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The Council Bluffs Road: A New Perspective on the Northern Branch of the Great Platte River Road

By Merrill J. Mattes

Historian Merrill Mattes, author of *The Great Platte River Road*, a publication of the Nebraska State Historical Society (1969) which won the Western Heritage Award, was invited by Midland Lutheran College of Fremont to present the final program in a lecture series, part of observances celebrating the 100th anniversary of Midland. In his speech, delivered November 9, 1983, and presented here in full, he says: "In connection with my current project for a comprehensive bibliography of emigrant narratives I have made some rather surprising discoveries that I believe will compel revision of historical thinking about the nature and extent of emigrant travel along the north side of the Platte River."—Editor

It is indeed a pleasure to participate in the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Midland Lutheran College.

Out of curiosity I made an effort to find out what happened in 1883, besides the birth of your college. Well, there wasn't an awful lot; the year 1883 seems to have been in a kind of historical vacuum. It had been seven years since the Battle of the Little Bighorn, which, paradoxically, marked the beginning of the end of Plains Indian warfare. It would be another seven years before the Battle of Wounded Knee in December, 1890, the last flare-up of Indian hostilities, an event which, according to Frederick Jackson Turner, signified "the end of the frontier." In 1883 our President was the undistinguished Chester A. Arthur, who had attained that high office by virtue of being Vice-President when an assassin put an end to President James A. Garfield. One historian describes Arthur as "a machine politician of dubious integrity. Yet to the dismay of his political associates, his administration proved unexpectedly honest and efficient." About the only thing of consequence that I could find that happened in 1883—besides the birth of Midland College—was passage of the Civil Service Reform

Act, which provides that federal employees be selected on the basis of merit, rather than political patronage. Quite praiseworthy, to be sure, but not very exciting.

I was reminded, however, that 1983 is the 200th anniversary of the Treaty of Paris, following the American Revolution, which formally recognized the existence of the new nation, dedicated to liberty from tyrants, and championing the rights of man. At that point in 1783, it was—we realize now—mainly the rights of white men, but I should hasten to add that freedom for black slaves as well, albeit delayed for 80 years, was made possible only by the inexorable logic of freedom articulated by Thomas Jefferson's axiom in the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal."

The rapid growth of the fledgling republic was made possible by the blessings of geography—a huge unexplored continent to expand in, a cornucopia of natural wealth, and two oceans which separated us from envious predatory nations of the globe.

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States with its Bill of Rights, and the Emancipation Proclamation, are perhaps the only documents that rival in historical importance the Louisiana Purchase agreement of 1803. For \$15,000,000—which would not pay for one good fighter plane today—the Emperor Napoleon ceded to the United States a land drained by the western tributaries of the Mississippi River, which doubled the size of the young republic. Jefferson alone was the architect of this biggest real estate deal in the history of the world. His Memorial in Washington, DC represents the man as Founding Father, author of the Declaration, and the nation's third President. For his magnificent role in the Louisiana Purchase, with its incalculable consequences, he has been immortalized at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, with its soaring stainless steel arch.

The military "Corps of Discovery," known to us as the Lewis and Clark Expedition, was launched in 1803 by Jefferson while Louisiana was still held nominally by France, having recently received it from the Spanish Crown. But in the spring of 1804, before their keelboats started up the Missouri River, the two captains participated at St. Louis in flag-raising

ceremonies. The Missouri River and its tributaries—including the River Platte—were now American soil. The explorers stayed on the Missouri River to its headwaters before their gruelling wilderness crossing to headwaters of the Columbia River, so knew nothing of the Platte except to explore it a few miles above its mouth. Ironically, it was not the Missouri River of Lewis and Clark, but the River Platte which was destined to become America's peaceful highway of empire. I call it "the Great Platte River Road," and the City of Fremont and Midland Lutheran College are squarely in its path.

Why call it "the Great Platte River Road"? Why not "the Oregon Trail" or "the California Trail" or "the Mormon Trail" or any one of a dozen other trails that followed the Platte? *The question itself is the answer!* At different times, different people going different places used these various terms, *but for the first 1,000 miles they were all following the same travel corridor*—namely the central route overland, up the Platte, North Platte, and Sweetwater Rivers to South Pass, which afforded the only easy passage over the spine of the Rocky Mountain cordillera known as the Continental Divide. (It was called South Pass because it was far south of Lemhi Pass, Montana, the one used by Lewis and Clark, but used by practically nobody thereafter.) Whether you were going to Oregon, California, Utah, or any other territory or state beyond the Rocky Mountains, you first followed the Platte and its tributaries to South Pass. Why *not* call it "the Great Platte River Road"? That's exactly what it was, and the term "Platte River Road," or variation thereof, was used frequently by emigrants themselves.

