“Crossing the Great Plains: A Sesquicentennial Look at the 1847 Mormon Pioneer Trek West.”

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Top: During the Mormon Centennial of 1947, Spencer and Camilla Kimball stood on Independence Rock viewing vehicles decorated to represent wagons and the animals that pulled them. (Historical Department, Archives Division, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)

Below: In 1997 the Mormon commemoration was marked by an overland trek with wagons and handcarts. (Courtesy of Eileen A. Bell)
ONE HUNDRED FIFTY YEARS AGO some 4,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints huddled along the west bank of the Missouri River in their makeshift cabins, wagons, and dugouts awaiting spring. Freshly dug graves in a hill just a few miles north of present Omaha, Nebraska, contained several hundred fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters who had perished from exposure, disease, and malnutrition. The survivors hoped their future would brighten, like the coming of the spring grass after a long winter, as they fled from their tumultuous past seeking a place to dwell in peace and safety. With the hardest 265 miles of their 1,300 mile trip accomplished, Brigham Young, the president of the church’s governing body, the Twelve Apostles, made plans to settle “in some good valley in the neighborhood of the Rocky Mountains...or the great Basin.”¹

From 1847 to 1897, some 100,000 Mormons traveled west along the Great Platte River Road to the Great Salt Lake Valley, the last 30,000 riding the newly completed transcontinental railroad all the way to Ogden, Utah, after its completion in 1869. This article analyzes the motives forcing the Mormons to venture west, observes several unique features that made the Mormon Trail experience different from that of other overland travelers, and examines how that experience has been memorialized.²

Of all the forces driving people to venture west along the Overland Trail—furs, gold, land, and adventure—perhaps none was stronger than the Latter-day Saints’ desire to escape religious persecution. For those Mormon pioneers gathered along the Missouri River’s banks and scattered from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Winter Quarters, Omaha Indian Nation, in 1846, their future looked as bleak as their present condition.

It had not started that way. Since the church’s founding in 1830, Latter-day Saint numbers had increased steadily as converts joined the church, first in America and then from abroad, especially in England. Nevertheless, persecution, some of it deserved, most of it uncalled for, had driven the Saints from New York to Ohio and then to Missouri. In Missouri, mob action intensified and the Saints made a hasty retreat to Illinois. There they were welcomed at first, and the Saints built a city they named Nauvoo near a bend in the Mississippi River.³

For a time, all was well. Then, political intrigue and distrust mounted between Mormon and non-Mormon groups. The Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., held substantial political influence in Illinois because the Mormons usually voted as a block. He also had helped acquire the Nauvoo Charter that gave tremendous power to Smith as mayor of the city and its officials to act in legal matters. Additionally, since 1844, church leaders openly acknowledged the practice of polygamy and other social revelations that caused non-Mormons to view the Saints as a threat to American mainstream society.

Mutual distrust and rumors accumulated like a powder keg awaiting ignition. A newspaper published by several apostate members, the Nauvoo Expositor, proved to be just the spark needed to set it off. The Expositor began publishing controversial material against Smith and other prominent church leaders and was particularly strong in its attack on polygamy. Mayor Smith and the city council had the press destroyed as a public nuisance. Less than a month later, in June of 1844, an anti-Mormon mob killed Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum while they were in the Carthage, Illinois, jail.⁴

After the death of Joseph Smith, most non-Mormons thought

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the church would fragment and disappear. Although it did divide, most Saints looked to a new leader, Brigham Young, who in the next few years would plan and execute one of the best-organized movements of people in American history.\(^5\)

Bernard DeVoto called 1846 “the year of decision,” and indeed it was, especially for the Latter-day Saints.\(^6\) That year Brigham Young envisioned a three-pronged venture that would take the body of Saints to the Great Basin. The first prong involved the hiring of a ship, the *Brooklyn*, to transport those members newly arrived from England or still living on the East Coast around South America to Yerba Buena (San Francisco) where they could then travel overland to the Rocky Mountains. The second plan was for those Mormon converts arriving at New Orleans and staying in Mississippi to travel upstream to Independence, Missouri, and embark overland on the south side of the Platte. They were to rendezvous at Fort Laramie with the main body of Saints coming along the Platte’s north side; they made up the third and largest group. After sixteen years of persecution, mob harassment, unlawful arrests, and the martyrdom of their prophet, the Saints could only hope that there were better times ahead. By the year’s end, they would implement arguably the most carefully planned, continual, systematized, and organized pioneer migration of the nineteenth century.

