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Latter-day Saint Settlement
of the West





A Forgotten Trail and Mormon Settlements

By Stanley B. Kimball

The Nebraska City Cutoff, 1864-66

Just as Florence, Nebraska, replaced Iowa City in 1859 as the main outfitting place for immigrating Saints, so, in 1864, the settlement of Wyoming in the state of Nebraska replaced Florence. During these years most European immigrants took trains from the east coast straight to Saint Joseph, Missouri, and then traveled by river boat up the Missouri to Wyoming, a small settlement forty-five miles below Florence and seven miles above Nebraska City. From Wyoming it was easy to intersect the Nebraska City Cutoff, the last of the overland trails to the West.

The principal reason for shifting to Wyoming seems to have been the Indian troubles of the mid-1860s. And the trail, as its name suggests, was shorter.

Twenty-two organized immigrant companies, 6,500 Saints total, used the cutoff during its three-year service. Some 500 more Mormons traveled individually with other non-Mormon, freight wagon trains from nearby

Nebraska City.

The Mormons preferred Wyoming, founded in 1855, over Nebraska City because it provided ample space for their staging ground and was well removed from criminal elements in the bigger port city. The Mormons constructed a few buildings of their own there, but nothing remains of old Wyoming today except an unmarked graveyard where a number of unknown Mormons were buried. Old Wyoming was doomed when the Missouri, Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad bypassed it.

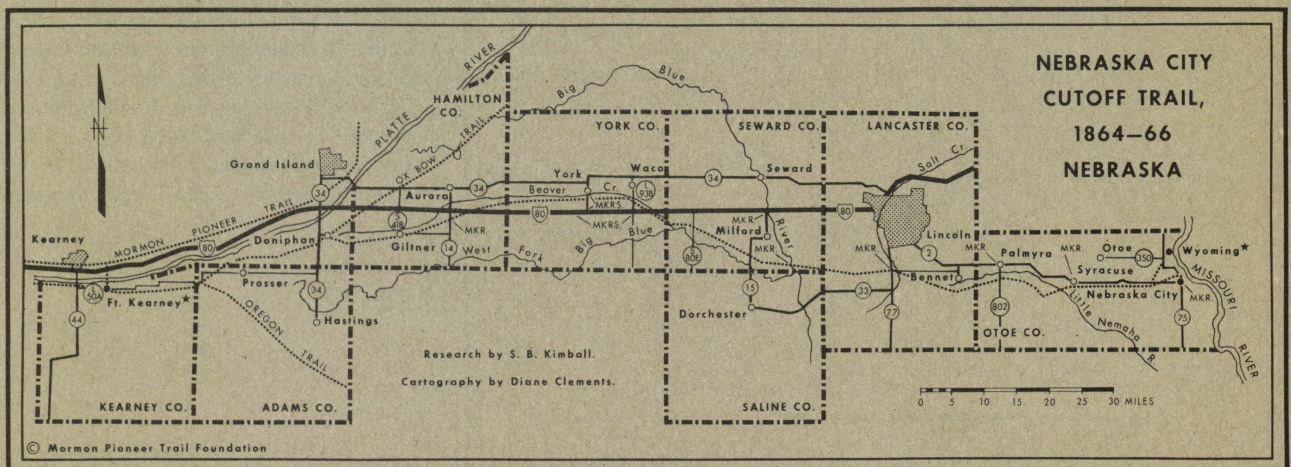
To reach the old site, take Highway 75 north from the Nebraska City courthouse about six and one-half miles. There are no road signs, so watch for a country road going west to Otoe. Two and one-half miles north of that intersection is a dirt road leading east to the Missouri River. (Ask locally for directions.) The course of the river has changed since 1866, however, and the present shoreline is nearly one-half mile east of where it was when the Mormons

were there.

The current hamlet of Wyoming, two and one-half miles southeast of old Wyoming, has no real historical tie to the older community of the Mormons.