You can't logically follow "the Oregon Trail" all the way to California or Utah, but somehow the term "Oregon Trail" has dominated historical writing for over a century *notwithstanding the fact that only a fraction of those following the Platte went to Oregon*. It has been generally understood that by "Oregon Trail" you meant the main trail along the south side of the Platte. Another stereotyped concept is that the trail along the north side of the Platte was "the Mormon Trail," but the Mormons were going to one place only—Utah. So is it logical to talk about people following "the Mormon Trail" to California, Oregon, or Montana?

Yet, when the Congress of the United States in 1976 passed

a bill finally recognizing the existence of historical trails, what did they do? They created an Oregon National Historical Trail, going from Independence, Missouri, to Oregon City, Oregon, and a Mormon Pioneer National Historical Trail, going from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Salt Lake City, and let it go at that! If this legislation was all you had to go on, you would never suspect that the greatest of all western trails was the California Gold Rush Trail, nor would you suspect that anybody but Mormons followed the north side of the Platte. When I objected recently to these omissions to the Colorado congressman who sponsored the bill, he told me, in effect, that nobody bothered to tell him that people went overland also to California—nor did anyone tell him that Mormons were not the only ones who followed the road along the north side of the Platte.

I might add, parenthetically, that within the last year there has been formed an Oregon-California Trails Association. Being a charter member of that organization, I can tell you that one of its objectives is to enlighten congressmen, as well as ordinary citizens, about some facts of American history. I expect that one day soon Congress will get around to recognizing the existence of the greatest migration trail of them all, both in numbers and impact on American history, the California Gold Rush Trail of 1849-1859. If the government historians who do the obligatory research on this proposal do their homework properly, one branch of this officially recognized trail would then be marked as it follows the north side of the Platte.

Let me hasten to clear up what might sound like a contradiction, when I refer to the California Trail as “the greatest of them all.” It was by far the most important *single trail* in both numbers and historical significance. However, it was only *one strand* in the complex or ganglia of trails that followed the great central migration corridor we have termed “Platte River Road.”

All this is by way of saying that my object has been to restore order to the chaos of nomenclature that clutters up textbooks. It boils down to this: Regardless of origin or destination, there was just one central route west, at least until 1859, and that was the road up Platte River. Feel free to use the various other names for different trail strands at different periods, *but*

recognize that they are all integral parts of one basic trail system. And take care to use the broad general term when you are making broad generalizations about travel up the Platte, whether the north or south sides thereof.

The reason I inserted "1859" above as an exception is because in that year, following the discovery of gold in Colorado, a large number of emigrants veered to the left and, instead of following the North Platte to South Pass, followed the South Platte to Denver and the New Colorado mines. This was called "the Pike's Peak Gold Rush." It has surprised me to discover that in 1859, however, there were still more people going to California than to Colorado. The California gold rush, which began with the stampede of 1849, kept its image aglow for over a decade.

At this point it's important to refine further our definition of "Great Platte River Road." True, with the exception of the diversion down the South Platte beginning in 1859, there was just one prime route following the Platte and North Platte to South Pass. But I must point out that you did not get on that road in one place until you came to the vicinity of Fort Kearny. What I am saying is that to get on the Platte you had first to get across the Missouri River, and you had your choice of a number of jumping-off places. You could start from the vicinity of Independence or Kansas City, Missouri, or Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, or St. Joseph, Missouri, or Old Fort Kearny which became later Nebraska City, or the Council Bluffs-Omaha area. There were others, but these were the five main starting points of all overland expeditions. In other words you had the option of jumping off at any one of several places over a stretch of 250 miles along the Missouri River, between Kansas City and Omaha. The point is that all of these five main branches, though widely separated to begin with, came together in the neighborhood of Fort Kearny. I say "neighborhood" because if you were on the north side of the river you didn't normally cross over to touch base at Fort Kearny, but when you came opposite that fort your road then became closely parallel with the main road from Independence and St. Joseph. This is not just a figure of speech. The overland diaries are full of references to emigrants seeing columns of wagons on the opposite shore, whether north or south.