At first the migration plan unfolded as Mormon leaders had hoped. The Mississippi body of Saints began its journey upriver to Independence. Two hundred thirty-eight Saints boarded the *Brooklyn* and left New York on 4 February 1846 and began their voyage around South America. From there, however, things began to falter. Young had not planned on an early expulsion from Nauvoo, precipitated by more persecution. The first group of Mormons left Nauvoo on February 4, coincidentally the same date the *Brooklyn* departed from New York, and the next few months saw the evacuation of 12,000 to 16,000 Saints from Nauvoo. Ill-prepared for the extreme winter temperatures and unable to redeem most of their property in Illinois, the Saints struggled through the mud of southern Iowa, establishing settlement waystations like Sugar Creek, Garden Grove, and Mount Pisgah before arriving at the Missouri River.\(^7\)

The evacuation from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Kanesville (Council Bluffs), Iowa, in 1846 took longer than expected. Large numbers of poor needing assistance slowed down those obliged to share their substance with their spiritual brothers and sisters. Leaving during early spring, the Saints encountered terribly wet weather that produced muddy conditions that slowed wagons down to a crawl. Sometimes they moved only a few miles a day. Any final attempts for the main body of Saints to cross the Rockies that year were abandoned when in July of 1846, more than 500 men (known as the Mormon Battalion) were mustered into Col. Stephen W. Kearny’s expedition that marched through the Southwest.\(^8\) The sudden exodus of so many men, combined with those gone on missionary service, the weather, and the sheer numbers of people to be moved helped delay the first westward expedition until 1847. It took the Mormons longer to cross the 265 miles from Nauvoo to Council Bluffs in 1846 than it took the 1847 Pioneer Vanguard to travel 1,050 miles from the banks of the Missouri River to the valley of the Great Salt Lake.

With a large portion of the men now gone, Young focused his attention on preparing for the winter and next year’s migration. He secured permission to set up temporary camps in Iowa, especially on the east bank of the Missouri River at Council Bluffs.\(^9\) Young also requested permission from the Indian agent at Trading Point and from chiefs of the Omaha, Osage-Missouri, Ponca, and Pawnee tribes to allow the Saints to make temporary settlements in Unorganized Territory to assist members in their move to the Far West.\(^10\)

The Mormons established a temporary settlement called Winter Quarters on the Missouri’s west bank (approximately six miles above the Mormon ferry at the present-day Omaha suburb of Florence). President James K. Polk agreed to the Mormon request to stay on Indian land as long as it was temporary and they did not cause any disturbances.

After arriving at an agreement with government officials and representatives of several tribes, Young organized the building of Winter Quarters.\(^11\) The temporary settlement materialized quickly. John D. Lee recorded in his journal that he “was astonished when [he] looked around and saw what serious enterprise and industry had brought to pass within six weeks past. A city of at least 400 houses had been erected in that short space of time, through the ingenuity of the Saints.”\(^12\)

Not all of the membership made it to Winter Quarters and Council Bluffs. Many temporary settlements of log cabins, sod huts, dugouts, tents, and wagon boxes filled western Iowa. The winter was full of misery. Meager supplies, inadequate sanitation, extreme elements, and outbreaks of various diseases took their toll and by spring, hundreds of new graves had been dug at Winter Quarters. Young continued making preparations for the approximately 15,000 Saints and 30,000 head of livestock that were scattered across 500 miles of prairie and up and down the Missouri for forty miles.

