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Children on the Mormon Trail

Jill Jacobsen Andros

While reflecting on her experience crossing the plains in a Mormon handcart company at age nine, 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, 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.¹

Unfortunately, when discussing this period of Mormon migration to Utah, historians have traditionally neglected the accounts of the children on the Mormon trail, focusing almost exclusively on the seemingly more accurate records of adults. Recent studies, however, seem to suggest an increasing interest in this largely untapped area of historical inquiry. Be this as it may, recent studies that have dealt with the records of children have not dealt with the Mormon trail and focus mainly on children's involvement in actual settlement and frontier life—paying scant attention to children's records and experiences dealing with the overland trail.²

The role of children on the trail was vital to the success of the entire exodus. They carried out the important tasks of day to day life as well as provided important emotional support to parents and families who might have otherwise lost the will to continue. These children, furthermore, play an essential role in preserving the modern-day memory of the Mormon trail. Their journals and memoirs differ from the records of adults by providing information about trail life in a manner that dwells on the sensory experience, reflecting clearly the fears, prejudices, and hopes of many involved in the diaspora. This dimension of trail life is obscured if not entirely lost in a study of adult accounts alone.

This particular study of the migration concentrates on the recollections of those young pioneers who traveled the 1200-mile Mormon Trail from Iowa to Utah between 1847 and 1866, whether in wagons or handcart companies, and who were between the ages of five and fifteen during their trek. Children younger than five would not remember very much about their experiences, and those older than fifteen were often considered adults; some were even married or considered heads of households at that age.

Naturally, the forty journals and personal histories, both published and unpublished, used for this study are representative, but by no means exhaustive, of the extant sources.³ While many records do exist, few were written during the actual journey; most are reminiscences, written years after the fact. Difficulties arise, as people's perceptions are altered with age and distorted by hindsight. The settlers' accounts of their remembered childhood, for example, could easily have been colored by their experiences after settling the West. Nevertheless, such records do not lack historical merit; they must, however, be judiciously handled and carefully evaluated when read for historical facts. Their greatest contribution is not the facts of time and place they report, but rather the insight they provide into the perceptions and feelings of the children. This study is intended to show the manner in which children recorded their perception of the trail and how their perceptions change the modern understanding of the trail based solely on adult records. Additionally, the study of these records illustrates the vital role children played in regards to the success of the diaspora.

PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES

Elliot West, a prominent western migration historian, explains that children's records bring the trail to life by sharing the children's perceptions, impressions, and feelings as they traveled, as opposed to more practical concerns such as miles covered, the weather, or the quality of the grass, that fill the records of adults. Furthermore, while adults described things in terms of the familiar world they left behind, children were literalists and sensualists; they wrote of their experiences literally and tended to notice and remember things that produced physical sensations.⁴ For example, Catherine Greer, age thirteen, carefully provided a lengthy, visually detailed description of a spider web she saw one night.⁵ While this is a seemingly trivial thing to record, it illustrates that children remembered and recounted matters and details which evoked physical sensations—details adults either did not notice or chose to exclude from their records.

Although children's experiences naturally differed according to individual circumstances, the records reveal that most children held the same general impressions of trail life. Examining their common impressions presents a perspective of trail life that helps modern readers to better understand the journey.

One thematic observation found in children's journals is contact with the Native Americans. These strange and intriguing people fascinated, frightened, and often befriended the children. B.H. Roberts, who made the westward trek at age ten, observed, "Our contact with the Indians around the Wyoming encampment had not been sufficient to do away with the fear in which the red men were held by us, and it could be well imagined that the hair on our heads raised as we saw an inevitable meeting with these savages."⁶

Despite the children's initial fear—perhaps traceable to parental prejudice or concerns—the Native Americans proved to be more helpful than threatening. Elizabeth Pulsipher, age twelve, reported that when her family was suffering with hunger and sickness at Fort Leavenworth, the "Indians" were very friendly and offered them aid.⁷ Even more telling, George Harrison, age fourteen, actually left his family on the trail to beg food from some Native Americans camped nearby. He ended up living happily with

them for several months, until Johnston's Army passed through the area and hired him as a cook. Of the forty accounts utilized in this study, half mentioned encounters with Native Americans, and most of these experiences were positive.

