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# *Journal of Mormon History*



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Manuscripts dealing with all aspects of Mormon history are invited. First consideration will be given to those which make a strong contribution to knowledge through new interpretations or new information. A panel of readers will also consider general interest of the paper, extent and accuracy of research, and literary quality.

Papers received before April 1 will be considered for a \$300 prize. The winning paper will also be guaranteed publication in the *Journal of Mormon History*.

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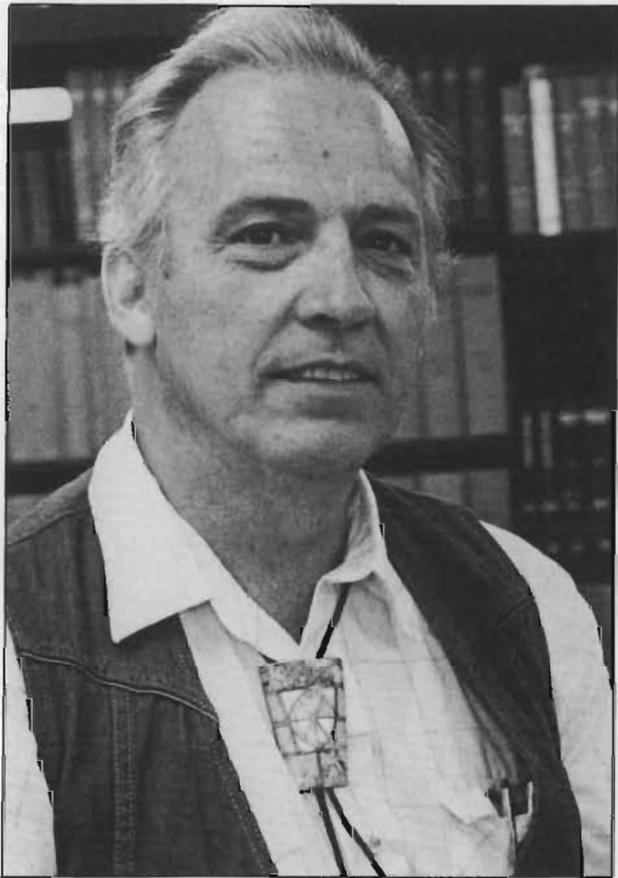
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FRONT COVER: The Nauvoo Temple.

BACK COVER: The Nauvoo Temple in ruins. Steel engraving by Frederick Piercy from his book *Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley* (Liverpool: Franklin D. Richards, 1855).

Photos on page 6 courtesy Stanley B. Kimball.

All other photos courtesy Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



Stanley B. Kimball

# The Power Of Place and the Spirit of Locale: Finding God on Western Trails

Stanley B. Kimball

For twenty-six years I have tried to share my findings and adventures as I researched, traveled, lectured, and wrote about trails, especially those used by the Mormons during their migrations. Tonight I wish to tell you what, for the most part, has never appeared in my writings and papers – the intensely personal, private, and spiritual experiences that have come to me while tramping the West.<sup>1</sup>

The old trails are natural places of worship, linear temples that provide me with beauty, remoteness, and tranquillity. They are also schools of knowledge and experience about life, about others, about myself. They have enriched my life and made me a better person, a better historian.

I have taken to heart the advice of English historian R. H. Tawney, who said, “What historians need is not more documents, but stronger boots.” We need to get out of our offices, libraries, ivory towers, and archives and experience the places we write about. It has been my good fortune to follow – on foot, by Jeep, and by plane – fifteen trails through fifteen states, aggregating more than ten thousand miles – much of the time following my ancestors, all the time following my heritage, and often enjoying the sensible power of place and tangible spirit of locale.

I have come closer to God on the trails in three ways: though the splendor and order of nature, by way of my pioneer heritage, and by association with my fellow beings.

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Stanley B. Kimball, immediate past president of the Mormon History Association, is professor of history at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville.

*Nature*

The trails I travel were highways for my ancestors, a nineteenth-century people who believed themselves a remnant of God's chosen Israel who were leaving a modern Egypt for a new Zion.