So for most "north-siders," Fort Kearny was only a geographical reference point, not a place to visit. There were exceptions, of course, people crossing over to take mail or look for mail at the Fort Kearny post office, or to obtain information, or perhaps to get medical aid from the post surgeon. But crossing the Platte to Fort Kearny was no light undertaking. During the normal migration season, from April through June, at this point the Platte was running full from Rocky Mountain snow melt. Furthermore, there is ample testimony that the Platte here was from one to two miles wide, and interspersed with gravel bars and islands. If you tried wading or swimming, you could drown from fatigue and cold; if you tried taking a wagon, it could bog down in quicksand. Crossing the Platte here was only for the brave, desperate, or foolish.

So normally if you started on the north side you stayed on the north side. But there's a point here that needs clarification. You call all the combined trails "Platte River Road," but what about people jumping off in the vicinity of Council Bluffs? Weren't they actually on "the Mormon Trail"? I would answer that you are partly right and partly wrong! In 1847 there was indeed a *Mormon Pioneer Trail*, created by Brigham Young and his followers when they made their exodus from Winter Quarters in present North Omaha, to Utah. The problem is that it's misleading to call the north side "the Mormon Trail" as if that's what it mainly was, because it wasn't! Let me put it this way. It was mainly a Mormon Trail in 1847, and probably also in 1848, but *beginning in 1849 with the California gold rush, the Mormons lost their brief monopoly*. My examination of emigrant diaries and newspaper accounts, including records in the various repositories in Utah, leads me to conclude that from 1849 on there were far more non-Mormons from the Council Bluffs area going to California, Oregon, and other places, than there were Mormons migrating to Salt Lake City. Not only that, *beginning in 1849 substantial numbers of Mormons switched their strategy, and began to follow the south side of the Platte all the way*, jumping off at places like Plattsmouth, Nebraska City, and Atchison, Kansas. So if you say that at times there was a Mormon Trail (or trail used by Mormons) along both the south and north sides of the Platte, that would be an accurate statement. But if you fall for the

careless concept that the north side route was "*the Mormon Trail*" and nothing else, you have drifted far away from the historical facts. While it was clearly "*the Mormon Pioneer Trail*" of 1847, as recognized by Congress, *it was clearly also "the north branch of the Oregon Trail" and even more so, "the north branch of the California Gold Rush Trail."* The distortion in the public perception results from the fact that "*the Mormon Trail*" on the north side, like "*the Oregon Trail*" on the south side, have become stereotyped concepts rooted in the minds of text-book historians. It is time to stand back and take a better look at those stereotypes.

While "*Platte River Road*" is a good generic term today for the Platte River corridor, was there another name in migration days specifically for the north side of the Platte, other than the misleading term, "*Mormon Trail*"? Well, terms like "*the northern route*" or "*the north branch*" were used, but there was another one that was most commonly used from 1849 on, which historians and popular writers have tended to overlook altogether. From written evidence in the form of hundreds of emigrant eye-witness accounts, I would say that the big majority of non-Mormons called it "*the Council Bluffs Road.*" Amazing in its simplicity, isn't it? *That's what they called it because that's where they jumped off from.* People on the south side, during the California gold rush, also had their own brand names for *that* major route. They mainly referred to "*the California Road*"—they didn't use the term "*trail*" as much as we do—but they would also talk about "*the St. Joe Road*" or "*the Independence Road*" (or, in later years, "*the Nebraska City Road*"), on the same principle of meaning as "*the Council Bluffs Road.*"

A word here about Omaha in the migration picture. You know, of course, that Omaha came into the world in 1854, right on the heels of the Kansas-Nebraska Act that created Nebraska Territory. Of course Omaha itself became a major factor in the subsequent migrations but, strangely enough, we never hear of the road west becoming "*the Omaha Road*" or "*the Omaha Trail.*" It continued in 1854 and thereafter to be "*the Council Bluffs Road,*" because everyone from the East crossing the Missouri River at this point had to come through the city of Council Bluffs first. But the usage also goes back to the fact that the whole region—present Omaha included—on

both sides of the Missouri River was long known as Council Bluffs, stemming from the fact that in 1804 Lewis and Clark met with the Indians at "Council Bluffs" above present Omaha.

