

The Unusual and Strange on Mormon Trails, 1831-68: A New Look

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The Mormon immigrations lasted nearly forty years, beginning with the move from New York and Pennsylvania to Kirtland, Ohio, in 1831 through the wedding of the rails at Promontory Point, Utah Territory, in 1869. It involved up to seventy thousand people who left behind what may be the largest single body of westering accounts—over a thousand are known, and more turn up every year.

This body of trail accounts reveals much that is typical of Americans who immigrated to the West and adds much to our understanding of that part of western history. The same accounts also demonstrate much that was unique to westering Mormons—as well as a wealth of information about the unusual and bizarre in the Mormon trek west. This paper will treat only this last aspect of the whole Mormon Exodus. The story falls neatly into four categories: domestic, supernatural, the handicapped, and the miscellaneous.

Although some incidents may have been touched up to become “faith-promoting incidents” and although it is true that diarists were prone to record the unusual, my experience with Mormon journals causes me to take them pretty much at face value. Furthermore, although a few stories may appear to some to have little importance beyond interesting reading, I like to think that the study as a whole opens up a small window on our trail heritage. Similar studies of Oregon and California trail accounts would, of course, turn up a body of strange

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and unusual happenings, but such studies are quite beyond the scope of this paper.

Domestic

The domestic accounts range from the mildly unusual and unfortunate to the truly bizarre. We can begin with the totally inappropriate dress of female pioneers. Nothing could have been more awkward and dangerous than the long skirts of that era decreed by fashion and modesty. Early in our immigrant history, in 1852, Emily Bloomer promoted a safe, sane, and modest costume that became known as “bloomers.” Our grandmothers seldom wore them because they suggested radical feminism or appeared to conflict with Deuteronomy 22:5 wherein it was decreed, “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.” It is tragic that this thinking absolutely worked against the saving of life and the avoidance of hurt. Therefore, the sources are full of unusual death and injuries occasioned by long skirts becoming entangled in ox chains, wagon wheels, brakes, and other wagon parts.

There are also many accounts of nearly miraculous healings and of Saints not being injured when heavy wagons passed over them. One unusual instance was simply because the sister weighed 250 pounds—she was well padded.¹ She tried to get out of her wagon without stopping the oxen. Since oxen usually moved about two miles an hour, people seldom stopped them just to get in and out of such slowly moving wagons, but many paid a price for that decision.

Men’s clothes seldom led to accidents, but inexperience could. In 1850, one Scottish immigrant, for example, unused to handling long bull whips, tried to use his whip while it was wet. Wet whips do not throw properly. Instead of hitting an ox, the whip looped around the ox chains; and the whip, fastened to the man’s hand by a cord, dragged him under his own wagon.²

High altitudes created some unusual cooking problems for the sisters. Because water boils at a lower temperature in high altitudes, beans, for example, could cook all day and never get tender. Many sisters also found cooking with buffalo dung, “meadow muffins,” highly unusual.

Hunger and starvation led to bizarre events. One man stole a cow’s foot, and one figured out how to eat the insides of a cake without anyone noticing what he had done. One old brother, who had lost his sense of smell, tried to make soup out of a skunk.³

One evening, a sister baked some bread that turned out to be the lightest, whitest she had ever made. But when the family came to eat it, the flavor was extraordinary, like nothing they had ever tasted before. Upon investigation, it was determined that, somehow, about one-half pound of soap had fallen unnoticed into the camp kettle and frozen there. That night in the dark, when the kettle was rinsed out, the soap was not seen; and when the water was heated, the

soap melted away. But since food supplies were limited, the family had to eat the bread anyway.⁴ Because of such scarcity, over time, the pioneers ate just about all flora and fauna along the trails—just about anything they could catch or bite and nearly everything that ran, crawled, flew, swam, or grew.

