

# Iowa CONSERVATIONIST

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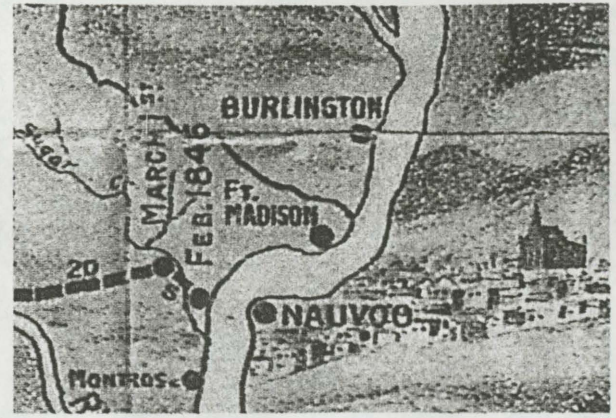
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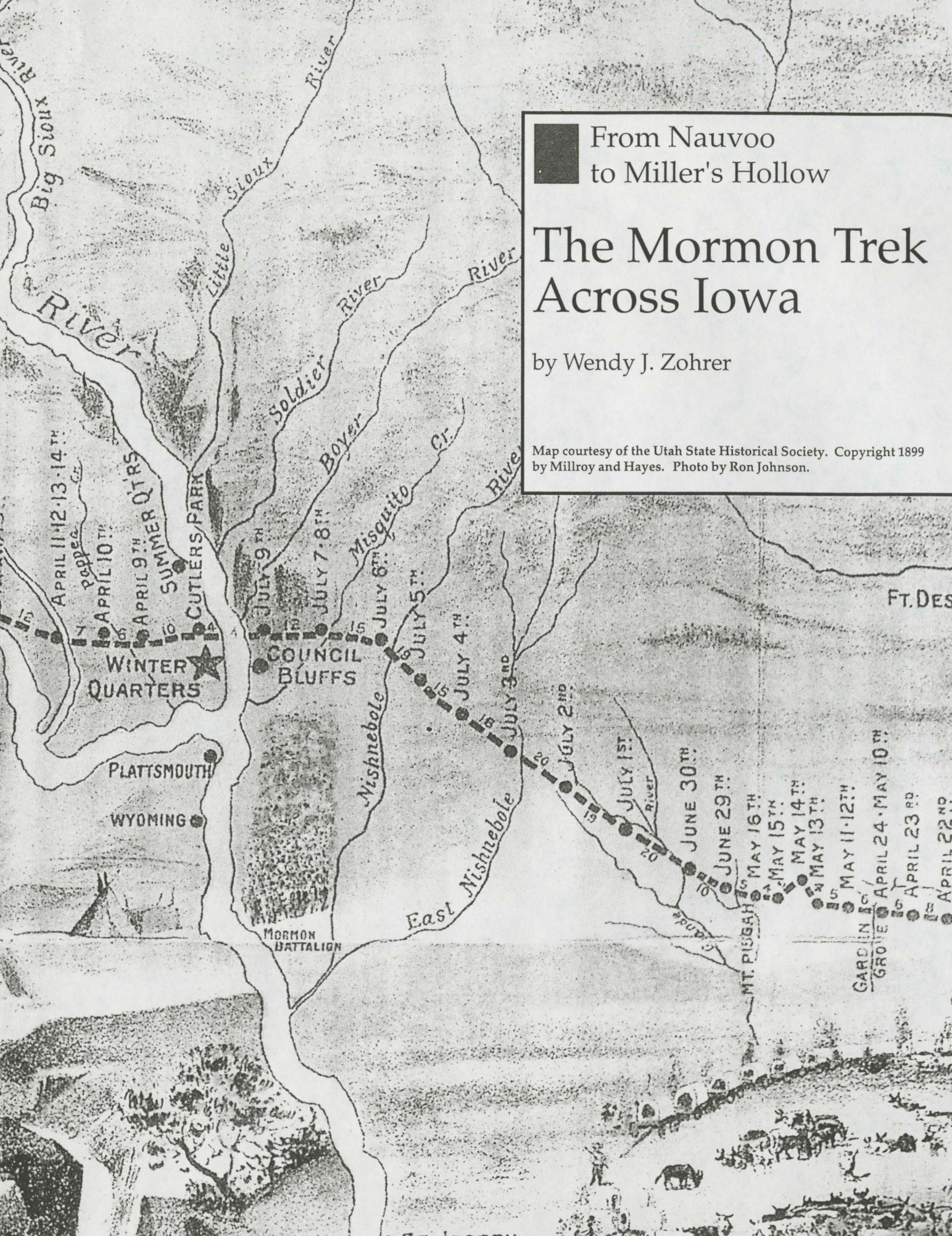
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*by Tammra K. Pavlicek*  
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**COVER:** Front -- Peregrine falcon. Photo by Lowell Washburn. Back -- Post office/general store at Bear Grove used by the Mormons on their travels across Iowa in the 1850s. Photo by Wendy J. Zohrer.



