

History/Religion Reference

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1994

HISTORICAL ATLAS OF MORMONISM

Edited by

S. Kent Brown
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SIMON & SCHUSTER

A Paramount Communications Company

New York

London

Toronto

Sydney

Tokyo

Singapore

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Simon & Schuster
Academic Reference Division
15 Columbus Circle
New York, New York 10023

Printed in the United States of America

printing number

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Historical atlas of Mormonism / edited by S. Kent Brown, Donald Q.
Cannon, Richard H. Jackson.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-13-045147-9 (alk. paper)

1. Mormon Church—History—Maps. 2. Mormons—History—Maps.

I. Brown, S. Kent. II. Cannon, Donald Q., 1936-. III. Jackson,
Richard H., 1941-

G1021.E42H5 1994 <G&M>

289.3'022'3—dc20

94-21912

CIP

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RAIL ROUTES (1831–1869)

Stanley B. Kimball

The effective beginning of railroad travel in the United States came in May 1830 with the opening of the first division of the Baltimore and Ohio line, an event that would greatly affect Mormon immigration. The story of Mormon immigrants and the railroads is little known. Generally, little attention has been paid to pioneer immigrants except as travelers in wagons. Yet very few Mormons went west solely by wagon.

Most Mormon immigrants began their wagon journey at the Missouri River by first taking various rivers and railroads from Canada and the East Coast, a distance up to 1,300 miles—the same distance between Nauvoo and Salt Lake City. At various times, Mormons traveled by a variety of rail and water routes to reach their destinations, starting as early as 1837. By 1856, rail travel extended west of Chicago and St. Louis when the Chicago and Rock Island railroad reached Iowa City, Iowa. By 1869, the Union Pacific reached Utah. Thereafter, Mormons were able to travel by rail all the way from the East Coast to Utah.

Starting in 1840, the first Mormon immigrants sailed to the United States. By February 1855, ninety-three percent of European immigrants entered the United States at New Orleans and took riverboats initially to Illinois (1839–1846), later to their wagons on the Missouri River. Thereafter, because of the developing railway network, emigration patterns changed and all European immigrants entered at Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. They then took various railroads as far as possible, at first to Chicago and St. Louis, thence by other rail lines (and Missouri River boats) to their wagons on the Missouri River at places such as Westport, Independence, Weston, and St. Joseph, Missouri; Leavenworth and Atchison, Kansas; Nebraska City and Wyoming, Nebraska; and Council Bluffs, Iowa. Train travel was cheaper, faster, and safer—safer because immigrants were not exposed to the river-borne scourge of cholera.

These observations mean that some 34,000, or 49 percent, of the approximately 70,000 LDS pioneers who crossed the plains before 1869 traveled by railroad to their waiting wagons. Mormon immigrants did not routinely travel by train, however, until 1856, when the Chicago and Rock Island railroad reached Iowa City, Iowa. The first Mormons to use this route were the handcart pioneers.

Over the years the most important midwestern railroads used by Mormons were the Chicago and Rock Island, 1856–1859 (now the Iowa Interstate), the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy, 1859–1866 (now the

Burlington Northern and part of the Amtrak system), the Hannibal and St. Joseph, 1859–1866 (now mainly the Burlington Northern), the Missouri Northern, 1859–1868 (now the Norfolk Southern), the Chicago and Northwestern, 1867–1869 (still the C&NW), the Chicago and Alton, from 1854 on (now the Illinois Central and Gulf and part of the Amtrak system), and the Pacific Railroad, from 1854 on (now the Union Pacific and part of the Amtrak system). A few also rode the Council Bluffs and St. Joseph line and the Keokuk and Fort Des Moines railroad. Some, usually missionaries, also went east by railroad.

A most important year in Mormon rail travel was 1859, when the Hannibal and St. Joseph railroad reached the Missouri River (the first railroad to do so) at St. Joseph, Missouri. Mormons could then ride all the way from the East Coast to St. Joseph by rail. In 1867 the Chicago and Northwestern reached Council Bluffs, Iowa, where Mormons crossed the Missouri and picked up the Union Pacific railroad—a fact that soon permitted Mormons to ride the rails from the East Coast to Utah, thereby becoming “Pullman pioneers.”

The Union Pacific railroad started west from Omaha in 1865, but the Mormons generally did not use this route until 1867, when the tracks reached as far west as North Platte, Nebraska, and the Chicago and Northwestern reached Council Bluffs. In 1868, Mormons took the Union Pacific to Cheyenne, Laramie, and Benton, Wyoming; and thereafter, all the way to Ogden, Utah.

Because they almost always traveled in inexpensive “emigrant cars” rather than in the first-class and “Palace Cars,” Latter-day Saints experienced most of the discomforts typical of mid-19th-century railroads. Among standard problems were crowding, uncomfortable cars, poor heating and ventilation, insufficient lighting, primitive sanitary facilities, inadequate eating conveniences, a lack of drinking water, noise, smells, jolting, shaking, vibration, fatigue, dirt, lice, soot, sparks, smoke, fire, gamblers, thieves, tramps, drunks, “mashers,” loss of luggage, snow, ice, sickness, bad brakes, derailment, accidents, wrecks, delays, and deaths.

Kate Carter, “People Who Came on the First Trains,” *Our Pioneer Heritage* (1965); Richard L. Jensen, “Steaming Through: Arrangements for Mormon Emigration From Europe, 1869–1887,” *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 3–23; Stanley B. Kimball, “Rail/trail Pioneers to Zion: 1855–1869: A Preliminary Study,” paper presented at Mormon History Association Conference, May 1992.

MIDWESTERN RAIL ROUTES USED BY MORMON MIGRANTS, 1855 –1869