Hunger could reduce children to turning flour sacks inside out and sucking what they could out of the seams.⁵ In 1851, one mother “spread down a sheet and shook a cracker sack free of crumbs and told her three children that that was their supper, and they crawled around and gathered up every crumb and went to bed without a whimper.”⁶ Starvation created horror. In 1856, Patience Loader [Rozsa, Archer] awakened to find a starving man, who had already eaten the flesh off his own fingers, gnawing hers. The poor man, William Whittaker, died shortly afterward and was buried at Willow Springs in present-day Wyoming.⁷

Another sister in the same company, Elizabeth Kingsford, had a night of terror. She later recorded:

About the 25th of October, I think it was—I cannot remember the exact date—we reached camp about sundown. My husband had for several days previously been much worse. He was still sinking and his condition became more serious. As soon as possible, after reaching camp, I prepared a little of such scant articles of food as we had. He tried to eat, but failed. He had not the strength to swallow. I put him to bed as quickly as I could. He seemed to rest easy and fell asleep. About 9 o'clock, I retired. Bedding had become scarce, so I did not disrobe. I slept until, as it appeared to me, about midnight. It was extremely cold. The weather was bitter. I listened to hear if my husband breathed—he lay so still. I could not hear him. I became alarmed. I put my hand on his body when to my horror I discovered that my worst fears were confirmed. My husband was dead. He was cold and stiff—rigid in the arms of death. It was a bitter freezing night, and the elements had sealed up his mortal frame, I called for help to the other inmates of the tent. They could render me no aid; and there was no alternative but to remain alone by the side of the corpse til morning.⁸

The next morning, they wrapped him in a blanket and placed him in a pile of snow with thirteen others who had died. The ground was frozen so hard that no grave could be dug.

Another sister, in 1856 in the third handcart company, endured a strange domestic situation. She was in a Welch company. She could not speak the language, although her husband could. She had to share her tent with a man with one leg, two blind men, a man with one arm, and a widow with five children.⁹

The strange could sometimes be rather humorous. In 1864, somewhere along the Platte River, a husband, his wife, and the wife's mother were traveling together. The husband and mother-in-law often quarreled. One day in some domestic squabble, the husband began to choke the wife, and the mother-in-law was trying to drag him off. A male member of that company threw the husband out of the wagon. He began to cry saying, “I'll leave you, and you'll never see me again!” After he left, the wife cried and blamed her mother for driving him off.

But later that night, the husband came crawling back into the wagon, begging forgiveness. He reformed, became a good man, and joined the Church.¹⁰

Sometimes domestic situations were almost freakish. In 1853, in eastern Iowa, a sister suddenly demanded her clothing and said she was leaving her husband and three daughters. He refused, went on, fully expecting she would have to follow. She did not. He grieved, and when he arrived at Council Bluffs, he found a postcard from his wife instructing where to send her clothing. He never saw or heard from her again.¹¹

A somewhat similar case also took place in Council Bluffs. One wife, leaving her family, shoved her thirteen-month-old infant at her husband, Jacob Hamblin, and said, "Take your little Mormon brats!"¹²

Death occasioned many unusual situations. People fell into wells; some were sucked into quicksand; and some were struck by lightning. Some children were crushed by animals and wagons, and some were picked up by whirlwinds. One hydrocephalic infant died near Chimney Rock.¹³

Pioneers were buried in blankets, snow banks, packing cases, hollowed-out cottonwood logs; between pieces of bark; in bread boxes, tea canisters, dresser drawers; and even in soldered sheet-metal coffins. Sometimes the Mormons reburied those who had been disinterred by wolves or who had never been buried in the first place.

There were also premature burials—or, at least, premature decisions made regarding death. One mother, thinking her baby dead and with no time to dig even a shallow grave, could only wrap the infant in a blanket and put it under a bush. During the night, she felt the urge to go back to the child. She found it alive and returned triumphant to camp.¹⁴

The Supernatural

Some strange, supernatural events were recorded. Some Saints thought they saw the devil himself, or his hand, in events. There is at least one Three Nephites story, several accounts of evil spirits, and stories of loved ones and strangers appearing to give counsel and cheer.

The earliest of these accounts comes from the Kirtland camp of 1838 in its move from Kirtland, Ohio, to Far West, Missouri. According to Arouet L. Hale, sometime in July, after Sunday services, a Brother Willey was suddenly thrown on his back by the power of the devil. He raved and frothed at the mouth like a mad man. The elders administered to him and rebuked the evil spirit. After the second rebuke, the "Devil went out of Brother Willey and went stomping through camp," running against several tables.¹⁵

In an 1860 handcart company, a non-LDS woman was suddenly seized by "evil spirits." The elders administered to her. Immediately, so the record states, her paroxysms ceased, and she asked, "Why did we not let her go, why had we called her back to this world of trouble as she had got past all pain and was going

off in a nice four horse carriage, all finely caparisoned." It was later learned that this woman considered herself some sort of a medium and that she thought some evil spirits really were trying to stop her from going to Salt Lake City and becoming a Mormon, so she was baptized on the spot, near Green River.¹⁶

