

THE  
MORMON  
TREK WEST



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PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
DAN GURAVICH

*Introduction by Stanley B. Kimball*

HISTORIAN, MORMON PIONEER TRAIL FOUNDATION

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FIRST EDITION

# Introduction

Since its beginning, in 1846, The Great Trek has captivated the fancy of both Mormons and non-Mormons, and the Mormon Trail is quite probably the most written-up trail in all history. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of contemporary journals were kept during the twenty-two years the Mormons trod it. Scores of books, hundreds of articles, and thousands of stories have been written about it. (I, myself, have contributed well over a hundred.)

All this fascination with The Great Trek is well deserved. Interest has never been greater than it is today.

Until recently, one could gauge the interest in this particular American trail by asking the late Paul Henderson of Bridgport, Nebraska, about his guest book. Paul, a great trail expert, who in his eighties had himself become a monument along the road, was consulted by all serious students, writers, and photographers of the trail, including the co-makers of this book.

The belief that this famous trail was a Mormon creation or discovery is mistaken. It may be that of the thousands of miles of trails and roads the Mormons used during their migrations from 1831 through 1868, from New York to California, they actually blazed less than one mile. This one bit of authenticated trail-blazing lies between Donner Hill and the mouth of Emigration Canyon, just east of Salt Lake City. The Mormons were not looking for a place in the history books. They had a job to do and they did it as easily and as expeditiously as possible, always using the best roads available. But whether the trail should rightfully be called the Mormon Trail or the Great Platte River Road, the Oregon Trail, the California Trail, or something else, Wallace Stegner said, I believe accurately, "By the improvements they made in it, they earned the right to put their name on the trail they used. . . ."

Prior to The Great Trek, the Mormons had had little experience in moving masses of people and livestock over long distances. What training they had acquired was in 1834 during the Zion's Camp March from Kirtland, Ohio, to Liberty, Missouri. This nine hundred mile journey to redress wrongs done to their brethren by mobs and militia in Jackson County, Missouri, redressed no wrongs after all, but it helped train them for their final exodus west.

The additional skills they learned while crossing Iowa in 1846 not only made easier the much longer part of the trek from the Missouri River to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847, but they also set the pattern for building and colonizing the Great Basin.

It is a curious fact that the Mormons, who did not want to go west in the first place, were the most successful in doing so. Mormons were not typical westering Americans: whereas others went for a new identity, adventure, furs, land, or gold, they were driven west for their religious beliefs. The pioneer group was not concerned just with getting themselves safely settled but in making the road easier for others to follow. Furthermore, the Mormons transplanted a whole people, a whole culture, not just isolated, unrelated individuals. They moved as villages on wheels and differed profoundly from the Oregon and California migrations. Consequently, the Mormons became the most systematic, organized, disciplined, and successful pioneers in United States history.

The experience of the trail, the crossing of the plains turned into a great event not only in the lives of the pioneers but in the minds of their descendants. It became a rite of passage, the final test of faith. The contemporary U.S. Mormon is proud of nothing in his heritage more than that one or more of his ancestors "crossed the plains." Today a special mythology and clouds of glory surround these pioneers. The most important honor societies in Mormondom are the Sons and Daughters of the Utah Pioneers.

*The Mormon Trek West* is a skillful blending of beautiful photography and beautiful writing. Mr. Guravich might well have had in mind producing something like "The Illustrated Emigrants' Guide" or "The Illustrated William Clayton's Journal." (Clayton's *Guide* and *Journal* are the best original single sources for The Great Trek.) He has carefully framed every photograph so that the hand of man is never visible. One can almost believe he was with Clayton during those exciting days.

Mr. Brown is a professional writer of great skill, and he has followed the trail himself. His text, derived almost exclusively from contemporary journals, is eminently readable. Mormon and non-Mormon alike will appreciate his artistry.

One notable strength of the text is the thorough attention paid to the background of The Great Trek—a background that unobtrusively extends back to Joseph Smith's grandfather. Too often this genesis is missing in other studies of the trail, but without, for example, the explanation of the Missouri persecutions, neither the Illinois experience nor the exodus itself can be understood properly.

The story commences with Charles Shumway, a real person standing in the snow on February 4, 1846, dejectedly looking from Nauvoo, Illinois, across the mighty Mississippi into Iowa, that Mormon Mesopotamia between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, into his future, into his fate.

The whole text is neatly held together by continual reference to Shumway and

his family. We follow them, their trials and triumphs, across three future states and into the Great Basin, through the fiftieth anniversary of the trek in 1897, and to his death the following year.

The Great Trek must be divided into two parts: across Iowa in 1846 and across the Great Plains in 1847. The three hundred-mile-long Iowa portion was the worst. In the beginning the weather was terrible, and the Saints, a mixed group of men, women, and children, were inexperienced and often unprepared. Most of the trail deaths took place in Iowa. It required a month to cover the first hundred miles—an average of three per day.

By March 1 the Mormons were ready to quit their staging round on Sugar Creek in Lee County, Iowa, six miles west of the Mississippi, where they had been gathering since February 4. No accurate record was kept of how many wagons and people were at Sugar Creek that March 1—estimates vary from four to five hundred wagons and from three to five thousand individuals. Five hundred wagons and three thousand people is probably close to the truth. The ubiquitous whitetops, or covered wagons, of the era were ideal for such travel. Families en route could live in, on, and under these animal-drawn mobile homes, and at the end of the trail, they could become temporary homes until real houses could be erected.