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From Nauvoo  
to Miller's Hollow

# The Mormon Trek Across Iowa

by Wendy J. Zohrer

Map courtesy of the Utah State Historical Society. Copyright 1899  
by Millroy and Hayes. Photo by Ron Johnson.

APRIL 11-12-13-14<sup>TH</sup>

APRIL 10<sup>TH</sup>

APRIL 9<sup>TH</sup>

SUMMER QTRS

CUTLERS PARK

JULY 9<sup>TH</sup>

JULY 7-8<sup>TH</sup>

JULY 8<sup>TH</sup>

JULY 5<sup>TH</sup>

JULY 4<sup>TH</sup>

JULY 3<sup>RD</sup>

JULY 2<sup>ND</sup>

JULY 1<sup>ST</sup>

JUNE 30<sup>TH</sup>

JUNE 29<sup>TH</sup>

MAY 16<sup>TH</sup>

MAY 15<sup>TH</sup>

MAY 14<sup>TH</sup>

MAY 13<sup>TH</sup>

MAY 11-12<sup>TH</sup>

APRIL 24-MAY 10<sup>TH</sup>

APRIL 23<sup>RD</sup>

APRIL 22<sup>ND</sup>

WINTER QUARTERS

COUNCIL BLUFFS

PLATTSMOUTH

WYOMING

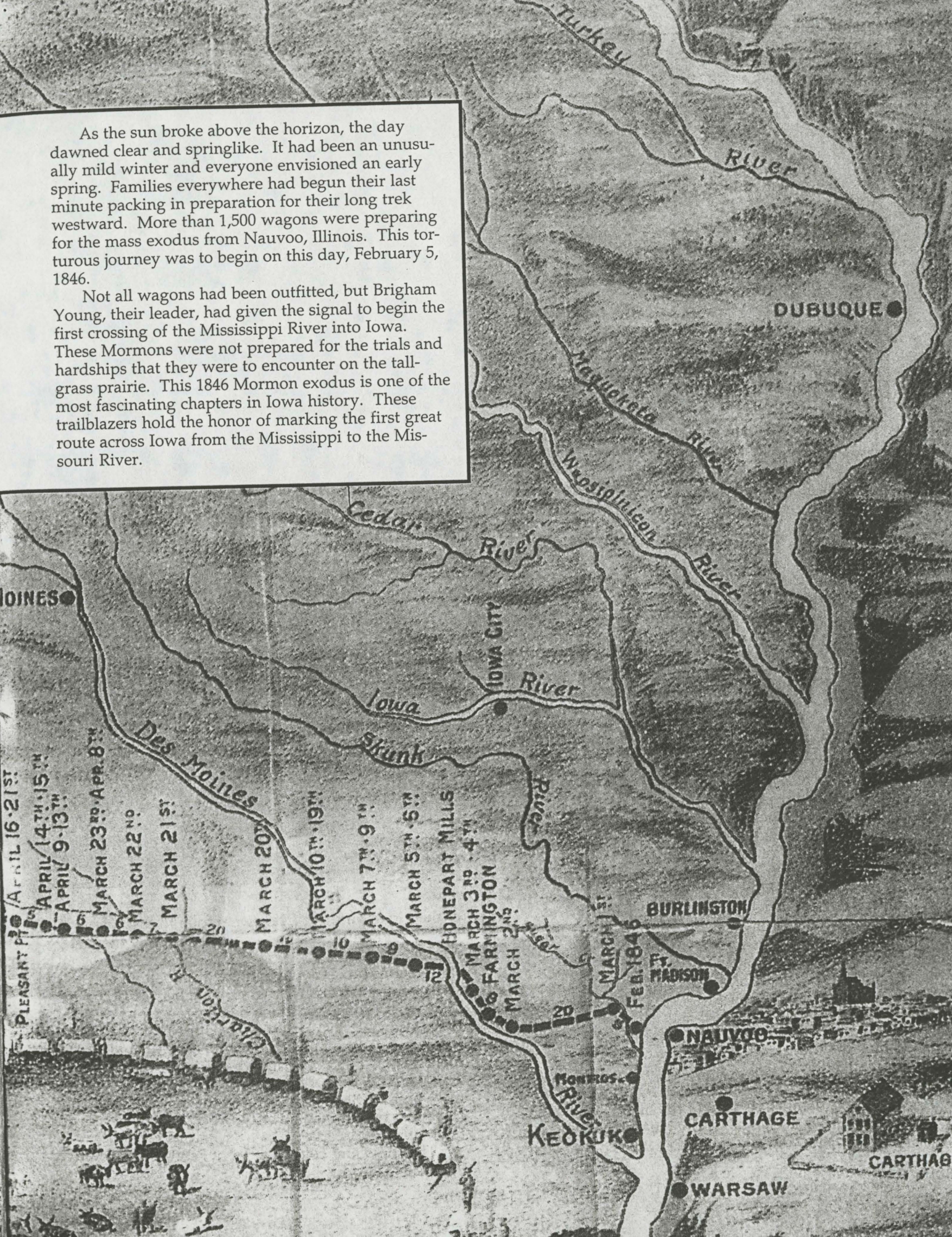
MORMON BATTALION

FT. DES



As the sun broke above the horizon, the day dawned clear and springlike. It had been an unusually mild winter and everyone envisioned an early spring. Families everywhere had begun their last minute packing in preparation for their long trek westward. More than 1,500 wagons were preparing for the mass exodus from Nauvoo, Illinois. This torturous journey was to begin on this day, February 5, 1846.

Not all wagons had been outfitted, but Brigham Young, their leader, had given the signal to begin the first crossing of the Mississippi River into Iowa. These Mormons were not prepared for the trials and hardships that they were to encounter on the tall-grass prairie. This 1846 Mormon exodus is one of the most fascinating chapters in Iowa history. These trailblazers hold the honor of marking the first great route across Iowa from the Mississippi to the Missouri River.



PLEASANT HILLS  
APRIL 16-21ST  
APRIL 14TH-15TH  
APRIL 9-13TH  
MARCH 23RD-APR. 8TH  
MARCH 22ND  
MARCH 21ST  
MARCH 20TH  
MARCH 10TH-19TH  
MARCH 7TH-9TH  
MARCH 5TH-6TH  
MARCH 3RD-4TH  
MARCH 2ND  
MARCH 1ST  
FEB. 1846