In Nebraska City proper is a marker for this old trail on the courthouse square. The Mormons picked up the trail somewhere west of Nebraska City near highway 2 and crossed the Little Nemaha River near Syracuse. A marker is on old highway 40 near the Syracuse Hospital. The marker at Palmyra is about one-half mile south of the bridge on highway 802. The Mormons passed south of Lincoln, where another marker can be found at the southwest corner of an intersection of highway 77 and a section-line road from Bennett, approximately four miles north of highway 33.

From here to York County the old trail is hard to follow. Generally it stayed close to the West Fork of the Big Blue River and Beaver Creek. Just west of the Milford exit on the south side of Interstate 80 is a rest area where a marker points to the Big Blue



crossing. South of Milford is another marker to the crossing of the Big Blue River. (Ask locally for directions.) One might as well take Interstate 80 to the Waco exit where there is a marker one quarter mile south of that intersection. Another marker is on the west side of highway 81, east of the York bridge over Beaver Creek (on the unnumbered highway running between York and In-

terstate 80). The rest areas just east and west of the York exit also contain historic markers. Continue west on Interstate 80 to the Aurora exit where there is a marker on the east side of highway 14, about one mile south of this intersection. This well-shaped monument marks the site of an old well on the trail.

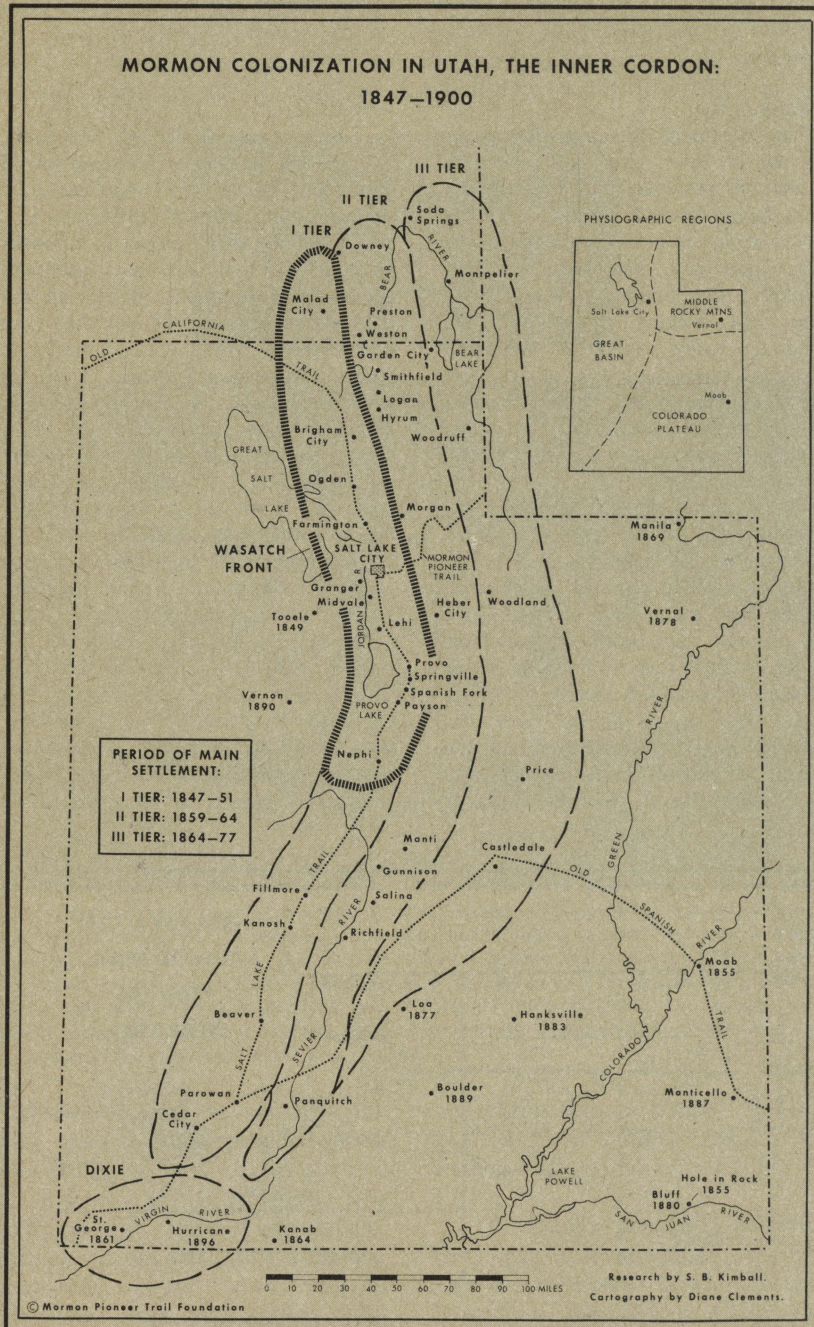
The old trail passed through Giltner and joined the Ox Bow Trail, an older route between the Missouri River and Fort Kearney, two miles south of Doniphan on highway 34. (Trail enthusiasts may wish to know that this junction took place in section 22 on T9N and R9W.)