Now that we have the nomenclature straightened out, what I want to do is to focus on the Council Bluffs Road, or north branch of the Platte River Road, that passed through the site of future Fremont, Nebraska. I am glad to have the opportunity to do this, because so much attention has been focused in history books on the south side route that things have gotten out of balance, trail-wise. Now it is probably true, statistically speaking, that more people went along the south side of the Platte. That's because the majority of those from the East going West funnelled through St. Louis at the mouth of the Missouri River. It was logical for them, therefore, to jump off at Independence or Westport or Fort Leavenworth or St. Joe. Thousands came by Missouri River steamboats which were crowded, pestilential, often floating nightmares, so they were anxious to get off as soon as possible, and get started with their wagons overland. While Independence was the Number One starting point in the 1840s, the period of early Oregon migration, St. Joe became Number One in 1849 because starting from there saved about 100 miles of overland travel. (The real smart ones, always a minority, took the steamboats to Old Fort Kearny—later Nebraska City—because that saved 200 miles of overland travel; you could go straight west from there and join the main road at New Fort Kearny on the Platte.)

But after conceding that the statistical majority followed the south side of the Platte, I contend that the north branch, which jumped off at Council Bluffs, has been badly neglected by historians—except by Mormon historians, that is, talking about Mormons. To judge from most history books you might gather that the north side was followed by Mormons and maybe a few other people who were confused where they were going. One reason for this neglect and this misapprehension is that early historians didn't have a lot of information to go on. When he edited the Thomas Turnbull journal of 1850 in *Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* (1913) the eminent historian Frederick L. Paxson stated as fact that few goldseekers followed the north side of the Platte, and "even fewer have left known journals of the route." About 25 years

later, rare book dealer Edward Eberstadt, in critiquing a manuscript for Yale University, complained that diaries of those following the north side were quite rare. From these imagined facts both of these authorities concluded that non-Mormons on the northern route were relatively scarce.

Well, both of these gentlemen have passed on to their rewards, so presumably they will not feel chagrined if I say that I can prove that at least one third (and probably more) of all people heading west up the Platte followed the north bank, whether they called it the Mormon Trail, the Council Bluffs Road, or the Yellow Brick Road to China! One third does not a majority make, but it is a respectable minority. Now then, in my *Great Platte River Road*, published in 1969, I calculated that the total number of those going west by the central overland route, from 1841 to 1866, as 350,000. I would now—15 years later—adjust that figure upward to closer to 500,000, if we are to include all those going to Colorado from 1859 to 1866, and also increasing some of my original annual estimates because of fresh evidence. For example, most calculations for 1849-1852 lean heavily on figures reported in the emigrant registers at Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie, which were on the south side of the river, and thus tended to ignore or downplay migration on the north side. Also, the data in over 1,000 new overland accounts (discovered after completing my *Great Platte River Road* manuscript in 1966) strongly suggest that original estimates for several years, particularly in the period 1859-1866, were too conservative. At any rate, if we calculate that the grand total during the migration period, both sides of the river, was close to 500,000, that's at least 165,000 who came by covered wagon through future Fremont, Nebraska.

Now how do I get my estimate of at least one-third of the total up the north side of the Platte, particularly when there were no emigrant registers kept by the military on the north side? Who was keeping the score? Well, to begin with, the Mormons kept close tabs on the numbers of their own people going to Utah. But for non-Mormons from the Council Bluffs area, going through Fremont, there are two primary sources of data which have been neglected. One of these categories is newspapers published at Council Bluffs, which give some random impressions of the crowds there, as well

as the rosters of some emigrant companies. My main reliance, however, is on first-hand observers—in the form of diaries, journals, letters, or recollections of emigrants themselves. Since around 1930 when Mr. Eberstadt complained that there were few diaries of northside travelers, a great many of these turned up in library collections all over the United States—in fact I have turned up over 600 such documents for northside travelers, which is roughly one-third of my total to date of over 1,800 eye-witness accounts for both sides of the river. My ratio is one known record-keeper to every 275 emigrants. So 600 record-keepers times 275 equals 165,000 emigrants; and three times 165,000 is approximately 500,000. This calculation may not be a model of scientific precision, but it provides something resembling concrete proof for my thesis.