MOINES

DUBUQUE

IOWA CITY

BURLINGTON

NAUVOO

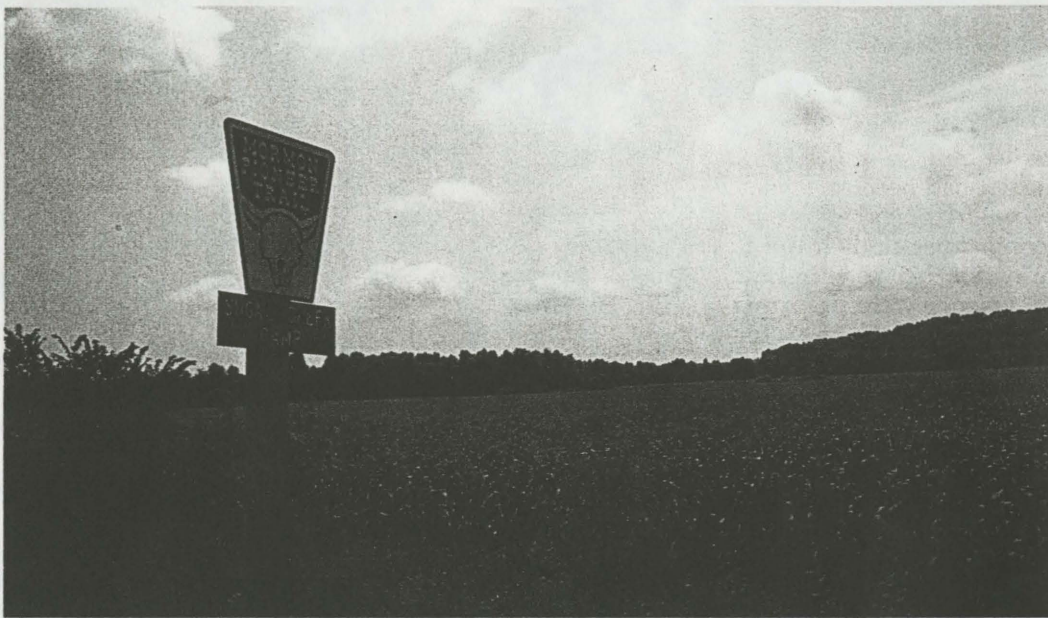
KEOKUK

CARTHAGE

WARSAW

CARTHAGE





Site of Sugar Creek in Lee County, the first camp the Mormons established in Iowa during their journey to Salt Lake City, Utah. Sugar Creek became known as the "place of extreme hardship" as Iowa's winter blasted the pioneer travelers.

RON JOHNSON

Troubles had plagued the Mormons for some time in their small village of Nauvoo, Illinois. Joseph Smith, the original leader of the Mormons, was the mayor of Nauvoo. Smith ordered the destruction of a newspaper's presses, published by a man who opposed Mormonism. After the presses were destroyed, Joseph and his brother were arrested and jailed. An angry mob stormed the jail and the Smith brothers were killed. Brigham Young then became leader of the Mormons.

Much pressure was put on them to leave, and finally in the late winter months of 1846, the first crossing of the Mississippi was made.

Families immediately began to outfit their wagons with important staples for survival. It was proposed that a family of five needed oxen, two cows, two beef cows and three sheep. Other necessary provisions included 1,000 pounds of flour, 20 pounds of sugar, one rifle and ammunition, 10 to 20 pounds of seed, 25 to 100 pounds of farming tools, a tent and other personal items. The total estimated cost was \$250. Soon they were to experience the prairie fires, mud, rattlesnakes, bear problems and floods on their 300-mile trip across Iowa. It was to take five long months before the Missouri River would be sighted. Approximately 15,000 Mormons moved west across the territory during that spring of 1846.

The springlike weather quickly changed after establishing the first camp at Sugar Creek. The temperatures plummeted to 20 degrees below zero, and it began to snow. Sugar Creek became known as the "place of extreme hardship" because of the inadequate shelter and improper clothing. Finally on March 1 they were able to break camp and travel five miles on the first day

Fighting extreme cold and snow, the Mormons only averaged three miles per day during the first month. A 15-month-old infant and a young man were the first to die along the journey, at Richardson's Point camp in Van Buren County. Before their travels would end, hundreds more would perish.



STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

of their long journey. They were soon to discover that they would only average three miles per day the first month.

Wagons broke down and were left behind at settlements. Too many wagons were being lost, so the Mormons stopped for much needed repairs at Richardson's Point and established the first way station.

These first months were extremely cold and, at Richardson's Point, a 15-month-old infant and a young man were the first to die on this infamous trail. Many more became ill and died during the long journey, and these first two graves are only two of hundreds that dot the prairie landscape.