West of this junction the trail generally followed the Platte River to the Kearney and Adams county line west of Prosser, where it joined the Oregon Trail. From there it went due west to Fort Kearney, where the Mormons crossed the Platte and picked up the old Mormon trail of 1847.

Mormon Colonization in Utah, the Inner Cordon: 1847-1900

The Mormons began to tame the Great Basin as soon as they arrived in 1847. Under Brigham Young's colonizing policy, 358 settlements were established by the time of his death in 1877. Thereafter, colonizing proceeded at a more leisurely pace until about 1900, when official Mormon colonizing was terminated, probably because Church membership was becoming too scattered and because few desirable places were left to settle.

In what became Utah proper, the settlement pattern consisted of three bands or areas, known as the "inner cordon," extending out from the edges of the Valley. The first band, along the Wasatch Front, extended south down the Old Spanish and Salt Lake trails to Cedar City. Beyond Utah, the line of colonies reached to San Diego, through



the famous Mormon Corridor, to give inland Mormons easy access to the sea. Within five years much of this strip was colonized.

The second settlement strip consisted primarily of a fertile valley chain lying east of the mountains (the boundary of the first strip) and was colonized in the early 1860s. The third strip, including most of the remaining desirable areas in the middle Rocky Mountain region and the Colorado Basin, was colonized into the 1870s. These three areas account for seventy-five percent of all colonies established in Utah.

Dixie, in southern Utah, was a small, separate area of colonization. Other colonies appeared here and there, mainly on the Colorado Plateau.

Mormon Colonization in the West, the Outer Cordon: 1847-1900

Mormon colonies spread beyond Utah, through fertile valleys and along rivers, eventually reaching into Canada and Mexico. The original purpose of the colonies was to secure the borders of the generously proportioned State of Deseret (never officially recognized), which extended from the crest of the Sierras to the continental divide, and from Mexico to Oregon. Within this huge area, there were three main settlement areas. One consisted of Star Valley, Wyoming; Carson Valley, Nevada; and the Nevada Great Basin. A second was along the Little Colorado, the Upper Gila, and the Salt rivers in Arizona, and a third was the cities of San Bernardino, California, and Las Vegas, Nevada.

Beyond the State of Deseret were many colonies in the Big Horn Basin, Wyoming, in the San Luis Valley, Colorado, along the Upper Snake River, Idaho, and along the San Pedro River, Arizona.

During the 1880s, because of the United States government's vigorous prosecution of polygamists, two foreign colonies were founded: the Alberta Refuge, around Cardston, Canada, and the Mexican Refuge, consisting of seven colonies in northern Chihuahua and Sonora, the earliest of which was Colonia Diaz in 1885. □

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