On one occasion, Thomas Briggs administered to his mother, who recovered. Later, he said a personage dressed all in black appeared to him and said, "You saved her life, but I will have her next time."¹⁷

Not all encounters with evil spirits took place on western trails. One, for example, occurred on a railroad train. On 20 July 1869, one hour out of Omaha on the Union Pacific, "one of the sisters was seized with an evil spirit so bad that it required four persons to hold her down to prevent herself from jumping off the train." Zebulon Jacobs, from whom we have this account, "administered to her three different times, it required muscular force to get the oil between her teeth, but after we got through rebuking the spirit, she became quiet" and soon completely recovered.¹⁸

One Three Nephites story comes from 1847, perhaps the earliest one on the trail. While at Fort Bridger, Jim Bridger told Robert Sweeten and others that he had seen the captain of Brigham Young's company riding ahead of the rest. According to Sweeten, "We learned that there was no such man riding ahead of the company, but he was believed to be one of the Three Nephites guarding the company and leading it to the proper place."¹⁹

Another example of supernatural comfort concerns a sister in the 1857 Martin Handcart Company who had just lost her husband. The night of 28 October, the night before the rescue teams sent from Salt Lake City reached the company, her husband appeared in a dream and said to her, "Cheer up, Elizabeth, deliverance is at hand."²⁰

Many Saints considered that their prayers had been answered. Perhaps no account was as dramatic, however, as that of Robert L. Overseen. In 1866, along the Platte River, he lost a shoe, and he was not permitted to ride in the wagon. In desperation, he prayed and, in his own words, "As soon as I had uttered the prayer, a shoe came flying at me. Someone had thrown it out of a passing wagon." It was small but usable.²¹

The Handicapped

I am surprised at the number of physically and emotionally handicapped pioneers who attempted to cross the plains or whose guardians attempted to take them to Zion. Emotional disturbances ranged from the mild to the bizarre. In September 1861, while camped on the Big Sandy in present-day Wyoming, a company met a woman walking east all alone. She asked them for directions to the Platte Bridge, as she wished to make some purchases. She had already walked more than 200 miles, and the bridge lay about 250 miles farther east. The company captain discovered that she did not "seem exactly right in her mind" and

finally prevailed on her to return to the valley with them.²²

B. H. Roberts recorded an 1866 story of an emotionally troubled sister on a train between New York City and the Niagara Falls Bridge. She started “running wild, screaming and clapping her hands and jumping over people and things. Several times, although they tried to restrain her, she tried to destroy herself by leaping from the moving train.” She was finally subdued, apparently recovered, and stayed with the immigrant company.

Sometime later, when the company reached present-day Wyoming, Roberts one day saw her bathing two girls in a tub when “suddenly she began raking the backs of the girls with her clawlike hands until red streaks appeared on their backs and on the shoulders blood was oozing from the scratches.” After this, she was assigned to another traveling company, and Roberts never saw or heard of her again.²³

In 1850, a Brother and Sister Hunter tried to take their severely retarded son west with them. While they were camped temporarily at Kanesville, Iowa, Gibson Condie, a Scottish immigrant, recorded the following:

The poor boy's name was David, or David the Idiot. If any stranger came to the house to see the family, they would be terrified, afraid to come into the house, for David, would make all kinds of gestures, make his head go to one side and then to the other and have his tongue out and dance. He was bare headed all the time and would not wear shoes. He wore a beard which contrasted so strongly with his propensity for wearing women's petticoats as to shock most people seeing him for the first time, even though he was quite harmless. To make matters worse, he could not talk. His poor mother was almost a prisoner in her home, for if she went out and left him alone at home, he would throw anything he could find, shoes, stocking, for example, into the fire, acts which seemed to please him greatly. His mother, when this happened, would call him by name, scold him for doing it so that he would know that he had done wrong.

His father had great faith and used to say that when the family got to the valley, he would have his son administered to by the Twelve Apostles, and he would become a sound man. Father Hunter believed his son was possessed of evil spirits which would be cast out, and that David would become as smart as any one in the family.²⁴

One cannot help hoping that this pious wish came true. Unfortunately, the records are silent on this matter.