Encounters with Native Americans were not the children's only new experiences. Spectacular displays of natural phenomena impressed them deeply; they remembered these experiences throughout their lives and wrote about them in later years. Among these experiences, those involving buffalo, thunder storms, and geographical landmarks are clearly emphasized in journals and diaries. William B. Ashworth recalled the time he saw what appeared to be a large black cloud, but which proved to be a herd of "hundreds of buffalo." He also recounted a frightening experience in a storm: "The lightening and thunder increased terrifically and the good women lifted up their dresses and covered us completely with their full skirts. . . . We boys were crying as hard as we could."⁸

In another instance, Jesse Applegate, age seven, shared his memory of a terrible storm on the plains. He awoke suddenly during the night to a terrible assault on his senses.

The rain was pouring down into my face, my eyes were blinded with the glare of lightning, the wind was roaring like a furnace, and the crash of thunder was terrible . . . For a minute I was dazed and could not realize the situation, and before I had fairly recovered my senses, Uncle Mack picked me up and put me into the hind end of a covered wagon.⁹

Such descriptions illustrate the sensualist and literalist nature of children's accounts, which tend to add a slightly new dimension to the historical conception of trail life. Adult accounts, conversely, depict storms in romantic metaphors, describing them as a "natural meteorick exhibition of electrick fluid," or a "hellish blast that severed pole from pole."¹⁰

As further indication of this distinction, children not only described the fearful wind and torrential rain that tore down their tents, but also included their perceptions of interesting landmarks, such as Devil's Gate and Chimney Rock. Being such literalists, many expressed disappointment as they reached these romantic-sounding landmarks, only to discover that the

Sweetwater River tasted bitter, and that Devil's Gate was nothing more than a rocky ridge.

Children were also well-acquainted with a more somber aspect of trail life—death. The strong sense of community and the frequency of death along the Mormon Trail made it impossible for parents to shield their children from grim reality. As Elliot West points out, there was little time for the luxury of mourning and the pressing duties of trail life quickly turned the children's minds back to their daily tasks. Consequently, journal entries concerning death "sit calmly beside notes of the ordinary."¹¹

This apparent lack of emotion is a recurring phenomenon in the accounts of Latter-day Saint children. Perhaps this is partly due to the intervening time between the event and the time it was recorded, but it is nonetheless probable that in some situations there developed a certain callousness to death. Caroline Pedersen Hansen, age seven, remarked on the excessive heat, sunburns, and difficulties when crossing rivers. Inserted in what seems to be a random fashion among these everyday concerns is one sentence mentioning her discovery, upon waking up one morning, of her brother lying beside her, dead.¹² A man traveling in the same company as Hyrum Weech, age eleven, was accidentally shot in the leg while hunting buffalo. Of that experience, Hyrum simply recorded, "The weather being very warm, they could not save him and he died and was buried there. Out of all the men who went, they got only one buffalo."¹³ Once again, this lack of emotion could be ascribed to the passage of time, or perhaps experiences after arriving in Utah, and yet, the vivid recollection that only one buffalo was brought back suggests the possibility that practical concerns of life and necessity sometimes superseded the common, more abstract reality of death.

While it is true that many children were not afforded the luxury of time to mourn, some of them did express in later recollections the grief they had experienced. Heber Robert McBride, a member of the ill-fated Martin handcart company, recorded the death of his father:

I went to look for Father and at last I found him under a wagon with snow all over him and he was stiff and dead. I felt as though my heart would burst I sat down beside him on the snow and took hold of one of

his hands and cried oh Father Father there we was away out on the Plains with hardly anything to eat and Father dead.¹⁴

Other powerful emotions, particularly fear, are dominant features in the journals and memoirs of pioneer children. The fears reflected in the writings of children are different from those expressed by adults. Adults' fears centered on the possibilities of losing a spouse or a child, seeing their families go hungry and cold, and dying themselves. In contrast, the fears of the children focused on more commonplace, immediate obstacles, including river crossings, rainstorms, and getting lost or left behind.