Young and the church leadership carefully studied the official government reports like those of John C. Frémont, interviewed mountain men and explorers, and read published accounts of western emigrants to learn all they could about the land and its inhabitants to the west.\(^13\) Frémont’s 1843-1844 maps and journals particularly interested Young. Frémont noted that along the Bear River just north of the valley of the Great Salt Lake were extensive bottomlands where “water is excellent, timber sufficient, the soil good . . . and where grass and salt so much abound.”\(^14\) Mormon leaders also memorized Lansford W. Hastings’s *Emigrant’s Guide to Oregon and California* which the ill-fated Donner-Reed Party had used the previous year before early snows trapped the group in the Sierra Nevadas. Brigham Young also met with Catholic Father Jean-Pierre de Smet, who had not been in the Great Salt Lake Valley but told about travel through Nebraska, Wyoming, and Idaho.

Most importantly, like Moses, Young received a “revelation” on
“the word and will of the Lord concerning the camp of Israel.” 15 Young’s vision instructed the Saints to organize companies into bodies of 10, 50, and 100. It also told them what to take, how to prepare, and who the leaders would be. Through keeping the commandments, they would be delivered from their enemies and receive the blessings of a “chosen” people. 16

The 1847 expedition was to leave in two detachments, the first sent to explore, mark the trail, build roads, bridges, campsites, cabins, plant crops, and prepare the way for those coming behind. The second group would be composed of the population of Winter Quarters. The first group finalized preparations and began moving wagons out by April 5. On April 15 and 16, an initial group of 143 men, 3 women, and 2 children gathered near present-day Fremont, Nebraska, and received final instructions. That Sunday, Young laid out the daily routine: bugle call and prayers at five a.m. morning bugle; breakfast, lunch preparation, caring for the stock and teams; seven a.m. train moves out, the men to stay beside their teams with loaded gun in hand or nearby; noon rest for the animals and a cold lunch; on to the night’s camp; prayer at eight-thirty, and sleep by nine. 17

They, like the future telegraph and Union Pacific Railroad, chose to follow the north bank of the Platte River, not only because it separated them from others heanding west, but also because there would be more wood and forage through less use. Though mountain men moving to and from various rendezvous had used both sides of the river, the Saints began keeping track of distances, erecting occasional mileposts, and making their own guidebook with diary entries on what contemporaries called the Northern Route or Council Bluffs Road. 18 Orson Pratt’s scientific reading of latitude, elevation, and temperature were all included in William Clayton’s Latter-day Saint’s Emigrants’ Guide published in 1848 in St. Louis. Clayton, Pratt, and Appleton Milo Harmon even developed a wooden odometer to track mileage (previously Clayton relied on counting wagon wheel revolutions, 360 to the mile). 19

The Pioneer Company started across future Nebraska traveling from the Elkhorn River to Loup Fork before crossing it on April 24. Then they dropped down to the Platte near Grand Island and saw great herds of antelope. The company also met a large band of Pawnees who absconded stock over the next few days, perhaps as a toll for crossing. On May 6 the pioneers encountered their first buffalo just west of present-day Kearney. They also sought refuge from a prairie fire by pulling onto islands in the Platte River.

Near the forks of the Platte, the vanguard was supposedly met by John Young Nelson, a man living among Spotted Tail’s band of Brule Sioux. He wrote:

I had never heard of Mormons at this time, and did not know what they were. They told me they were Latter Day Saints. I looked around for their halos, and, not seeing any, said to them—“What sort of cattle is that?” To this they replied, they were the chosen people of the Lord. Said I: “Well, I am very pleased to meet you for there are mighty few of them about these parts.” 20

Supposedly after they hired Nelson as a guide to take them to the Black Hills (Laramie Range), the group passed Ash Hollow on May 20 and arrived at Indian Look-Out Point and Ancient Bluff Ruins May 22. Two days later they had a friendly meeting with some Lakotas. Young and a few of the leaders smoked the peace pipe with two chiefs and thirty-three warriors. Shortly after passing Chimney Rock on May 26, Appleton Milo Harmon recorded that Young chastised the men for

the excess dancing and frolicking, playing cards, dice, dominoes, checkers which had been carried on for the last few days was leading to worse evils, to neglect of duties, to carelessness, recklessness, to quarrels, divisions, to sin and death. He added that civil recreation was no harm if not carried to excess. 21