The California gold rush beginning in 1849 was the start of heavy travel on both sides of the river. Prior to that date we had on the north side only a handful of fur traders and missionaries, and a few thousand Mormons going to Utah. At the risk of scrambling things chronologically, I might mention that the first fur traders of record to use the north side—and therefore the first white men to pass through Fremont—were four men led by Thomas Fitzpatrick in 1824. Strangely enough, they weren't going *up* the Platte, they were coming *down* it, having reached South Pass from the north, after their Missouri River expedition was derailed by hostile Indians. They checked into Fort Atkinson—north of present Omaha—in starving condition. Their reports led to several upriver expeditions from trading posts in the Council Bluffs region. Missionaries out of Bellevue, south of present Omaha, accompanied fur traders westward beginning in 1835. That year Samuel Parker and Marcus Whitman started for Oregon, and in 1836 the north side had the honor of being the route of the first white women to cross the continent. These were Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding, Presbyterian missionary wives, both authentic American heroines, who somehow survived 2,000 weary miles on horseback, and encounters with uncouth drunken trappers and scalp-hunting savages. In 1847, the year of the Mormon pioneers, Narcissa and Marcus Whitman and many others at their station on the Walla Walla



Historian Merrill Mattes with Marilyn Peterson, associate professor of journalism and English at Midland Lutheran College. Courtesy of Fremont Tribune, Jim Nolan, photographer.

River were massacred by Cayuse Indians. Narcissa is second only in fame to Sacajawea of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and I deplore the fact that in Nebraska there is no memorial in her honor. Either Bellevue or Fremont, or some place in western Nebraska, would be an ideal location for such a memorial .

I am not going into detail, even briefly, on the epic of the Mormon hegira, because that story has been told and retold. However, neither that fact nor my efforts to put the Mormon migration in proper relationship to other migrations, should be construed as any kind of bias. I agree with the Congress of the United States in recognizing by the creation of the Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail, that the Mormons played a major role in developing the western frontier, and their enterprise will always command my admiration.

The California gold rush was the beginning of the true "Great Migration." This epic story begins in 1849, and reaches a crescendo in 1850, and again in 1852 and 1853. During those

five years I have tabulated a total of around 175,000 emigrants on both sides of the Platte, of which around 60,000 followed the Council Bluffs Road through Fremont. From 1854 to 1858 the migration numbers were respectable but not spectacular. There was a big jump in travel figures, beginning in 1859 with the Pikes Peak gold rush, which continued through the early 1860s, stimulated by people who wanted to avoid getting involved in the Civil War. Also, in the early 1860s gold was discovered in Nevada, Montana, Idaho, and eastern Oregon, and brought on more stampedes. Most of this later travel went through Council Bluffs/ Omaha, because there was now a steamboat ferry there, and it was closer to the inland destinations. So my thesis now is that, while Independence was number one in the 1840s, and St. Joe was number one for 1849 and 1850, *Council Bluffs became the number one jumping off point for all migration during the period 1852 to 1866*. That's a startling fact which textbook historians seem unaware of, or have ignored.

I don't have everything worked out statistically, except for the five-year period, 1849-1853, the climax years of the gold rush. For that period I have tabulated 173 record-keepers who jumped off from the Kansas City area, 282 from St. Joseph, and 312 from Council Bluff. But look what happened in 1852 and 1853. In those two years Council Bluff ran away with the prize, with 168 record-keepers crossing there, versus only 44 at Kansas City and 59 at St. Joseph.

There are two other remarkable facts regarding 1852 and 1853. In those years Oregon suddenly became popular again as a destination, with homes rather than gold as a primary objective. For those two years, I have counted 130 record-keepers going to Oregon, versus 138 to California. In other words, in those years there was a revival of the Oregon Trail on both sides of the Platte, a fact also unknown or ignored by historians who write textbooks. But then there was another remarkable development beginning in 1852, doubtless related to this shift to Oregon. This was the appearance of women on the Platte River Road, for the first time, that is, in significant numbers since the Oregon migrations of 1843-1848. For the climactic period 1849-1853 I have examined 994 eye-witness accounts. Of this number males outnumber females by a ratio of nine to one, but of the 107 females of record, 69 of them

turn up in 1852 or 1853, or triple the number for the three preceding years. This is related to the fact that in 1849-1851 the California gold rush was a male monopoly. Most companies were made up exclusively of men who left wives or sweethearts to seek their fortunes in California, and expected to return. By 1852 the gold fever, though not quenched, diminished somewhat, women began to assert themselves, and move the whole family and household effects to Oregon or California. In the years following 1852 and 1853 the migration of families — men, women, children, and in-laws—became routine.