Along the trails are pastures, streams, rivers, mountains, everlasting hills, high places, waste places, deserts, solitary and quiet places, still waters, highways, paths, springs, wells, and fountains—landscape features bringing to mind favorite scriptural passages and forms. Seldom am I nearer to my God than when I am in places full of biblical imagery, where I can see no evidence of the human hand. This nearness is because we do not live in ourselves alone but become a portion of what is around us.

The various wildernesses and desert areas remind me of the times the Savior and other biblical individuals withdrew into such places for reflection and contemplation. Some people look at the wilderness along the trails and refer to this "godforsaken land." That is unfortunate. I remember some rhymed doggerel I read once in a Wyoming motel. It began

This God forsaken land they call it.  
As they gaze with pitying eye.  
Nothing here but sagebrush  
And a vast expanse of sky.

and ended

This loneliness they talk about  
Is God's own peace.

There are high places along the trails, such as Ancient Bluff Ruins, where I am disposed to reflect. I have lifted mine eyes unto those hills, where I felt as I felt thirty-nine years ago on high places in the Holy Land, where hymns of childhood, such as "High on a Mountain Top" and "Oh, Ye Mountains High" flooded my mind.

From promontories such as Independence Rock or atop some of the great gorges on the trails I am moved to rededicate myself to good works. Once on an elevation near Rocky Ridge in Wyoming, I chanced upon an old rancher on horse back. We chatted, and I commented on how much closer I felt to Deity here than in many other places. To which he responded, "Hell, son, you ought to, you're a mile up nearer heaven."

At other times, however, I have cast my eyes down and cried out of the depths of uncertainty and asked God to confirm the sureties of my youth, to help me see through the dark glass of confusion, to save me from the pride of learning and the vanity of mind service.

There are no greener pastures, no stiller waters than those found at Pacific Springs—acres of shimmering diamonds in the desolate area just beyond South Pass. There I can hear, internally at least, the admonition "Be still and know that I am God." There is a great quiet, a peace that passeth all understanding, a companionable solitude in which I am least alone.

Other sources of water in the deserts and waste places lend understanding to

biblical references to fountains, wells, and springs of life and salvation. The literal and spiritual implications of such references are intensified on trails.

Along many parts of the trails, I welcome the memory of that departed world of my ancestors and other westering peoples and the silence many before me have sought for introspection and communion. Such a temple of silence exists at Martin's Grove, where a dead pine tree in that V-shaped cleft in the Rattlesnake Mountains is the only reminder of those of my faith who in 1856 huddled and perished there in a Wyoming blizzard.

### *Heritage*

When I tramp old western trails, I share a great deal—the past, my heritage, my common membership in the human race. I participate vicariously with a cross-section of humanity, with the more than 250,000 people who went West before the coming of the railroad, with people of all races, nationalities, and faiths with all kinds of motivations. Especially can I share the religious devotion of those priests and missionaries who suffered in the wilds to teach all nations the Good News.

I have felt the joy of some Latter-day Saints when they first saw their new Zion. Jane Reo Pearce, an English convert, for example, noted in 1851 that she was filled with “joy and gratitude for the protecting care over me and mine during our long and perilous journey.” In 1856 John Crook, also from England, wrote “There was the scene before us that we had long looked for and read and sung about, the City of the Saints. Oh what joy filled each bosom at the sight,” and in 1862 Thomas Memmott, recorded, “Oh, how my heart leaped for joy at the grand sight. The Zion I had so long wished to see.”

I have felt the power of place and the spirit of locale particularly strong at locations where I know prayer circles took place, events unique to my people, separating them from all other westering companies.

At least six of my own direct ancestors crossed the plains, so I identify immediately with their experiences, but more importantly I identify, as all Mormons to the latest African convert can, with their God-fearing, God-oriented lives. Four of these ancestors left trail accounts that lend a closeness achieved in no other way. The contemporary Mormon is prouder of nothing more than the fact that one or more of his or her ancestors “crossed the plains.” The contemporary convert can look to those same people as spiritual models.

Along these trails of faith and testing, many pioneers found God in the wilderness, or at least increased faith and a greater immediacy with God. (And so have I.) A study of their trail accounts documents this conclusively, and it has been my good luck to have had the time and opportunity to annotate nearly nine hundred of them—and this too has been a trail experience, one bringing me closer to my heritage.

