



MAP OF
OREGON AND UPPER CALIFORNIA
From the Surveys of
JOHN CHARLES FREMONT
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WIN QUARTERS

RETURN TO TERR

THE WESTWARD MIGRATION
TAKES A BRIEF EASTWARD TURN

BY WILLIAM W. SLAUGHTER



By the time Mormon pioneer leader Brigham Young arrived in the Salt Lake Valley on July 24, 1847, the hard work of settlement was already underway. Members of his vanguard company who had entered the valley ahead of their ailing prophet had immediately started diverting the waters of City Creek for irrigation, planting late crops and building temporary shelters. When Young arrived, the work was extended to laying out streets and choosing a site for their temple. On August 9, the pioneers celebrated the birth of the first white child born in Utah—little Elizabeth Steele. Two days later they grieved the first death in the valley when 3-year-old Milton Therkill drowned in a creek.

Their new life in their new homeland had begun.

The “big company” of 1,500 souls was still on the trail, following in several well-organized smaller companies. They would arrive in the Salt Lake valley in September and October. By winter these pioneers built a walled fort, constructed 450 log cabins, cultivated some 5,000 acres, and planted 872 acres of winter wheat. Some 1,650 pioneers wintered in the Salt Lake Valley during 1847-1848.

In August, Brigham Young and a number of his pioneering colleagues began a return trip to Winter Quarters in order to help organize the next year’s migration. These eastward-bound pioneers left in two groups. The first party left on August 16-17 under the leadership of Shadrach Roundy and Tunis Rappleye. This group consisted of 70 men (24 pioneers and 46 members of the Mormon Battalion “sick detachment”), 34 wagons, 92 yoke of oxen, 18 horses, and 14 mules.¹ With light-loaded wagons, familiarity of the terrain, and rivers no longer swollen with spring runoff, the trip to Winter Quarters took a little more than half the time it took to get to Salt Lake.

But that does not mean the trip was easy. Without the firm guidance of Brother Brigham, this group was, in the words of author Wallace Stegner, “close to mutiny and violence through a good part of their journey, and arrived [at Winter Quarters] not as austere disciplined companies but as a rabble of backbiting stragglers.”² At one point on the Platte River, Indians stole 17 horses; fortunately 16 were recovered. Also, starvation was a real concern as their provisions were scant. Sylvester Earl wrote: “I [was] sent in company with Horace Thornton to a small band of Indians and sold my shirt off my back for some meat. I then took my wagon cover and cut and made me another [shirt]. We then persued our journey about forty miles and come to an immense drove of buffaloes. Here we killed and dried all we wanted and hundreds of pounds to take home.”³ So plentiful were

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Sylvester Earl

the buffalo kills that they arrived in Winter Quarters with ample amounts of dried meat. Earl continues, “we arrived in Winter Quarters on the 1st of September, 1847 when with great joy I met my wife and three sweet little children all well.”⁴

The second group, lead by Brigham Young, left Salt Lake on August 26. It included 107 men (seven of the Twelve Apostles), 36 wagons, 71 horses, and 49 mules.⁵ Traveling eastward, they soon encountered wagon companies of Latter-day Saints on the trail. The west-bound Saints rejoiced in meeting their fellow pioneers. Noted Mormon midwife Patty Sessions, a member of the Daniel Spencer company, wrote: “Saturday 4 [September] go 1 mile stop good feed here the Pioneers came to us it mad[e] our hearts glad to see them they staid all night with us eat and drank with us had a good meeting Sunday 5 they bid us good by with their blessing and left us to go to their families they gave a good report of the valley said it was the place for us.”⁶



Thomas Bullock

Later the same day, after meeting Parley P. Pratt’s westbound company, Thomas Bullock recorded, “The brethren engaged in visiting P.P. Pratt’s Co.—mutually gratified at the opportunity—& such good feelings existed that we did not separate until after 9.”⁷

This eastward group, like the first one, lacked adequate provisions and lived off the land where possible. But, as historian Will Bagley states, “the Saints found that all the fat was gone off the land.”⁸ However, on 7 September, after traveling through a snow storm, they met the John Taylor and Joseph Horne companies, who surprised Brigham Young’s group with a “supper in a Willow Grove... which was furnished with Roast & boiled Beef, Veal... Pies, Cakes, Biscuits, Butter, Peaches, with coffee, Tea, Sugar, Cream & a variety of good things of life. About 60 sat down to the Table first time, the remainder the second spread... Afterwards the brethren & sisters tript ‘the light fantastic toe’ in the dance, making a large fire in the Willow Patches; which they kept up until about 10 or 11 o’clock.”⁹ Two days later, they awoke to find 50 horses had been stolen by Indians during the night. Ten more livestock were stolen during a raid on September 21. Throughout their journey, these east-bound Saints were troubled by hunger, exhaustion, snow storms, and loss of animals from Indian raids.

Fortune shined on them as they journeyed along the Platte River road when, on October 18, Hosea Stout and a party of 15 men met them with two wagonloads of foodstuffs. On October 31, they entered Winter Quarters greeted by streets lined with cheering people.