Loneliness and darkness accentuated terrible images in the fertile imaginations of the children. Mary Goble Pay, in her thirteenth year, recalled with painful clarity a particular night she was sent out from camp to fetch water. Away from the security of the camp, she fell prey to frightening images of "Indians." She repeatedly glanced around wildly in fear, and became so confused and scared, that she could not find her way back. By the time the search party finally found Mary, her legs and feet were frozen.¹⁵

Just as valid as these young pioneers' fears was the overwhelming fatigue they experienced on their journey. The accounts of their exhaustion and suffering serve to illustrate and underscore the extreme hardships endured, as included in the records of adults. In the words of John Settler Stucki, who traveled the Mormon Trail when only nine years old:

[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 handcart.¹⁶

Equally compelling is the grimly humorous memory found in B.H. Roberts' autobiography. He describes the losing battle with exhaustion. While cognizant of the prohibition on riding in the wagon, he finally succumbed and, climbing up into the wagon box, found a barrel large enough to hide in and rest for a time. He lowered himself into the barrel and discovered, to his shock, that it contained three or four inches of molasses at the bottom. "The smarting of my chapped feet almost made me scream with pain, but I stifled it. Too tired to attempt to climb out, I remained and

gradually slipped down and went to sleep doubled up in the bottom of the barrel." He emerged later, dripping with molasses, to the amused laughter of the emigrants, but the rest had been worth the embarrassment.¹⁷

Often found in vicious tandem with fatigue, hunger was a familiar companion to children. Some children in the less fortunate handcart companies had their rations reduced to merely two ounces of flour per day and nothing else. Noting this information, Heber Robert McBride added, "then was the time to hear children crying for something to eat nearly all the children would cry themselves to sleep every night my 2 little Brothers would get the sack that had flour in and turn it wrong side out and suck and lick the flour dust." Some of the children even resorted to chewing on pieces of raw hide all day to alleviate hunger pains.¹⁸

Despite these deprivations and challenges that constituted much of trail life, the children's journals and personal histories also include a wealth of references to the "fun times" enjoyed on the trek. Indeed, for some pioneers, the enjoyable times overshadowed all other memories. Alma Elizabeth Miner, who crossed the plains at age six, described the westward journey as a "delightful pleasure jaunt." She further expanded, "We children would run along as happy as could be. My older sisters used to make rag dolls as they walked along for us little children to play with."¹⁹ Favorite pastimes for children included searching the anthills for "Indian beads," exploring, and swimming. Catherine Adams Pilling, age twelve, happily recollected evenings at the camp where the company danced or sang together.²⁰

Such accounts would appear to contradict the grimmer tales of toil and hardship. Crucial to the resolution of this apparent paradox is the realization that there were many different companies traversing the plains, and some were more successful, or fortunate, than others. Consider the observation by Evan Stephans, who made the journey at age twelve, "The journey across the plains was such an experience of pleasure to me, that I found it difficult to sympathize with the pioneers who thought it a hardship."²¹ Evan Stephans traveled with a successful wagon train in 1866, thus suffering only minimally. In stark juxtaposition, members of the Martin and Willie handcart companies endured insufferable rigors and deprivations, and never referred to their experience on the freezing trail as "fun" or a "pleasure jaunt." It must also

be remembered that by the time many children wrote of their experiences, the poignant pains of their travels and the hardships they bore were wiped away by nostalgia. Nevertheless, memories of pleasant times are important to the overall conception of trail life.