Now, somewhat more somber, the Mormons crossed the North Platte to the south side on June 1 and journeyed three-quarters of a mile up to Fort Laramie. They had covered the 522 miles from Winter Quarters to Fort Laramie in 42 days, averaging slightly more than 12 miles a day. 22 Young met with some of the Mississippi Saints who had traveled overland in 1846: since the main body had not arrived that year, they had turned south and wintered near Pueblo, Colorado, with some of the Mormon Battalion. Young dispatched a few men to help the rest of the Mississippi group to follow. From Fort Laramie the enlarged party followed the Oregon Trail on the south side of the river passing Register Cliff and, a few days later, Ayers Natural Bridge before arriving at the North Platte River crossing (present-day Casper, Wyoming) on June 12. For nearly a week they rested, hunted, fished, and built a ferry to take the loaded wagons across. They left ten men behind to ferry emigrants and replenish supplies. 23 Heading southwest, they followed the Sweetwater River past Independence Rock and Devil’s Gate.

On June 27, they crossed South Pass and angled southwest to Jim Bridger’s Fort on the Black’s Fork River. A day’s journey from South Pass near the Green River, they met Jim Bridger and two companions. Bridger discussed with them the geography of the Great Basin and told them the Utah Lake area might prove a nice place for settlement. Two days previous, mountain men Moses “Black” Harris and Thomas “Pegleg” Smith had discouraged the Mormons about settlement in the Great Salt Lake Valley. They said Cache Valley on the Bear River held possibilities. Before they reached Fort Bridger, Samuel Brannan (who had taken the group of Saints to California on the Brooklyn and then journeyed east from California) had come on the overland trail and told Brigham Young of the beautiful country in California but was unsuccessful in convincing him to lead the Saints there.

Arriving at Fort Bridger on July 7, they made necessary repairs
and purchased a few supplies. Then, they set off on Hastings Cutoff following the faint Donner-Reed wagon tracks left the year before and headed for the Bear River. Two days out of Fort Bridger, they met Miles Goodyear who had built Fort Buenaventura on the Weber River near present-day Ogden; he told them that vegetables in his garden grew fine in the climate. After the party crossed Bear River and arrived at Red or Echo Fork, Brigham Young contracted “mountain fever” and fell ill.24 Instead of slowing the whole party down, Young split the party into three groups with Orson Pratt taking the lead with forty-two men. Pratt and John Brown explored ahead, followed by road-builders down Echo Canyon to the Weber River. Traveling down Weber Canyon, they searched and found where the Donner-Reed journey to the Great Basin and the founding of “Great Salt Lake City, of the Great Basin, North America.”26

During the next two decades until the completion of the railroad at Promontory, Utah, in 1869, more than 200 companies of around 70,000 Saints traveled on at least part of the so-called Mormon Trail to Salt Lake City. This on-going migration of an entire group of people over 1,050 miles took the first caravan 111 days. By the 1850s, handcarts could make the trip in 60 to 80 days. Later, stagecoaches completed the journey in two weeks and the short-lived Pony Express in just six days. After 1869, the railroad made the journey less than a two-day affair, and today one can drive it in fifteen hours or fly across it in two hours.

Mormons do not hold exclusive rights to the trail that the U. S. Congress officially named on 10 November 1978 the “Mormon Pioneer Trail: National Historic Trail, Illinois to Utah.”27 In fact, trail historian Merrill J. Mattes estimated that between 160,000 to 200,000 of the half-a-million overlanders, including the gold-rushers and the majority of emigrant trains in the 1850s, used some portion of what he more accurately calls, as contemporaries often did, the Council Bluffs Road or Northern Route.28 Other historians argue that even though Mormons were not the only ones to use it, and although they certainly traveled on the south side a great deal as well, the improvements they made in the trail earned them the right to attach their name to it.29

Whether one calls it the Great Fur Trade Road, the Great Platte River Road, the Oregon-California Trail, or the Mormon Trail, after 150 years, one question remains. What features of the Mormon Trail experience were unique from those of the estimat-
ed 350,000 to half-a-million emigrants who ventured west on the trail system on both sides of the Platte?

