

THIRTY-SIX MILES OF HISTORY

By WAYNE WILCOX*

With some small variations the Mormon Pioneer Memorial Highway closely follows the route taken by the Mormon Pioneers through the Wasatch Mountains and into Salt Lake Valley. Starting at Henefer the route winds thirty-six miles through the crown of the Wasatch Mountains, and ends at the This Is the Place Monument, at the mouth of Emigration Canyon.

From 1847 to 1862, except for a brief period in 1850, when Parley P. Pratt's Golden Pass Road was partially used, this route was the sole means of entrance into the valley from the east. Along this route came all the wagons of the immigrants, the freighters, the Pony Express, and Johnston's Army. Let us start at Henefer and trace those last thirty-six historic miles into Salt Lake Valley.

The first wheeled vehicles over this route were those of the Donner Party, who preceded the Mormon migration by one year. These people, with their twenty-three wagons, required sixteen days of constant work cutting the trail through the Wasatch. The Mormons, who followed in their tracks a year later, came through in three days, but not without considerable labor—the Donner tracks, in some places, having been completely obliterated. Turning southwest at Henefer, a few rods north of a monument commemorating this famous route, we proceed up Main Canyon on a smooth oiled highway, with the old trail twisting its way along Henefer Creek. After winding six miles up Main Canyon we arrive at the summit or "Hogsback," where William Clayton of the Mormon party put up a guideboard, "80 miles to Fort Bridger."

The old trail here was not extremely steep, but being mostly on the side hill, it required the expert care of the teamsters to

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keep the sliding wagons upright. Just over the summit of the Hogsback still can be seen the deep tracks of the wagons, as they wound down into Dixie Hollow. Here, at Dixie Hollow, is the site of the Dixie Creek Pony Express Station. This seems to have been a favorite campground, as both the Mormon and Donner parties made this their first camp after leaving the Weber River.

Much labor was required by the Donners and Mormons in descending the next three miles down brush-choked Dixie Hollow. Both parties were forced to pull up a ravine to the west and detour the impassable bottoms. It was many years later before a road was cut completely through Dixie Hollow. Their labors were increased when they finally reached the floor of East Canyon. Orson Pratt wrote in his journal of the tremendous labor in cutting a road through the thick willows, which for the next eight miles covered the floor of the canyon.

The trail crossed the stream thirteen times in this stretch, and even as late as 1860, the road up East Canyon still crossed the creek thirteen times. The trail today is covered largely by the waters of East Canyon Reservoir, and it is hard to imagine the extreme labor of those early immigrants in cutting their way through here. The site of Bauchmann's Pony Express Station is reached next, and here the Pioneer Memorial Highway leaves the trail and turns to the right up Little Dutch Hollow, where it regains the trail at the summit of Big Mountain. The immigrants left East Canyon four miles above Bauchmann's Express Station and turned up a lateral ravine known as Little Emigration Canyon. The four miles of trail up Little Emigration Canyon to the summit of Big Mountain probably gave the Pioneers their greatest trouble, as it required all their effort to get the wagons up the steep pitches and over the large boulders that filled the canyon.

Looking at it today, it seems impossible that anyone could possibly bring wagons up through that rough ravine. However, up they came, and finally attained the summit of Big Mountain where they glimpsed a portion of Great Salt Lake Valley and journey's end. The trail down Big Mountain is best described by Albert Tracy, who was a member of Johnston's Army. He writes in his journal, under date of June 25, 1858: "So steep, so smooth, and so rocky was this descent, that a mule or horse

might scarcely keep his footing going down, while in spite of drags, wagons, or ambulances, could only be gotten to the base by means of ropes held hard by the men. . . .¹ The wheel scars of the thousands of wagons that came down that slope still can be seen today. The trail winds down to Mountain Dell Canyon and here, at the base of Little Mountain, the wagons stopped and prepared to ascend the last major obstruction before entering the valley.

Passage on down through the narrow brush-filled defile of Parley's Canyon was impossible, and it was necessary to cross the summit of Little Mountain and attain the valley through Emigration Canyon. The trail winds down the west slope of Little Mountain and plainly is visible today and comes in at the Last Camp Monument on the highway. The wagons proceeded five miles on down Emigration Canyon where they arrived at Donner Hill. On arriving at this point, rather than cut through the thick brush around the side of this hill, the Donner Party doubled their teams and brought their wagons up and over the perpendicular incline.

Mormon journalists of the Pioneer party also record the problem they had in gaining entrance into the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. On July 21, 1847, Orson Pratt observed that "the wagons last season had passed over an exceedingly steep and dangerous hill. Mr. [Erastus] Snow and myself ascended this hill, from the top of which a broad open valley, about 20 miles wide and 30 long, lay stretched out before us. . . . we could not refrain from a shout of joy which almost involuntarily escaped from our lips the moment this grand and lovely scenery was within our view." His companion, Erastus Snow, similarly described their entrance into the valley. William Clayton's journal entry for the following day says:

After traveling one and three-quarters miles [down Emigration Canyon], we found the road crossing the creek again to the south [misprinted "north" in the published journal] side and then ascending up a very steep, high hill. It is so very steep as to be almost im-

¹"The Utah War; Journal of Albert Tracy, 1858-1860," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, XIII (1945), 25.

possible for heavy wagons to ascend and so narrow that the least accident might precipitate a wagon down a bank three or four hundred feet,—in which case it would certainly be dashed to pieces. Colonel Markham and another man went over the hill and returned up the canyon to see if a road cannot be cut through and avoid this hill. . . . Brother Markham says a good road can soon be made down the canyon by digging a little and cutting through the bushes some ten or fifteen rods. A number of men went to work immediately to make the road which will be much better than to attempt crossing the hill and will be sooner done. . . . After spending about four hours' labor the brethren succeeded in cutting a pretty good road along the creek and the wagons proceeded on, taking near a southwest course.

In short the Mormon wagons "kept down the gulch of Emigration to a point immediately above the present Hogle Gardens Zoo, then to avoid a marsh in the bottoms, pulled up on the benchland to the south, roughly paralleling the present Wasatch Boulevard but a few yards below it to arrive at the bench at the intersection of Wasatch Boulevard and Michigan Avenue, the northeast extremity of the present Bonneville Golf Course. From this point they wound down the sloping plateau to camp on Parleys Creek, in the vicinity of present 5th East and 17th South streets. This, it should be noted, was also the route of Brigham Young two days later. The 'This Is the Place Monument' north of the gulch of Emigration serves to commemorate imposingly the historic circumstance of the Mormon arrival in Salt Lake Valley, but is not to be taken as marking the site where Brigham Young got his first sweeping view of the future home of the Saints."²

Anyone willing to spend a few hours' time tracing these last thirty-six miles over the Memorial Highway will be well rewarded. The wheel scars of the old covered wagons are still

²The above descriptions of the Donner and Mormon entrances into Great Salt Lake Valley are essentially those contained in footnote material to the journal of James Frazier Reed in "West From Fort Bridger," *op. cit.*, 205, and conform to the facts as determined from the journals of the original participants.

there; Donner Hill still obstructs the mouth of Emigration Canyon, and Big Mountain still offers the sublime view the Pioneers saw when they first obtained its summit. With the linking of the last six and one-half miles of the Pioneer Memorial Highway by the National Guard, the old trail can be followed with comparative comfort in the family car.