In addition to providing a basic understanding of their trail experience, the thoughts and feelings of these young pioneers provide fresh perspective and greater insight into trail life generally. Adult perceptions of the unaccustomed realities of traveling through strange, harsh territory were severely distorted by the pull of the familiar world they had left behind and as well as fears of what lay ahead. More adaptable than adults, and unfettered by images of a vague future or nostalgia for a hazy past, children lived in the present. This unique vantage point enabled them to view their immediate surroundings with a clarity difficult for their parents to emulate.²²

Although impossible to quantify, the lessons learned from experiences on the trail prepared these young settlers for life on the frontier. The trail had molded the children into capable settlers; they could accomplish tasks even in the face of extreme fatigue and hunger. Developed resourcefulness enabled them to endure hardships and alleviate discomforts. This resourcefulness was demonstrated by the young B.H. Roberts, who, having only his sister's petticoat for a blanket, discovered a good way to keep warm. He rolled two boulders together and, using a burning cow chip from a neighboring fire, lit a fire between them. After the fire had burned down a little, he curled tightly around the warm stones. Upon awaking the next morning, he recorded with amazement, "I was covered with an inch or two of snow which had fallen through the night . . . I made my way to look for breakfast, grateful for this long night of pleasant and apparently warm covering."²³ Such inventiveness is what would ultimately save these pioneers from the foreign, unforgiving environment of the intermountain West.

In addition to practical lessons, children also learned to confront their fears. Whether the object of their fear was death, separation, "Indians," or other aspects of trail life, children learned to banish them, rather than allowing their fears to incapacitate them; at times, their very survival depended on how well they had learned this fundamental lesson. These

skills undoubtedly aided them in some measure as they encountered the struggles involved in carving homes out of the Utah desert.

ROLES, DUTIES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Evidence suggests that children had at least as great an impact on trail life as the trail had on them. Their impact on trail life is especially seen in the context of the family unit, which is credited with much of the success of migration and settlement. The sundry duties and responsibilities assumed by the children evidence their invaluable contributions to the Latter-day Saint migration.

One such duty commonly assigned to children was to collect buffalo chips for fuel. Every night, while the adults busily struck camp, the children, accompanied by some women, gathered buffalo chips to make cooking fires. At first, it was certainly not a coveted task, as Edwin Alfred Pettit's records, "Some of the daintier sex, instead of picking them up with their hands, used tongs to gather them with. Before we had gone very far, they got very bravely over this, and would almost Wght over a dry one."²⁴

In addition to collecting buffalo chips, the children had to walk. While this may appear to be a relatively simple responsibility, in actuality it required herculean effort from the children. Exhaustion, tears, and blistered feet had to be ignored so valuable room in the wagons and handcarts could be saved to keep the company moving. Peter Howard McBride reported that the younger children and old people started early each morning to ensure that they would not be too far behind at nightfall.²⁵ In many instances, the older children also shouldered the more challenging responsibility of caring for younger siblings, and on occasion even their parents, during the trek. Heber Robert McBride recounted his experience:

The team was give out intirely and we had to take more load on our carts and had to haul Father and Mother sometimes we would find Mother laying by the side of the road first then we would get her on the cart and haul her along till we would find Father lying as if he was dead then Mother would be rested a little and she would try and walk and

Father would get on and ride and then we used to cry and feel so bad we did not know what to do.²⁶

Elizabeth Pulsipher shared a similar experience. She related, "Being the oldest child the responsibility of the family rested upon me, and nearly every night I had to be up with the sick baby." As if that were not enough, she added, "Many a night I have lain and held a quilt over mother to keep the rain off her."²⁷ Margaret McNeil Ballard, age thirteen, crossed the plains with her sick four-year-old brother strapped on her back the entire journey. She sat up alone each night holding him in her lap.²⁸

Children performed many other duties along the trail that were essential to the family's success. Margaret McNeil Ballard, whose mother was very ill during the trek, described how she, out of necessity, arose early each morning to prepare breakfast for the family, hurriedly milked her cow, and drove on ahead of the company so the cow could graze in the grassy stretches before they were eaten by the company cattle.²⁹ As another illustration, Rachel Emma Woolley, age eleven, had to single-handedly drive the family wagon across the plains when one of the teamsters quit. She gratefully pulled into camp each night, completely worn out from the road and the strain of controlling the frisky horse.³⁰ It was largely due to these invaluable, seemingly endless, tasks of cooking, caring for sick and feeble family members, gathering fuel, pushing handcarts, and driving teams, that pioneer families were able to successfully complete the journey.