The Mormon Trail experience differed from other overland journeys in a number of significant ways. Historian John D. Unruh, Jr., has pointed out correctly that "the journey of the Mormon emigrants was considerably shorter, normally much less difficult, and marked by far fewer occurrences of fatal disease or Indian attack." The distance from the Missouri River settlements to Salt Lake City was approximately two-thirds of the way to other destinations such as Oregon or California.

Mormons had very few troubles with native tribes and, in fact, enjoyed a great deal of safety. Unruh estimated that of the approximately 400 emigrants killed between 1840 and 1860, 90 percent of the incidents occurred west of South Pass and mainly west or north of Utah Territory. In the 1860s, Capt. Eugene F. Ware made the implausible statement that, "These Mormons traveled through the Indian country more safely than if they had been Indians themselves" and reported Mormons claimed that "they did not fear the Indians, and that Indians never harmed a Mormon." 32

Mormons traded with and even lived briefly among several tribes such as the Omahas and Poncas, especially in the mid-1840s. They helped Pawnees and others suffering from Sioux/Cheyenne raids. They also established friendly relations with the Sioux and especially the Shoshoni along the trail.33

Indian attacks along the trail were generally rare and theft or attempted theft much more common, especially when emigrants' horses proved such an easy target.34 With the loss of game during the 1850s, more Indians resorted to utilizing emigrant livestock for food, and it was the theft of a Mormon cow from a Danish emigrant train east of Fort Laramie in 1854 that instigated the Grattan Massacre and the eventual escalation of U. S. Army-Sioux conflict. A Mormon traveling past the fort that day summed up the action saying:

The [D]anish train that was behind us came along the same day, and the Indians kild [sic] one of their cows. The danish captain told the military captain about it, then the military captain send a few of his soldiers to see the Indians about it, and they got to a dispute [sic] and they fired at one another and they had a fight.35

He continued by saying that after Fort Laramie, "We did not see no more Indians until we came to Salt Lake City." Additionally, Brigham Young's famous saying that it was easier to feed the Indians than to fight them proved more difficult as new Mormon colonies filled most of the fertile valleys in the Great Basin and resulted in both the Walkara and Black Hawk wars with the Ute nation during the 1850s and '60s.

The trail experience served as an initiation, a rite of passage, a test of faith, and a unifying element to early Saints, demonstrating their conviction and determination to build up the Kingdom of God. This was particularly true with parties that came after 1852 and had not gone through the years of persecution in Missouri and Illinois. Relocation also fit smoothly into their self-perceived status as a chosen people, who were forced by persecution to take an exodus through the wilderness, led by a modern-day Moses to

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From Nauvoo, Illinois, to Salt Lake City, the Mormons established stations and campsites, particularly in Iowa and eastern Nebraska.
the promised land. The Great Basin was complete with desert terrain, high mountains, a Jordan River and a Salt (Dead) Sea.37

Planning ahead for the annual migrations of converts required a great deal of organization and preparation, and the Mormons were up to the task. Attention already has been given to the organizational abilities of the Mormon priesthood under the direction of Brigham Young. The order, cooperation, and discipline so evident in Mormon companies traveling west stands as a marked contrast to “the process of disruption [that] prevailed so generally” in other overland movements.38 They even compiled their own trail guide, complete with camping sites, observations, and suggestions for future followers.

According to Webster’s Dictionary, a pioneer is one who goes before, preparing the way for others. Preparing the way for and assisting other Saints in crossing the Plains represent another important aspect of Mormon migration. From their experience in Iowa, leaders saw the wisdom of building temporary way-stations, digging wells, erecting cabins, planting crops, and constructing roads to make the trail easier for those to come.

