Women Among the Wagons

A Pioneer "Legacy"

Editor's Note: Throughout The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, its women were honored by a special "Legacy" observance last month. The PIONEER is pleased to join in this celebration of LDS women by publishing this article. It is one of a series appearing each issue through the efforts of City Creek Chapters, Sons of Utah Pioneers.

by Jeffery O. Johnson
City Creek Chapter

The Mormon migration to the Salt Lake Valley was usually a family project. Women and children had important parts to play in the journey. Sometimes women were partners with their husbands in getting the family to Utah. Other times they were temporarily heads of families who later joined their husbands at the end of the trail.

Often women became permanent heads of families when their husbands died or refused to follow the Church into the desert. Single women often traveled as temporary members of other families for the journey. Many of these were young girls who hoped to be reunited with family members in the Valley. The reminiscences and journals of these women give us interesting details concerning life on the plains.

Bathsheba Bigler Smith, wife of apostle George A. Smith, remembered the hard time the European immigrants had in adjusting to frontier travel. She wrote:

Twenty four of the wagons of our company belonged to the Welsh Saints, who had been led from Wales by Elder Dan Jones, they did not know anything about driving oxen. It was very amusing to see them yoke their cattle; two would have an animal by the horns, one by the tail, one or two others would do their best to put on the yoke whilst the apparently astonished ox, not at all enlightened by the guttural sound of the Welch tongue seemed perfectly at a loss what to do or to know what was wanted of him.

An English widow, Jane Rio Baker, saw it from another point of view. She wrote in her diary:

I can just fancy how you would laugh, could you see us, taking our first lesson in ox-driving, and our cattle taking every direction, except a straight forward one.

The wagons would be home for the family on the journey and temporary shelter after arrival until a log home was built. Women had the responsibility to make the wagon comfortable. Bathsheba Smith wrote:

I had hanging up on the inside a looking glass, candlestick, pin cushion, etc. In the center of our wagon we had room for four chairs in which we and our two children sat and rode when we chose. The floor of our traveling house was carpeted, and we made ourselves as comfortable as we could under our circumstances.

Many times women had to drive the wagons. When Joseph Mount's hired teamster left him part way in the journey, his wife had to drive the extra wagon. She would yoke and unyoke the oxen in addition to her other duties. Her daughter, Mary Jane Mount Tanner, describes her mother's difficult time:

As we reached the mountains the roads were very rough and she often had to spring from the wagon to guide the cattle
and keep the wagon from being upset. One of her oxen would never learn to hold back, and when going downhill she had to hold his horn with one hand and pound his nose with the other to keep him from running into the wagon ahead of him. Many times the bushes caught her dress in the wagon wheels and she had no choice but to run on, leaving pieces behind her.

Besides helping at the births along the way, women often did other necessary medical work. Jane Rio Baker wrote in her diary:

"Ferried over the Elk Horn (River) in safety; except one of Chatterley's company who caught his hand in a chain, bursting one of his fingers, making a rent of one and one half inches long. Mrs. Joseph Pierce and I sewed it up between us and dressed it well as we could."

Margaret Gay Judd Clawson was a teenager when she traveled with her family to Utah. Her reminiscences of the trip are full of teenage enthusiasm. She wrote:

"Oh, the monotony of camp life when not traveling. How delighted we all were when we started our journey for good. Everything was bright and beautiful. I was young and healthy. (Life was) colored rose for me. The responsibilities, anxieties and cares rested on my parents. In traveling as we did, one day was very like another. After jogging along all day we camped at night. The men took care of the cattle, while the women got supper. After that was over the young folks generally made a bonfire and sat around it, talked, told stories, sung songs, and etc."