The snow and cold weather of February and March



## The Handcart Expedition

More than one Mormon trail crossed Iowa during the 19th century. The trail stretching from Iowa City to Council Bluffs, known as the handcart trail, was undertaken by 2,962 people in nine companies between 1856 and 1860. Hazel Jensen's book describes this route, "No oxen or horse-drawn wagons made this trail. It was made by the footsteps of people walking — walking across the hot, dusty, wet, muddy state, pushing or pulling small handcarts laden with their belongings."

Mormon converts emigrated from Europe and traveled to Iowa City by railroad during that summer. Iowa City was the endpoint of the trail line. Many of these Mormon travelers were poor and could not afford a wagon and oxen. Handcarts were designed and constructed specifically for their westward journey.

Promotional material encouraged the use of handcarts and stated, "Fifteen miles a day will bring them through in 70 days, and, after they get accustomed to it, they will travel 20, 25 or even 30 with ease, and no danger of giving out, but will continue to get stronger and stronger; the little ones and sick, if there are any, can be carried on the carts, but there will be none sick in a little time after they get started."

Archer Walters, a 47-year-old carpenter from Sheffield, England, kept a journal of his family's trek across the tallgrass prairie state. The rose picture painted by the Mormon leaders did not prepare these newcomers for the challenges ahead. This 275-mile trip took an average of 25 days at a rate of 11 miles per day.

Walter's family left with the first Mormon Com-



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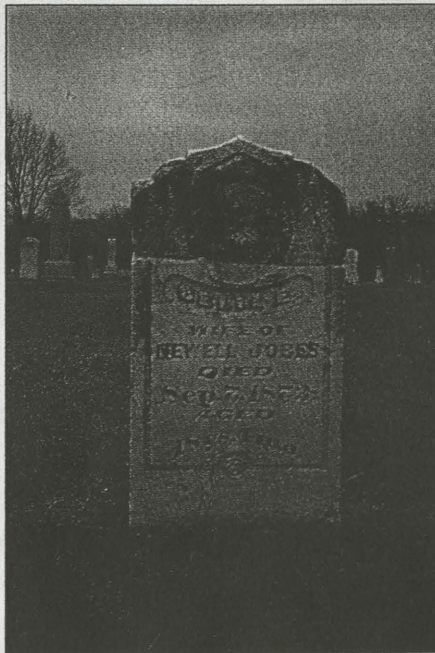
pany on June 7, 1856. The expedition crossed Iowa through the present day towns of Homestead, Marengo, Newton, Des Moines and Adel. Beyond here, they passed through or near the historic towns of Fairview, Bear Grove and Dalmanutha in Guthrie County. An old state road then took the travelers southwesterly where it joined the older Mormon trail near Lewis in Cass County.

These people had to face the dust, heat, starvation and death as they made the first handcart journey across the prairie. Five children and one man died on their 32-day trek through the state. Walter writes about these deaths. "Got up about 4 o'clock to make a coffin for my brother John Lee's son named William Lee, aged 12 years . . . Went and buried them (John Lee's son and Sister Prator's child) by moonlight at Bear Creek.

Hunger was common during this long trip. Bear problems made matters worse because they would ransack the Mormon camp for food during the night.

Therefore, the name, Bear Grove, was selected for this new community.

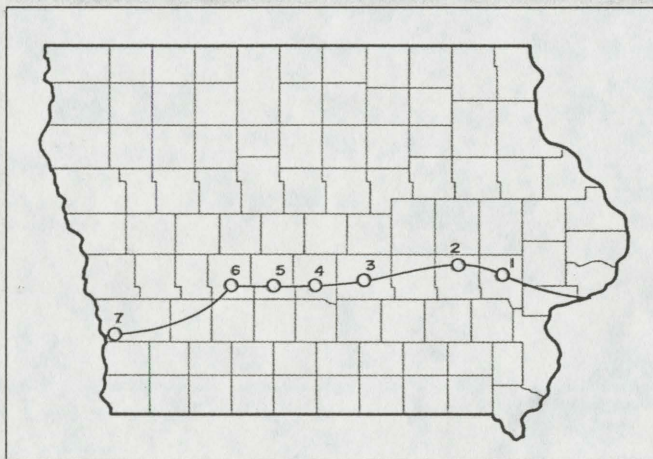
Walter's family finally reached the Missouri River on July 8, crossed the river and camped at the city of Florence. Here they rested before continuing their grueling trip to Salt Lake City, Utah.