### *Humanity*

Today one can not travel the old trails and remain very long in the hallowed silences of the past; the present is very real, most intrusive, and difficult to avoid.



The author standing in the ruts of his ancestors at California Hill on the Oregon Trail, Nebraska



Nearly forgotten trail marker in Dawson County, Nebraska

Avoidance, however, is not only difficult and impractical but also unwise and limiting. There is much to be gained through interacting with our fellow beings in their contemporary lives along the trails.

Over the years I have had many rich experiences and pleasure through arranged and chance meetings with people on the trails. There is a common brother and sisterhood, a bonding, a sharing (there is that beautiful word again) that is something special, something different from everyday life.

Over the miles, I have met with all kinds of people in all kinds of circumstances and been given help, encouragement, and friendship. Everywhere I have gone, I have found people excited about the old trails, tolerant of and interested in the Mormon dimension, and proud of the big or little piece of Mormon history in their local area. I was able to talk with many, ask questions, even camp on their property.

These people came from all walks, classes, and economic stations of life. There were ranchers, farmers, colleagues, horseback riders, hikers, history buffs, service personnel, government employees, and bar habitués. (In one eastern Iowa town, the only person who knew the location of what I wanted to see was the local barfly.)

In turn I have been able to help many others. All kinds of people have come to me for help of all kinds—where to best position themselves to watch striking sunrises, how to ride a horse across the trail in Wyoming, how to follow the trail by motorcycle, how to locate the grave of ancestors, where to plan a Boy Scout hike, what was the size of a handcart and what would have been in it, what did the Platte River ferry look like, where is Lone Tree (there were three of them), who were the five Mormon women who made it all the way to San Diego with the Mormon Battalion, just where did the Battalion intersect the Santa Fe Trail. They wanted photos identified and paintings checked for accuracy, my opinion about cherished trail legends, or the moving of trail markers, and for me to give evidence before state and congressional committees.

I met with church men of many faiths. In my own faith, scores helped me, all the way from President Spencer W. Kimball to branch presidents in little congregations along the trails.

Members of organizations such as the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, Sons of the Utah Pioneers, Daughters of the American Revolution, Chambers of Commerce, the Boy Scouts of America, the Oregon-California Trails Association, the Santa Fe Trail Association, the National Trail Council, and the Mormon History Association were helpful. My family, my university, my friends, and my church have been very understanding and supportive, emotionally and financially.

Especially prized was the help and encouragement of my friends in the Mormon History Association. I have been over the trails with colleagues like Eugene England, Richard Jensen, William Hartley, Ronald Esplin, Mark McKiernan, and Ken Stobaugh. I gained from their perceptions, both in the field and from their subsequent writings. One wrote the following when he reached the end of the trail and “looked down through granite peaks to the large golden cup of the valley”: “It is possible to sense the joy and relief and awe the pioneers must have felt as participants in the literal

fulfillment of the ancient promise that the mountain of the Lord's house would be established in the tops of the mountains." One also taught me about C.B. radio, a peculiar art form I found useful more than once in the field. I have also learned from acting as a guide for professional writers and photographers.

One of the great and lasting experiences of my life has been my decades-long association with LDS and RLDS historians, devoted, dedicated men and women patiently grubbing for truth, often misunderstood, unappreciated, criticized, even hindered. Such scholars are often the churches' first line of defense. Our official histories are easy to criticize. Only our professional historians are trained and equipped to go deeply enough into the records of the past to properly answer the ever-present detractors.

Some instances on the trails stand out. Once on the Utah-Wyoming border at the Bear River crossing, a rancher's wife divined that I had the G.I.'s, the Rocky Mountain Two Step, Montezuma's Revenge, or diarrhea, and asked me if I wanted a cure, to which I answered in the affirmative. She promptly handed me a shot glass of peach brandy. I said, "But ma'am, I don't drink." To which she retorted, "I didn't ask you whether you drank or not, I asked you if you wanted to get rid of what you have." I took the medicine and, whether it was really efficacious or whether it was the shock to my system, I do not know, or particularly care, but it worked. I was cured.