The sources reveal other heroic acts of faith regarding the attempt to take west not only emotionally disturbed but also the halt, the blind, the mute, and the maimed. After all, it was their Zion too. Did not faith move mountains? What missionary, what immigrant agent, or what company captain could say no? We believed in miracles and the gospel was universal, for all. Some made it; some did not.

In 1857, a girl with a wooden leg managed all right.²⁵ A sixty-year-old blind sister from Norway walked all the way, cheerfully pushing her handcart and

helped by her daughter. "We could hear merry laughter," one member of her company recorded, "when she unexpectedly found herself wading one or another of the many streams of water which were found along our way."²⁶

As previously noted, one handcart company had a man with one leg, a man with one arm, and two blind men, all who apparently made the journey safely.

Most accounts, however, are not of the happy sort. In 1866, Caroline H. Clark, while camped at Wyoming, Nebraska (yes, there really is, or was, such a place on the Missouri River between Nebraska City and Omaha), reported on 25 July that a "deaf and dumb girl died in our camp today."²⁷

In the Martin Handcart Company, there were several invalids, and one old brother of seventy was placed in charge of them. He got them up early and sent them out ahead of the company so as not to hold up the whole camp. One of his charges was paralyzed from the waist down and was badly deformed. He was able to propel himself with crutches and had promised the company captain that he would walk every foot of the way and not be a burden to the company. How would you refuse such a brother the chance to try?

One day the crippled brother was missing. A party went back to find him. In about a mile, they located him with two wolves prowling around and eagles in a tree waiting for him to die. They put him in the handcart they had brought along and returned him to camp. He pled with the company captain to be allowed to walk because of his promise. A few days later, however, he expired from exhaustion on the banks of the Wood River in present-day Nebraska. This valiant soul had pushed his wracked body more than 160 miles west of the Missouri River, only to wear out still some 950 miles short of his goal.²⁸

In 1853, somewhere along the Platte River, Selina Bray expired. She was fifty-one and for over twenty years had been so mentally and physically retarded that she had been unable to do anything for herself.²⁹ Some years later, in 1861, a Brother Robert Thomas lost his little crippled and retarded daughter to mountain fever.

Miscellaneous Events

There were, of course, a number of miscellaneous, unusual events. People were bitten by spiders and scorpions, male and female baggage got mixed to the great consternation of some, and mammoth bones were discovered and discussed. Some shoeless Saints took foot gear off corpses. One was a young man whose mother had preceded him to Utah, and he was ashamed to meet her without shoes. He was also so ashamed of robbing a corpse that at first he kept the shoes hidden from others in his trail company.³⁰

On occasion, some Saints took grim comfort in finding headboards of Missourians they suspected of having participated in the persecution of the Church in the 1830s. Some were pleased when they found such graves desecrated by wolves. On 7 October 1849, for example, William Appleby, walking

along in western Nebraska or eastern Wyoming, saw the grave and headboard of a “gold digger,” one D. Dodd from Gallatin County, Missouri. “The wolves,” Appleby noted, “had completely disinterred him. The pantaloons and shirt in which he had been buried lay strewn around the grave. His under jaw bone lay in the bottom of the grave with the teeth all completed and one of his ribs on the surface of the ground nearby were the only remains discernible.” Appleby believed that this was the same Dodd who had been a prominent participant in the Haun’s Mill massacre in Missouri in 1838 and considered such desecration as “righteous retribution.”³¹ Apostle George A. Smith also saw this grave and preached a trail-side sermon referring to his prophecy that “wild beasts should pick the old mobocrat, Dr. Dodd’s bones.”

Some travelers, although few, I presume, actually released their pent-up anger on the bones of deceased Missourians. In 1859, near Scotts Bluffs, N. W. Whipple found some Missourians’ graves that had been dug up by wolves. Their bones lay around bleaching in the wilderness. To Whipple, this was the fulfillment of some of the prophecies of Joseph Smith regarding those who had murdered and plundered the Saints in Missouri. Whipple found the names of the deceased on the headboards of their graves and noted, “I had the satisfaction of kicking their skulls about and trampling upon their ribs and other bones that the wolves had left bare.”³²