WENDY J. ZOHREK

Cemetery at Bear Grove.

-- WJZ



- |              |                    |
|--------------|--------------------|
| 1. Iowa City | 4. Ft. Des Moines  |
| 2. Marengo   | 5. Bear Grove      |
| 3. Newton    | 6. Miller's Hollow |



was soon replaced by the thawing and spring rains. The prairie became a sea of mud and after the first 100 miles, the travelers had to make their own trails. Many people had substituted horses for oxen, and it was soon discovered that the horses could not pull the heavily laden prairie schooners (wagons) through the mud.

Camps were made along streams and rivers which flooded after heavy rains and the spring thaw. Orson Pratt described these situations in his journal. "The mud and water around our tents were ankle (sic) deep, and the rain continued to pour down without cessation. We were obliged to cut brush and limbs of trees, and throw them on the ground in our tents, to keep our beds from sinking in the mire."

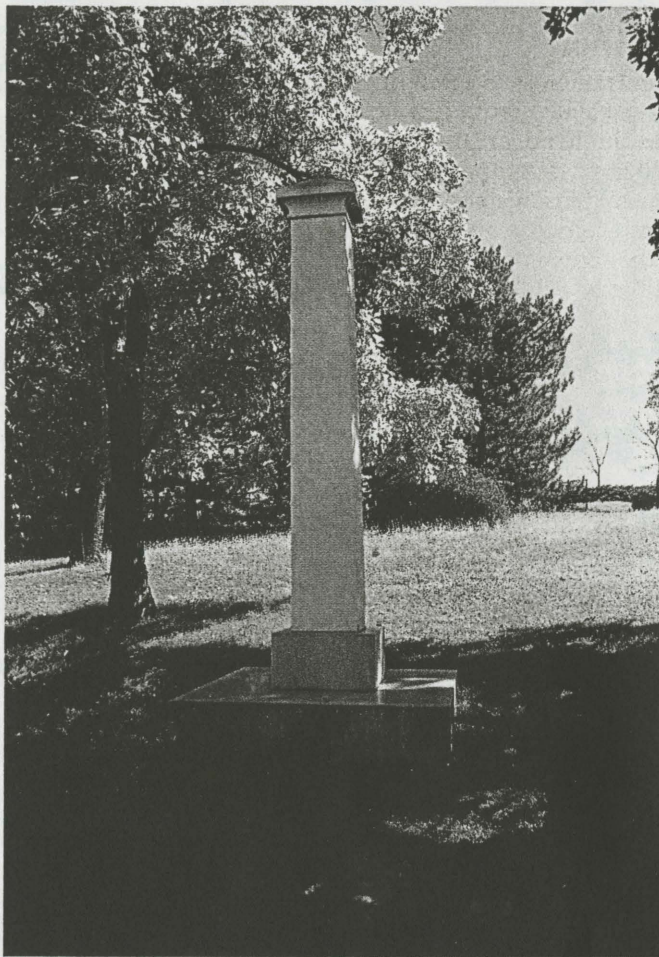
It was a struggle to continue as their schooners became stuck in the mud, but eventually the countryside dried. Still other unexpected hardships began. Rattlesnakes emerged after the long winter hibernation and the oxen and horses were bitten as they ventured too close to these well camouflaged creatures. These bites often resulted in the death of the Mormon's livestock.