And yet, the contributions of these children were certainly not confined to daily chores; children also provided invaluable emotional support for their families. Although the psychology of the pioneers is beyond the scope of this study, the assumption seems justified that parental responsibilities, felt by most mothers and fathers, sustained and motivated many parents to plod onward when it would have been far easier to simply give up.

Of course, children also depended deeply on their families for their well being. Children, in their records, freely acknowledged the integral importance of the family on the trail. References to parents emerge more frequently in the accounts than references to Native Americans, buffalo, fatigue, or hunger. These references bring into focus the interdependence

between children and parents, and by association the importance of the family unit in Mormon migration to Utah.

References to their parents' strength and physical determination are liberally strewn throughout children's accounts; parents helped the children struggle through the trials of pioneer life by setting examples for them to follow. Joseph F. Smith remembered how his mother's religious faith helped his family out of difficult situations, such as retrieving stolen oxen or healing oxen when they had been poisoned.

Remembering time spent on the trail, a large proportion of children simply wondered at the strength and courage of their mothers. Agnes Caldwell marveled at "the wonderful integrity of character of [her] mother's planning and successfully completing such a journey where more able-bodied and stronger—yes, even men—failed miserably."³¹ Mary Jane Mount Tanner was particularly impressed by her mother's fortitude. Halfway through the journey, the Tanner's driver quit, leaving Mary's mother to drive the team. One of the oxen was particularly unruly and would not learn to hold back when going downhill. Mary recalled:

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, a feat which would astonish some of our belles of the present day, and yet she was reared as tenderly and as little accustomed to hardship as any of them. Many times the bushes caught her dress, and she had no choice but to rush on, leaving it in pieces behind her.³²

Mary Ann Stucki Hafen, six years old when she crossed the plains, later reminisced about her mother's suffering, "By this time Mother's feet were so swollen that she could not wear shoes, but had to wrap her feet with cloth. . . . She would get so discouraged and down-hearted."³³ Her brother, older by three years, John Stettler Stucki, expanded on her observation:

My dear mother had a little baby to nurse, and only having half enough to eat and to pull on the handcart all day long, day after day, she soon got so weak and worn out that she could not help father anymore. Nor was she able to keep up with the Company. Sometimes when we camped, she was so far behind the Company we could not see anything

of her for quite a while, so that I was afraid she might not be able to get to the camp.³⁴

This particular sensitivity to the suffering, and sometimes death, of mothers seems to be an indication of the instability of trail life. Many of the children had left their homes in distant countries, crossed unfamiliar waters, navigated alien terrain, moved from house to house in an endless procession of "temporary arrangements," and finally found themselves homeless on the trail, never to return to their homelands again. Families, and especially mothers, were the one common factor—always there, reassuringly stable, and dependable. Perhaps the worst trauma a child could suffer was to lose this stable, protective anchor in this alarming new environment. As Elliot West elucidates, all children suffer from separation anxiety; they fear being separated from their main source of comfort and protection.³⁵ Thus, it is perfectly natural that children were especially sensitive to their mothers' welfare.

This interdependence between children and their parents highlights the significance of the family unit in westward migration and settlement. The challenges so ably met during the journey strengthened family bonds, as all members of the family relied on each other for the necessary support to survive. This increased unity arguably prepared them for the problems that inevitably attended settlement in the arid valleys of Utah.