Once in the Three Crossings area of Wyoming, I ignored all advice and tried to drive a regular car through some sandy spots on the trail and got stuck up to my axles. It took two trucks in tandem to pull me out, and neither driver would accept a dime for their services. One time in Kansas I ran out of gas. I put the word out on my C.B. radio, and in a matter of minutes two "good buddies" stopped and gave me a gallon of gas and would accept no compensation. On the Santa Fe Trail, a dentist extracted a painful thorn from my finger while I was in a parking lot—no charge. A rancher in Wyoming drove miles out of his way to show me some springs I could not find.

I got lost more than once and, sometimes in the process of getting back where I belonged, I made discoveries I never would have otherwise. Once however, at twilight, only prayer, I am convinced, saved me from a very difficult time. (As you can see, I got out safely.)

People have opened up closed museums, libraries, and offices for me, have given me keys to locked fences, put me up for the night, and personally shown me obscure places. Others have done research for me—photocopied things in libraries, gone to newspaper morgues, taken photos, copied texts on site markers, lent me their cars, let me borrow family documents to copy and return. People phoned and wrote me to be sure I was aware of trail developments in their area and alerted me to things I might not otherwise have learned of or seen.

I once lectured in Council Bluffs, Iowa, and, in passing, mentioned how I wished I had one of the (now very rare) wooden Mormon Trail markers placed across Iowa in the 1930s. Sometime later a farmer, who had heard me, offered me one he had in his barn. (It is now in my basement family room and, along with

other unique trail memorabilia, will someday go to the Church Museum in Salt Lake City.)

Some of my choicest experiences on trails was camping in Nebraska, Wyoming, and Utah with friends from the Bureau of Land Management, the Church Historian's Office, and Brigham Young University. Here was trail sharing and living at its best. Here were men, brothers at their best (it has not been my privilege yet to go camping with the sisters), fishing, botanizing local flora, digging out of mud and snow, slapping mosquitoes, cooking buffalo steaks over a campfire, enjoying a "Hunter's Breakfast" (which, incidentally, is one pound bacon, one dozen eggs, one onion, and a can of chopped green chili peppers), noting the incredible sidereal splendors when far from electric lights, wondering which star might be Kolob, and observing the occasional passing of some weather satellite overhead. We would ponder the heavens, for in Wyoming the heavens really do declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork. We also looked for the few celestial bodies mentioned in the Bible: Arcturus, Orion, and the Pleiades. Then to bed in our tents, drifting off to sleep listening to the various night sounds of the local fauna and enjoying the pleasant aroma of campfire smoke and crushed sage.

I have also camped out at Adam-ondi-Ahman in Missouri. And many years ago, I twice had the privilege of sleeping all night in the Carthage Jail, once with my son. As we lay on our camp cots, we read of the martyrdom by lantern light. While these experiences are more trail related than actual trail adventures, they were unusually spiritual and moving—as was the time I tramped around Nauvoo in a snow storm with a dear friend, Don Oscarson. I have had few experiences in life more moving than that.

Also very special was the time in 1979 I spent on trails with members of the Sons of Utah Pioneers when I laid out and flagged their Marathon Run from Nauvoo to Salt Lake City. Later, in a van, I paced the runners part way across Iowa. I have also had the opportunity many times of taking friends and students over the various trails, for up to twelve days at a time; sometimes Violet has accompanied me and given me her unique insights, especially into the motivation and experiences of women such as Narcissa Whitman, the martyred missionary and first white woman to cross the Rockies, and the honeymooning Susan McGoffin, the first white woman on the Santa Fe Trail, who wished "for the genius of an artist that I might pencil such scenes . . . of nature's grandest and most striking works."

These experiences I have had with people along the trails or interested in trails over many years have resulted in strong bonds between me and many others, bonds of respect and affection, bonds that have brought me closer to God in the most real sense of all, through my companions in mortality, through association with other sons and daughters of our common Father.

I have been exceptionally fortunate, even blessed, over the past twenty-six years, and I would like nothing better than another twenty-six years on the old trails communing with nature, my heritage, my God, my companions in this phase of existence, and sharing these adventures with others.

#### NOTE

1. I wish to acknowledge the contributive comments of Eugene England, who critiqued an earlier draft of this paper.