In late April 1846 these trailblazers stopped for a couple of weeks and cleared 300 acres of land and established the Garden Grove camp. Log cabins were built and crops were planted. Before moving on nearly a month later, logs had been cut to build an additional 40 cabins. Not all of the travelers resumed the trip, as some remained behind in the settlement.

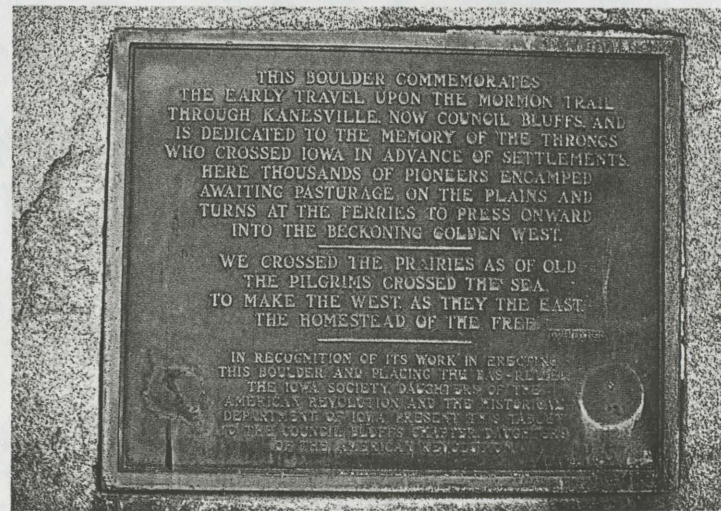
More than 2,000 Mormons pitched tents at the next major camp, Mt. Pisgah. This was the first settlement in what is now known as Union County. Caves were dug for shelter until log cabins were erected. But the lack of food and inadequate shelter took its toll on the new settlement. More than 160 people died the first six months.

Settlers found it impossible to break the tough prairie sod with their equipment. Instead, they went to the nearest timber and girdled hundreds of acres of trees. Girdling is done by stripping a section of bark around the entire tree trunk. The tree would then die and be removed. The soil was then plowed for crops.

Pottawattamie Indian chief, Pied Riche, bid them welcome as they set up camp at Mt. Pisgah. The Pottawattamie and Mesquakie tribes lived nearby. Chief Pied Riche and his tribe had been driven from their home which is now known as Michigan. These native



More than 2,000 Mormons pitched tents at the next major camp, Mt. Pisgah. This was the first settlement in what is now known as Union County. Caves were dug for shelter until log cabins were erected. But the lack of food and inadequate shelter took its toll on the new settlement. More than 160 people died the first six months. This marker, erected in 1888, stands in the middle of an area of ground that was a cemetery at the time of the 1846-47 emigration to Salt Lake City. The outlines of the graves have long since disappeared.



After five months of hardships, the Mormons reached Council Bluffs in July 1846. Baylis Park, on South Main Street in downtown Council Bluffs, contains a boulder with two markers honoring the Mormon pioneers.



## State and County Parks Along the Original Mormon Trail

### 1. Lacey-Keosauqua State Park

-- 2,200 acres; six miles west of Richardson's Point or 12 miles northwest of Bonaparte; picnicking, camping, hiking, lake.

Historic site -- Ely Ford; the Mormons did not use the ford in 1846 but later emigrating companies did.

### 2. Trailside Historic Park

-- 3 acres; managed by Decatur County Conservation Board; 1/2 mile west of Garden Grove; picnicking only.

Historical marker.

### 3. Mt. Pisgah Park

-- 8 acres; managed by Union County Conservation Board; 5 miles southwest of Lorimor; picnicking only.

Historical marker.