Prior to entering Winter Quarters, Brigham Young addressed his fatigued fellow travelers: "I wish you to receive my thanks for your kindness and willingness to obey orders; I am satisfied with you; you have done well. We have accomplished more than we expected... You are dismissed to go to your own homes."¹⁰ They had completed the expedition in nine weeks and four days.

Brigham Young and members of the original pioneer company were not the only ones who headed east to Winter Quarters. William Hyde, traveling with a company of Mormon Battalion veterans, recorded: "Reached the camp of the saints in Salt Lake Valley on the 12th October. The reception with which we met gladdened our hearts and revived our spirits. A small portion of the company found their families here, and consequently had got home. The Presidency and some of the pioneers had returned to Winter Quarters. The saints that were remaining felt very well pleased with the situation of the Valley."¹¹

Intent on being with their families, Hyde and 16 others started east on October 16, despite the danger of the late season. Perhaps having survived the deserts of the Southwest in their 2,000 mile march to San Diego and subsequent trip to northern California, over the Sierras and across the Great Basin, they felt they could handle any expedition, in any weather. After a journey that can only be described as arduous, they arrived at Loup Fork (Nebraska) on November 28. Hyde described the river as "swollen and so much ice running that it was impossible to get across... We concluded to go up to the forks of the river, which was some 12 or 15 miles distance through brush and over broken ridges without any road or trail. After reaching the forks we were two days before we succeeded in getting all things across."¹²

On December 9 they finally considered giving up. Hyde continues: "We camped within about 15 miles of [Elk]horn River, which place is 30 miles from... Winter Quarters. But as we were strangers to the route, we were not aware that we were so near our place of destination, and as the snow was deep, and our meat... entirely exhausted, we seated ourselves upon the snow around our camp fire and entered into council as to the wisest course to be pursued... On the morning of the 10th, we all were united in calling on the Lord to regard our situation in mercy and send us food from an unexpected quarter that we might have wherewith to subsist upon. And here the Lord heard our prayer. Soon after reaching the Horn, the wild turkeys began to pass our camp in droves, and such a sight I never before witnessed... We succeeded in getting four, which was one to every four persons... The 11th. Went to the camps of the Saints at Winter Quarters. The day was bitter cold and the company was well nigh used up. Our clothing being in no wise calculated for winter, we had suffered much with cold,

as well as with hunger... the reception with which we met, and the blessings that were poured upon our heads on our arrival, seemed to cause new life to spring up and to compensate us for all our toils."¹³

Although the Saints in the Winter Quarters area suffered illnesses and some deaths during the pioneers' absence, their crop harvest had been bountiful and they were well prepared for the cold Midwest winter.

At Kanesville, east of the Missouri River, the Saints hurriedly built a log tabernacle. On December 27, 1847, members filled the tabernacle to sustain the new First Presidency—President Brigham Young and his counselors, Heber C. Kimball and Willard Richards. It had been three-and-one-half years since the Saints were led by a First Presidency.

Many Mormons along the Missouri River utilized the winter months of 1847-48 in the same way Sylvester Earl did: "I spent the winter in preparing to go with my family to the valley."¹⁴ In the spring, a body of Saints left the Winter Quarters area to journey to the Salt Lake Valley in companies under the guidance of each of the First Presidency. Remaining Mormons had moved to Kanesville—the U.S. Indian Agent determined that Winter Quarters was on Indian territory and ordered Mormons to vacate. Winter Quarters, once the center for planning and preparing, now lay abandoned.

From 1848-1852, Kanesville, Iowa, and the surrounding area served as a vital center for those not yet able to venture west to the Great Basin. However, in the fall of 1851, the First Presidency issued a powerful statement for the Mormons in Iowa to wait no longer to remove to Salt Lake Valley. The following spring the majority of Saints left Kanesville and other Iowa settlements to gather with their fellow Saints in the valley of the Great Salt Lake. ▼

William W. Slaughter is co-author of Trail of Hope; the companion volume to the PBS documentary.

**"I wish you to
receive my
thanks for your
kindness and
willingness to
obey orders;
I am satisfied
with you;
you have done
well. We have
accomplished
more than
we expected...
You are dismissed
to go to your
own homes."**

¹ Thomas Bullock, *The Pioneer Camp of the Saints: the 1846 and 1847 Mormon Trail Journals of Thomas Bullock*, edited by Will Bagley (Spokane: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1997), 258. ² Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 184. ³ Sylvester Henry Earl, *Autobiographical Sketch*, 1854, typescript of ms., LDS Church Archives, 6. ⁴ *Ibid.*, 7. ⁵ Bullock, *The Pioneer Camp*, 276-277. ⁶ Patty B. Sessions, *Diaries and Account Book, 1846-1866, 1880*, typescript of ms., LDS Church Archives, 47-48. ⁷ Bullock, *The Pioneer Camp*, 279-280. ⁸ Bullock, *The Pioneer Camp*, 268. ⁹ Bullock, *The Pioneer Camp*, 281-282. ¹⁰ Stanley B. Kimball, Heber C. Kimball: *Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 175. ¹¹ William Hyde, "The Private Journal of William Hyde" (S.L.s.n., 1962?), 46. ¹² *Ibid.*, 47-48. ¹³ *Ibid.*, 48-49. ¹⁴ Sylvester Earl, *Autobiography*, 7.