great difficulty in saving her."<sup>18</sup> To treat her they used "a mixture of powder and lard externally and some whisky internally."<sup>19</sup> She slept soundly afterwards, but suffered from the effects of the bite for several months. In another company, an oxen that had been bitten by a rattlesnake was treated with whiskey and a tobacco poultice.<sup>20</sup>

Whiskey was in common usage on the frontier and was probably carried in most Mormon wagon companies. It served its purpose as a practical medicine and was particularly valued as a painkiller for snake

bites. One pioneer company hadn't ventured too far out onto the plains when they were intercepted by a man running up to them. Curiously enough, they were near a place on the trail named Whiskey Point. Greatly excited, he explained that his child had been bitten by a rattlesnake and he wanted some whiskey "very bad." The company gave him some and he ran off and "was soon out of sight." Shortly after the company camped for the night, half a dozen men came running into the wagon company's camp. As these

**"Wearing a Snake's rattle will cure the head ache. At any rate it will not hurt you to put it in your cap & keep it."**

Thomas Bullock



Luke Johnson

14. John D. Lee, *A Mormon Chronicle: The Diaries of John D. Lee, 1848-1876*, ed. by Robert Glass Cleland and Juanita Brooks, 2 vols. (San Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1955), 1:57. One of John D. Lee's horses was also bit by a rattlesnake at this place. He employed the remedy suggested by Brigham Young which "soon counteracted the Poison."

15. Mary Brannigan Crandal, [Autobiography], *An Enduring Legacy*, 12 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1987), 10:145.

16. Patrick Twiss Bermingham, *Journal*, 16 August 1856, in *Journal History of the Church*, 26 September 1856, hereafter cited as *Journal History*.

17. Daniel D. McArthur, Report, in *Journal History*, 26 September 1856.

18. James Sherlock Cantwell, *Autobiography*, 17 September 1856, Microfilm of typescript.

19. James G. Willie *Emigrating Company Journal*, 18 September 1856, Typescript.

20. Charles R. Savage, *Diary*, 29 July 1860, Microfilm of holograph.

## V. Bruised Heads & Heals

excited (and hopeful) men told them, "some more snakes had inserted their poisonous fangs into them, or their wives." However the pioneers were not to be taken in twice on this trick and spiritlessly sent the men packing.<sup>21</sup>

Journals and pioneer narratives are peppered with stories of close encounters with snakes and near misses from snake bites. Upon waking in the morning after a stormy night, John Lee Jones found his bedding was completely saturated. Having bedded down in a low place, Jones wrote, he "had been lying in two inches of Water all Night." Curled up between he and Edward Perry, his tent companion, were two large black snakes, each about two feet long. During the downpour, they had crawled in the tent to get out of the rain. Upon informing his tent-mate of the situation, his companion catapulted out, leaving the snakes "Sole Possessors of the Bed."<sup>22</sup>

The artist Frederick Piercy, who published handsome drawings of his trek across the plains, was surprised by a long snake that glided past his nose while he was lying down drinking water from a creek. Piercy admitted, "Had a professor of gymnastics been present, it is my opinion he would have spoken favourably of the rapidity with which I



sprang to my feet."<sup>23</sup> While camped at Ash Hollow, a young man was detailed to watch and herd the cattle. Being very tired he fell asleep, but was roused by the sound of something rattling. He was frozen in fear by the nearby rattlesnake poised to strike, but finally made a quick spring out of harm's way. He wrote, "Fortunately for his snakeship there was nothing I could kill him with than a buffalo chip."<sup>24</sup>

The pioneers wrote of their fearful feelings about the slithering serpents. A British woman was afflicted at night with "terror of the snakes skurring around us" on the barren plains, which fears caused her to yearn for "merry England."<sup>25</sup> At the sight of a dead rattlesnake, the first such snake George Beard had ever seen, he

confessed, "it caused a peculiar feeling and a shudder to go over me."<sup>26</sup> One company was setting up camp for the night when the general cry of "Snakes!" sent the camp into commotion. "We found the whole country alive with them," an immigrant in the company wrote. Inevitably and understandably, "our only show was to take what water we could, and hurry away from the place, leaving the snakes."<sup>27</sup>

In addition to their fears, Utah's pioneers harbored several curious notions about rattlesnakes. Not unexpectedly, it was commonly believed that the number of rattles indicated the age of a snake.<sup>28</sup> Wilford Woodruff believed that a man could be poisoned by some species of snakes that spit venom.<sup>29</sup> Thomas Bullock, traveling in Brigham Young's vanguard company, sent some rattles from a snake back to his wife in Winter Quarters. He wrote her that he had been told that "wearing a Snake's rattle will cure the head ache. At any rate it will not hurt you to put it in your cap & keep it."<sup>30</sup> Such information was gleaned from rural tradition and folklore.

Snakes were part of the trail experience, an element of travel that many would rather have done without. For some trail-hardened teamsters, snakes provided a serviceable purpose. It was not easy to manage a team of oxen. One teamster wrote, "We used whips aplenty." He confided that when the whips wore out, they used to see if they could find a big snake. After killing the snake, they would shove a stick in its mouth and use the dead snake for a whip.<sup>31</sup> Such a display of disinterested practicality on the part of this teamster is wondrous to contemplate. The crack of a genuine bull snake bull-whip might certainly have added appeal in bringing road-weary oxen to step a little more lively. Snakes underfoot and whip-cracking overhead an aspect of trail travel that generated uneasiness in both man and beast. ▼

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21. David Moore, Writings, p. 44, 20 May 1849, Typescript.

22. John Lee Jones, Reminiscences, p. 14, Typescript.

23. Frederick Hawkins Piercy, Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1957), 89.

24. John Allen Sutton, Autobiography, pp. 7-8, Microfilm of typescript.

25. Ellen Wasden Christensen, [Diary], in Laura Christensen McCurdy Clark, Others, 18.

26. George Beard, Reminiscences, in J. Kenneth Davies, George Beard: Mormon Pioneer Artist With a Camera (Provo), 17.

27. William Atkin, Autobiography, p. 29, 25 June 1859, Microfilm of typescript.

28. Thomas Bullock to Dearly Beloved Wife, 10 May 1847, Correspondence, Microfilm of holograph.

29. Bullock, The Pioneer Camp of the Saints, 165.

30. Thomas Bullock to My Dearly Beloved Wife, 14 May 1847, Correspondence, Microfilm of holograph.

31. James T. Sutton, Autobiography, Our Pioneer Heritage, comp. by Kate B. Carter, 20 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1974), 17:298.