In 1849, the church organized the Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company (PEF) to “aid church members in Iowa to migrate to the Great Basin.”39 Eventually, these funds were extended to help finance the trans-Atlantic and westward journeys of thousands of converts landing in San Pedro, San Francisco, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Quebec, or New York. New arrivals contributed to and replenished the fund after reaching Utah Territory, although there were instances of default and reluctance to pay.40

Additionally, Mormon private entrepreneurs were left to operate ferries to transport emigrants across the Missouri, North Platte, Green, Weber, Bear, and Jordan rivers. Ten percent of these collected tolls went directly into the PEF. Thus, even non-Mormons on their way to Oregon or California “were taxed indirectly to help Mormon emigrants reach Zion.”41 The ferrymen traded fresh stock for lamed ones and earned money as blacksmiths. Brigham Young also dispatched several families in 1853 to construct Fort Supply just north of Fort Bridger to provide for those operating the ferries and Mormon emigrants nearing the last leg of their journey and nearly out of food supplies.42 Other freight stations were built in present-day Wyoming and Nebraska.

The Saints took advantage of the large numbers of overland emigrants. In addition to charging tolls at their ferries, they welcomed other “Gentile contributions” to the building of the kingdom, whether they came from Forty-Niners and other emigrants wintering in Salt Lake, or later railroad workers, miners, and army personnel in Utah Territory. They also served as the trail scavengers, sending back men to glean valuables, iron, and wagon parts left by other emigrants along the trail.43

Non-Mormon emigrants varied in how they viewed the Mormons on the trail and in Utah Territory. Some, like the Italian Count Leonetto Cipriani, expressed surprise after sleeping at a Mormon farm. Cipriani recorded in his journal: “The Mormon received me in the manner of a patriarch welcoming an ancient wayfarer. And the next morning, he would accept neither payment nor gratitude, and yet he was an American of the West, one of those reputed to be the most rapacious!”44

Lucy Rutledge Cooke, a visitor passing through the Salt Lake Valley in 1852, recalled in a letter to her sister:

I suppose you are aware that this valley is entirely occupied by the Mormons or Latter day Saints much has been said about them making them out to be a disgrace to the earth but as far as we have seen they are as hospitable & kind as any people I ever met with I cannot say I should like to stay here altogether because there are none but Mormons. [And they wish] every one they meet with among the Gentiles (as all are called not belonging to them) to join their church[.]45

In another letter she continued, “We have met with much kindness among the Mormons & shall always have reason to speak well of them.”46

Others did not express the same feelings. Some avoided the Mormons altogether, fearing hostility, conflict, the practice of polygamy, or perhaps a sermon. Others expressed outrage at Mormon ferries profiting from overlanders and charging what they considered high rates of up to $3 or $4 per wagon to cross the North Platte.47 One 1856 emigrant group mistakenly as Mormons in Salt Lake remarked, “We bought flour at $6 a barrel, if they had supposed us gentiles it would have cost us five times as much.”48

Gold rusher G. C. Pearson reminisced, “We were received hospitably, as were all of the first arrivals. As the enormous influx of emigrants continued, a great many of the Latter Day Saints lost little time or opportunity to cheat the hapless traveler and to plot nefarious schemes for adding to their own meager assets.”49 There was the possibility of, and in some cases actual assessment of, “fines” of Gentile sojourners who had little recourse; and fines could double if the party denied the charges or began cursing.

Non-Mormons also could expect insistent indoctrination to the Mormon faith. In a letter to her sister about how a Mr. Roberts had tried to woo her into being sealed to him as a polygamous wife, Lucy Cooke wrote her sister, “I can assure you we hear Mormonism from morn till night.”50 Even those treated kindly, like Dr. Thomas Flint, were “Right glad that we have passed out of Mormon territory.”51 Yet despite these difficulties, Mormon and non-Mormon emigrants camped, ate, danced, hunted, and even married along the trail.