CONCLUSION

Children were invaluable to the Mormon trail for multiple reasons. For the modern researcher, their records make possible greater insights into how the trail was experienced by those who traveled it. The children's accounts reflect greater immediacy and more fully portray the sensual experience of the trail than do the records of adults. The records account the wonder, instability, innocence, happiness, and fear felt everyday by the pioneers. The records additionally demonstrate the importance of family units to the success of the entire endeavor.

Furthermore, childhood records recount the physical and emotional support given by children. Without the children and their willingness to bear

the responsibilities cast upon them, the exodus to the West would not have been nearly as successful as it was for the Latter-day Saints.

Trail life refined and molded the children's characters, preparing them for life on the frontier as settlers. Ahead of these children loomed the challenges of carving homes out of the desert and taming the harsh frontier. Their experiences on the trail taught them important lessons enabling them to bear these adult-proportioned burdens and record their experiences for posterity. The importance of their records cannot be overstated; they preserve a dimension of the trail experience that would otherwise be inaccessible.

Jill Jacobsen Andros graduated from Brigham Young University in April 1995 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History. She is starting a Master's degree program where she hopes to continue her studies of the nineteenth-century American West and especially the children on the Mormon Trail. This paper was originally submitted as a History 200 paper and later used as the basis for a 490 paper and presented at the Mormon Historical Society's annual meeting in 1996.

NOTES

- 1 Susan Arrington Madsen, *I Walked to Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 57.
- 2 An excellent example is Elliot West's work on children after they had begun the settlement of the Western Frontier, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far-Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).
- 3 I used the twenty accounts compiled by Susan Arrington Madsen in *I Walked to Zion*, and obtained the supplemental twenty accounts by randomly searching through Davis Bitton's *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies* (BYU, 1977). All excerpts from these accounts will appear as originally written, with no attempts to correct spelling and grammar.
- 4 West, *Growing Up*, 26.
- 5 Catherine Greer, "Autobiography," TMs., Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, 9-10.

- 6 B. H. Roberts, Gary James Bergera, ed., *The Autobiography of B.H. Roberts* (Salt Lake City: Signature Book, 1990), 26.
- 7 Kate B. Carter, ed., *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 12 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, 1959–1970), 2:267.
- 8 William B. Ashworth, "Autobiography of William B. Ashworth," TMs., Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, 4–5.
- 9 West, *Growing Up*, 27.
- 10 Ibid., 32–33.
- 11 Ibid., 239.
- 12 Carter, ed., *Pioneer Heritage*, 12:67.
- 13 Hyrum Weech, "Autobiography of Hyrum Weech," TMs., Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, 4.
- 14 Heber Robert McBride, "Journal of Heber Robert McBride," typist John C. Van Wagoner, 1959, TMs., Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, 9.
- 15 Madsen, *I Walked to Zion*, 93.
- 16 Ibid., 54.
- 17 Roberts, *B.H. Roberts*, 31.
- 18 McBride, 14.
- 19 Madsen, *I Walked to Zion*, 139.
- 20 Ibid., 122.
- 21 Carter, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 10:85.
- 22 West, *Growing Up*, 45.
- 23 Madsen, *I Walked to Zion*, 21–22.
- 24 Ibid., 73.
- 25 Ibid., 44.
- 26 McBride, 10–11.
- 27 Carter, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 2:267.
- 28 Madsen, *I Walked to Zion*, 125.
- 29 Ibid., 126.
- 30 Leonard Arrington, *Sunbonnet Sisters: True Stories of Mormon Women and Frontier Life* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 43.
- 31 Madsen, *I Walked to Zion*, 57.

- 32 Mary Jane Mount Tanner, *The Autobiography of Mary Jane Mount Tanner* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1980), 46.
- 33 Mary Ann Hafen, *Recollections of a Handcart Pioneer of 1860* (Denver: privately printed, 1938), 24.
- 34 Madsen, *I Walked to Zion*, 54.
- 35 West, *Growing Up*, 34.