The Saints used all kinds of wagons and carriages and all sorts of draft animals, especially horses, mules, and oxen. They often preferred the latter when they were available, for oxen had great strength and patience and were easy to keep, they did not fight mud or quicksand, and they required no expensive and complicated harness. The science of “oxteamology” consisted of little more than walking along the left side of the lead oxen with a whip, prod, or goad urging them on and guiding them, and was considerably simpler than handling the reins of horses or mules. With gentle oxen, widows with children could and did (with a little help, especially during the morning yoking up) transport themselves and their possessions successfully all the way to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.

What from the start was known as the “Camp of Israel” began to lumber out about noon to the “gee-haws” of teamsters and the yells of herdsmen and children. Thereafter, Old Testament parallels to a Zion, a Chosen People, an Exodus, a Mt. Pisgah, a Jordan River, a Dead Sea, and to being “in the tops of the mountains,” and making the desert blossom like the rose were noted, devised, cherished, and handed down. The Mormons resembled ancient Israel in other ways: they were divided into groups of fifties and tens and, at times, were factious and whiny. To keep the camp together, or at least to keep in touch with the various leaders, Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball appointed mounted couriers to ride back and forth and arranged for different-colored signal flags to communicate messages and call meetings.

Mormons had and have a strong penchant for making the best of things. Throughout the pioneering period they sang around campfires, listened to brass-

band concerts, and danced—they loved square and line dances, Virginia reels, Copenhagen jigs, polkas, and especially quadrilles. (Round dances, particularly the new waltz, were a bit suspect.)

As far as Bloomfield, Iowa, the pioneers used established old territorial roads. Thereafter they followed primitive roads and Potawatomi traces to an Indian agent's settlement on the Missouri at present-day Council Bluffs. En route they founded several permanent way stations and first blessed a sick animal, and William Clayton wrote the words to "Come, Come Ye Saints," the Mormon Marseillaise.

Later that June, the pioneers arrived on the Missouri River, where they set up their Winter Quarters. Contrary to myth, the 1847 part of the trek, covering approximately 1,073 miles, was neither one long and unending trail of tears nor a trail of fire. Over the decades Mormons have emphasized the tragedies of the trail. Tragedies there were, however. (Between 1847 and the building of the railroad in 1869, perhaps as many as six thousand died along the trail from exhaustion, exposure, disease, and lack of food.) (Few were killed by Indians.) To the vast majority, though, the experience was positive. Nobody knows how many Mormons migrated west during those years, but eighty thousand in over ten thousand vehicles is a close estimate.

The route west of Winter Quarters requires some explanation. The simplest way of following the pioneers (and most subsequent Mormon immigrants) from "civilization to sundown" is to divide the trail into four sections and relate them to the Oregon Trail, the "Main Street to the West." They followed generally what is sometimes called the Great Platte River Road, which had always been regarded as the most advantageous approach to the easiest crossing of the Rocky Mountains. The trail had been blazed by Indians, trappers, fur traders, and other immigrants such as the Marcus Whitman party, which went to Oregon in 1836, and the Stevens-Townsend-Murphy group, which first took wagons over the Sierras in 1844.

The Oregon Trail started at Independence, Missouri, and crossed Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, and Idaho. The first section of the Mormon Trail was from Winter Quarters generally along the north bank of the Platte River to near present-day Kearney, Nebraska. Up to this point the Mormon Trail and the Oregon Trail of the late 1840s were entirely separate. The second portion of the Mormon Trail was from Kearney to Fort Laramie, Wyoming. Along this section the two trails followed the Platte, the Mormons on the north bank and the Oregonians on the south. Since in the 1840s the favored route to Oregon and California was along the south bank of the Platte, it might appear that the Mormons pioneered the north-bank trail, but actually during the 1820s and 1830s the north bank had been the preferred way, used by fur trappers and missionaries. As late as 1846, the famous historian Francis Parkman took the northern route to South Pass.

The third section of the trail was from Fort Laramie to Fort Bridger. Here the Mormons followed the Oregon Trail proper for 397 miles. The fourth and final

section started at Fort Bridger, where the Oregon Trail turned north and where the Mormons left the Oregon Trail and picked up the year-old Reed-Donner track through the Rockies into the Salt Lake Valley.

From Winter Quarters, they had followed the broad, flat valley of the Platte for some six hundred miles and the beneficent little Sweetwater for about ninety-three more, all the while enjoying an increasingly rugged and beautiful land, and traversing finally a series of defiles and canyons from Coyote Creek to the famous Emigration. Topographically the trail had led across the Central Lowlands, over the Great Plains into the Wyoming Basin, through the middle Rocky Mountains, into the Great Basin. The Mormons passed along river valleys, across plains, deserts, and mountains, over several inland seas of grasslands and sagebrush steppes, and through western forests of Douglas fir and scrub oak. They were entering the empire of the buffalo, wolf, antelope, bear, coyote, goat, elk, fox, raccoon, rabbit, gray squirrel, and prairie dog; the prairie hen, wild turkey, snipe, goose, duck, crane, swan, great blue heron, and quail; the bee, grasshopper, and firefly; the rattlesnake, copperhead, lizard, and turtle; the grayling, catfish, and trout. They traversed the domain of various grasses from the stubby buffalo through the prairie, wheat, needle, sandhill, up to the five-foot-tall bluestem. Seasonally the area was a piebald garden of sunflowers, daisies, gayfeather, and butterfly milkweed.

For the 143 men, three women, and two children who left Winter Quarters, the pioneer trek of 1847 was mostly a great adventure with a dramatic ending. One hundred and eleven days later, as everyone knows, Brigham Young entered the valley and declared, "This is the place."

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