More than other overlanders, Mormons traveled both east and west fairly regularly. Guides, missionaries, and mail carriers regularly made the eastward journey. In the 1860s, Young sent empty wagon trains from Salt Lake in the spring. These traveled east and picked up groups of emigrants and brought them back that same year. Mormons gained government and local contracts for operating freight and mail services from California to Missouri in both directions.52

The Mormon caravans also contained a much larger percentage of women and children than overland migration as a whole.53 In 1847, 44 percent of all pioneer companies were under eighteen
years of age. Aspects of trail life usually unmentioned nevertheless happened. The men would sometimes dig a latrine at night but the general practice was ladies to the left, men to the right (women would go as a group and spread their skirts as a curtain for privacy). 

Mormon women and children also enjoyed a great deal of entertainment. A young bride named Olive Harriet Otto, who met her Mormon husband in Kanesville (Council Bluffs) in 1852, remembered the big dances and music of all kinds in the evenings on the trail. She wrote, "The President of the Train would come and open the dance with prayer, and then every boddy old and young, wold dance till thas [they] got tire." Children, however, remembered the walking. Nine-year-old Agnes Caldwell recalled:

Although only tender years of age, I can yet close my eyes and see everything in panoramic precision before me—the ceaseless walking, ever to remain in my memory. Many times I would become so tired and, childlike, would hang on the cart, only to be gently pushed away. Then, I would throw myself by the side of the road and cry. Then realizing they were all passing me by, I would jump to my feet and make an extra run to catch up.

Another pioneer child, John Settler Stucki, commented, "[I] would be so tired that I would wish I could sit down for just a few minutes. How much good it would do to me. But instead of that, my dear, nearly worn-out father would ask me if I could not push a little more on the handcarts." Other children enjoyed running from one ant hill to another in search of Indian beads, balancing on the tongue of the wagons when no one was watching, or playing with various small animals along the way.

Church leaders sought to cut the costs and travel time of the annual migrations of ever-increasing numbers of converts by implementing new forms of transportation, particularly handcarts. Brigham Young wrote a letter to Elder F. D. Richards in Liverpool on 30 September 1855 stating: "We cannot afford to purchase wagons and teams as in times past. I am consequently thrown back upon my old plan—to make hand-carts, and let the emigration foot it." From 1856 to 1860, ten handcarts companies of nearly 3,000 Saints made the trip to Utah. Two of the handcarts trains of 1856, led by James G. Willie and Edward Martin, started too late and became trapped in the Wind River foothills, sparking perhaps the largest rescue operation of nineteenth-century overland travel history. A surviving member of the Willie Company, Sarah James, recorded her feelings upon being rescued. She recalled that she and her family were "too tired to move, so we huddled in our covers, close to each other for warmth. It was snowing, and we were so tired. Suddenly we heard a shout, and through the swirling snow we saw men, wagons and mules coming toward us. Slowly we realized that help had come."

With the coming of the railroad, Mormon leaders were quick to see the advantages and disadvantages for Salt Lake City as a crossroads of the West. The railroads, too, planned to profit from an availability of Mormon labor to complete the transcontinental railroad and later, several of the spurs such as the Utah Central Railroad. One Union Pacific Railroad representative, Samuel B. Reed, made a contract with Brigham Young "for over $2 million worth of work on May 21 [1868]." In order to "sweeten the pot while preserving cash, the company agreed to transport Mormon emigrants (mostly English) to Utah at much reduced fares." It appears both sides mutually benefited from this arrangement. Even non-Mormons like British traveler W. F. Rae, interested in seeing the curiosities of the Mormons in 1870, noted that "The Pacific Railroad has rendered it easy to visit and to get away from the City of the Saints."