In conclusion, I wish to relate two particularly bizarre events. When we consider the use of candles, lamps, and campfires, the fact that wagons caught fire was hardly considered unusual; but one fire, at least, was rather strange. Some time in August 1861, somewhere west of Omaha, one wagon was set afire by electricity. The party had camped the night near a pole of the Pacific Telegraph Company (part of the Western Union Telegraph Company, which ran the wire from Omaha to Salt Lake City between July and October of 1861). During the night, a storm came up, and lightning caused a pole to break. The wire, falling across the wagon’s cover, set the cover on fire. It was quickly extinguished but was considered a great marvel.³³

I have treated Mormon-Indian relations elsewhere, both the routine and the strange, including the attempts to trade for wives, steal wives, and kidnap children, as well as the unusual and unexpected help offered Mormons by friendly Indians.³⁴ Here I wish to conclude with a tale I am not sure has ever been told before.

On 4 September 1859, the eighth handcart company, under the leadership of Captain George Rowley, encamped near Devil’s Gate, Wyoming. Also camped nearby was a band of Indians who had just been successful in battle with their enemies and were “parading around with scalps suspended on sticks.” The leader of the victorious Indians courteously invited the Mormons to visit their camp that night to witness the sport of torturing the captives to death. Frederick A. Cooper noted, “We respectfully declined.”³⁵

Notes

1. Martin Zyderlaan Diary, 21 August 1863, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Archives, hereafter LDS Archives.
2. Richard Bee Autobiography, typescript, 1850, p. 8, Brigham Young University Library, hereafter BYU Library.
3. C. C. A. Christensen, "By Handcart to Utah," translated by Richard L. Jensen, typescript, p. 16. Copy in author's possession.
4. Stella Jacques Bell, *Life History and Writings of John Jacques* (Rexburg, Idaho: Ricks College Press, 1978), p. 153.
5. George Mayer Diary, 1848, LDS Archives.
6. Elvira Carson Biography, 1851, p. 16, BYU Library.
7. Bell, 150.
8. Elizabeth Kingsford Autobiography, typescript, 25 October 1856, Utah Historical Society Library.
9. Kate B. Carter, ed., *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 14, "Priscilla Evans Autobiography" (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1971), 279-92.
10. Robert L. Ashby, ed., *Family History of Thomas Cropper* (n.p., n.p., 1957), 24.
11. Peter McIntyre Autobiography, typescript, 12 June 1853, LDS Archives.
12. Richard S. VanWagoner and Steven C. Walker, *A Book of Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1982), 109.
13. B. H. Roberts Autobiography, typescript, 1862, University of Utah Library.
14. Kate B. Carter, ed., *Treasurers of Pioneer History*, 5, "Emma P. Eliason Tells a Story" (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1951), 223-24.
15. Arouet L. Hale Journal, July 1838, LDS Archives.
16. *Journal History*, 24 September 1860, LDS Archives.
17. Kate B. Carter, ed., *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 3, "The Diary and Journal of Thomas Briggs" (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1960), 261-332.
18. Zebulon Jacobs Diary, 20 July 1868, LDS Archives.
19. Robert Sweeten Family Reunion, 5 May 1961, n.p., n.p., p. 10.
20. Elizabeth Jackson Kingsford Autobiography, typescript, 27 October 1856, Utah Historical Society Library.
21. *Eventful Narrative*, Faith Promoting Series, 13th book, n.p., n.p., n.d., p. 43.
22. Davis Ellis Johnson, comp., *Leaves from the Family Tree of Sixtus Ellis Johnson* (n.p., n.d., 1955), 137, LDS Archives.
23. Roberts, 19-22.
24. Gibson Condie Journal, 1850, p. 30, LDS Archives.
25. Christensen, 11.
26. *Ibid.*, 9.
27. Caroline H. Clark, Diary, 25 July 1866, LDS Archives.
28. John W. Southwell Autobiography, August 1856, LDS Archives.
29. James Jack Diary, 13 August 1863, LDS Archives.
30. *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1934, 7-8.
31. William Appleby Journal, typescript, 7 October 1849, LDS Archives.
32. Nelson W. Whipple Journal, 17 August 1859, LDS Archives.
33. Lucy Parr, ed., *True Stories of Mormon Pioneer Courage* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1979), 22-23.
34. "Red Men and White Women on Mormon Trails, 1847-68: The Captivity Narrative in Mormondom," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Winter, 1985): 81-88.
35. *Journal History*, 4 September 1859, LDS Archives.