### 4. Mormon Trail Park

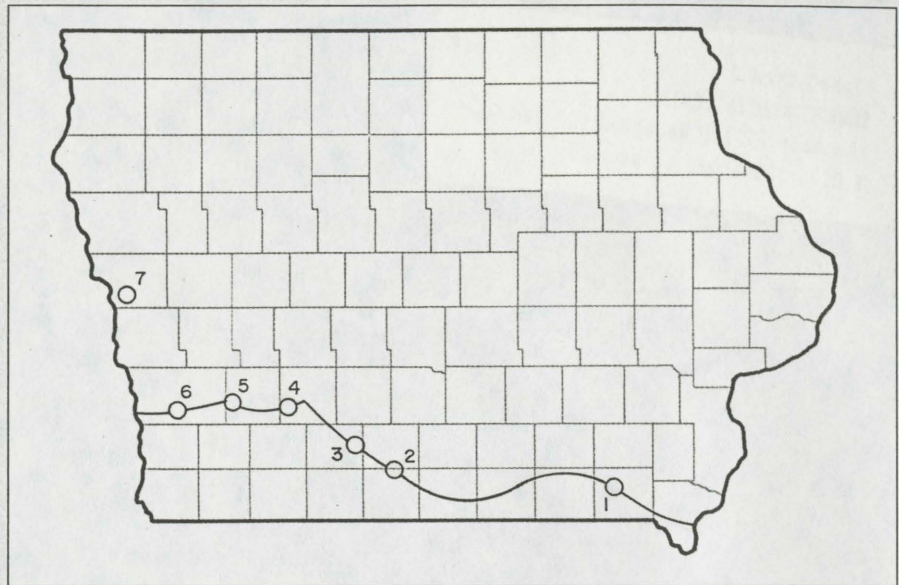
-- 170 acres; managed by Adair County Conservation Board; 1-1/2 miles southeast of Bridgewater; camping, picnicking, shooting, range, hunting, lake.

Historical marker.

### 5. Cold Springs Park

-- 104 acres; managed by Cass County Conservation Board; 1 mile south of Lewis; camping, picnicking, hiking, lake.

Historical feature -- nearby fields show dim traces of trail.



### 6. Old Towne Park

-- 8 acres; managed by Pottawattamie County Conservation Board; 1 mile west of Macedonia; camping, picnicking, hunting, stream.

Historical feature -- Macedonia founded in 1848, possibly by Mormons.

### 7. Preparation Canyon State Park

-- 344 acres; 15 miles southeast of Onawa; picnicking, hiking.

Historical feature -- Preparation Camp where 50 to 60 families settled.

-- WJZ

Americans were friendly and understood the hardships of being driven away.

Chief Pied Riche stated, "We must help one another and the Great Spirit will help us both. Because one suffers and does not deserve it is no reason we shall suffer always. We may live to see it right yet. If we do not, our children will."

Indian Town, near another Pottawattamie camp, was located on high ground east of the Nishnabotna River, about 2-1/2 miles west of the present-day town of Lewis. The native Americans in this area were also friendly and were often visited by the Mormons.

Despite sympathy from the Indians, occasionally the westward trek was hampered by Native Americans. Prairie grass could grow to heights of eight to 10 feet and Indians would clear large stretches of prairie grass by setting fire to it. These fires were terrifying to early travelers. At times the flames themselves were visible at night up to 25 miles away. Every light in the sky told of a prairie fire in that direction. In self-defense, "backfires" would be started close to the wagons and tents. The purpose of the burnt strip around the camp was to protect the people and their possessions. It was hoped that if a

prairie fire did veer near the encampment it would not be able to jump the burned strip of land.

After leaving Indian Town, the Mormons followed an Indian trail which ended at the Missouri River. After five months of hardships, Brigham Young and the first Mormons reached the Missouri River on July 9, 1846. It was decided to build a settlement which would withstand the upcoming winter. The westward movement would be delayed until the next spring.

Not all people continued the journey with Brigham Young the following year, but left the Winter Quarters and returned to the Iowa side of the river and established a new community near Indian Creek in the vicinity of an old fort. The settlement was named Miller's Hollow and was eventually changed to Council Bluffs.

Today, few traces remain of the Mormon trails crossing our state. Blue and white "Mormon Pioneer Trail" signs and brown and white signs mark this historic route. Iowa history springs to life as today's travelers see and touch the faint track of prairie schoolers or pitch a tent at one of these historic sites.

*Wendy J. Zohrer is an environmental educator and a freelance writer from West Des Moines.*