Celebrating A Pioneer Heritage

Those who chose to stay in Utah have celebrated annually the arrival of the Saints in the valley. On occasion, these celebrations have been expanded greatly to encompass a much larger group of participants. In mid-April 1997, trail buffs, Mormons, and non-Mormons began a reenactment of the historic exodus across the Great Plains. This was not the first time descendants of Mormon emigrants and others interested in the Mormon Trail have rekindled interest in the pioneers' trek to Utah. Every July since 1847 there has been a "Days of '47" parade that recently has been extended to include a weeklong celebration with barbecues, concerts, races, rodeos, pageants, and other events. In 1897, just one year after Utah's statehood, all of the living persons who had crossed the plains in 1847 gathered at a fifty-year anniversary celebration. A small wagon train traveled the Utah portion of the trail from Echo Canyon to Emigration Canyon and arrived in late July to flag-waving Utahns.

To celebrate the centennial in 1947, a "Centennial Caravan" was organized. One hundred forty-three men, three women and two boys, the same number of persons as the original 1847 group, adorned seventy-two automobiles with simulated covered wagon tops and plywood oxen and made the journey from Nauvoo to Salt Lake from July 14 to 22. They dined on deer, antelope, and buffalo and endeavored to replicate the original pioneers' journey as much as possible. Upon their arrival at the mouth of Emigration Canyon, they erected and dedicated a monument sculpted by Brigham Young's grandson Mahonri Young with the words "This is the Place" inscribed at the bottom.

This year, the sesquicentennial celebration revolved around two non-church sponsored wagon trains conducted by Mormon Trail Wagon Train-150 Years, Inc. They started from Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1996 and stopped in Council Bluffs, Iowa, and Omaha, Nebraska, for the winter. From April to July of 1997, a wagon train with a daily average of 1,000 people, a dozen handcarts, and at least one hundred horse- and mule-drawn wagons reenacted this historic crossing of the Great Plains and ended the journey at the "This Is The Place" State Park at the mouth of Emigration Canyon, now complete with a pioneer village known as Old
Deseret Village and containing nearly two dozen nineteenth-century buildings that have been moved there or built in period architectural style.

Mormon historian Stanley B. Kimball has asserted that the Mormon Trail experience and its results are far more important than heretofore realized and that the “Mormons and their trail made important contributions to the development of the Trans-Mississippi/Missouri West in all aspects of life—culturally, economically, socially, and politically.” Richard Jackson has proposed that for the typical Mormon, the journey was rather routine and the miracle of it was that it was accomplished by ordinary men, women, and children who were willing to make the journey because of their faith and persistence. Although Salt Lake City marked the end of the trail for a large number of the Mormon converts, many of them were sent on to colonize the West. By the end of the nineteenth-century, Mormon communities stretched from Canada to Mexico and from the Pacific to the Rocky Mountains. The pioneer group that set out from Omaha one hundred fifty years ago and the subsequent years of Mormon migration over western trails had a significant impact on the settling and development of the West. Though their trail experience was rather similar to that of other emigrants in a number of individual ways, when viewed in retrospect, the Mormon Trail experience was unique in its motivations, purposes, organization, demographic characteristics, methods of transportation, and ways in which it continues to be remembered and immortalized.

NOTES


9. A few chiefs from that Potawatomi nation had sold their remaining lands in southwest Iowa to the U. S. Government a few months earlier in May of 1846 and were waiting for their move to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma).

Crossing the Great Plains


15. This revelation on “the word and will of the Lord” given through President Brigham Young now comprises Section 136 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Containing Revelations Given to Joseph Smith, the Prophet with some Additions by His Successors in the Presidency of the Church (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1988), 282-85.


23. Appleton Milo Harmon was one of the men left at the ferry, and he gave a full accounting of their instruction from President Young. Anderson, Appleton Milo Harmon Goes West, 34-35.


31. Ibid., 185.

32. Clyde C. Walton, ed., The Indian War of 1864 (1911; reprinted, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 73, 149, 255.


36. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 4: 284.
47. Potter, *Trail to California*, 112.
54. Of the 1,642 pioneers who traveled to Utah in 1847 pioneer companies, 690 were under 18 years of age. *1997-1998 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1996), 103.
55. Interview with Stanley Kimball, October 1996.
58. Ibid., 54.