There was another remarkable phenomenon beginning in 1852, and that was the frequency with which emigrants who began from somewhere on the south side switched over to the north side, usually crossing the Platte at or a few miles above Fort Kearny. This crossing was just as dangerous as ever, but now they had the extra motivation of trying to escape from the cholera epidemic which was worse on the south side. Of course we have no way of knowing the exact numbers or percentage of people who crossed the Platte from south to north. From various journals I would calculate that in 1852, when the total migration was around 50,000, at least ten percent or 5,000 made this unusual crossing.

For 1859 I have counted 76 emigrant narratives. Of this number 38 or exactly 50 percent jumped off at Council Bluffs/Omaha. A random check of 150 narratives for the three-year period 1864-1866 discloses that 70 or about 46 percent of the total did likewise. Also, in the 1860s there is the testimony of several emigrants and Army officers that travel on the north side sometimes ran heavier than travel on the south side. These observations and statistical comparisons enable us to generalize with some confidence that in the late migration period, 1859-1866, *west-bound travel from Council Bluffs was running approximately equal to the combined total of all jumping-off places south of the Platte*—principally Plattsmouth, Nebraska City, St. Joseph, Fort Leavenworth, and the Kansas City area. Couple this fact with the extent of earlier South-North crossover traffic, and the case for heavy overall use of the north side, 1841-1866, becomes stronger than ever. A further refinement of our data may well demonstrate that the percentage of northside travelers on the Platte River

Road is closer to 40 percent of the total than the 33 1/3 percent or "at least one-third" that we hypothecated at the outset.

Where did the emigrants who went through the Council Bluffs gateway come from? We know that there were many boatloads of Mormons from Europe that reached the Bluffs via New Orleans and St. Louis, and also many non-Mormons from eastern United States who chose the steamboat route likewise. However, the heavy majority flocked there/via covered wagons. These people were mainly from homes in the northern tier of Midwestern States — eastern Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Illinois probably contributed more non-Mormon emigrants than any other state, and England was doubtless the principal source of Mormon recruits. If you stop to consider that most Mormons of the 1847 and 1848 migrations came from Nauvoo, Illinois, that makes that state the leader in all categories.

Although "south-siders" frequently crossed over to the north side because of the cholera scare, or under the impression that there was more grass on the north side for their animals, virtually everyone on the north side stayed on that side until they came to Fort Laramie, Wyoming, and there they crossed the North Platte to the south side because, until 1850, the general understanding was that further travel on the north side was impossible because of rugged terrain. But in 1850 it was discovered that the north side west of the fort wasn't so bad after all, and thereafter the majority stayed on the north side, all the way to the Upper Platte Ferry, where the south-siders finally crossed over to join the north-siders, to make one big combined road all the way up Sweetwater River to South Pass. Thus one of the advantage of the north side route after 1850 was that it avoided all major river crossings with the single exception of Loup Fork. Editors of Council Bluffs newspapers frequently harped on this theme to promote north side travel.

We have covered the geography of the great central route up the Platte, and focussed on the north side of that river, contending that "the northern branch" or "Council Bluffs Road" has been neglected by historians, and that it was far more important than they realized. Now I would like to get away from geography and conclude on broader aspects of the western trails.

In the matter of historical significance, these migrations

constitute one of the most momentous events in American history, ranking right up there with the American Revolution, the Louisiana Purchase, the acquisition of Oregon, California and Texas, and the Civil War. It was the Great Migration to these western territories that created the continental United States we know today. It led to the effective union of East and West, and filled the intervening wilderness—once considered unfit for anyone but savages—with farms and ranches, villages, and cities.

Another aspect of the Great Migration relates to our spiritual, rather than just our physical, welfare today. Here was an immense wilderness of arid plains, rugged mountains, and burning deserts, to be crossed before you reached Oregon or California. Aside from thirst and starvation, there were other perils lurking to strike down the emigrants—drownings at river crossings, getting run over by wagon wheels, caught in a stampede of oxen or trampled by onrushing buffalo, killed—or worse yet, captured—by Indians, afflicted with Asiatic cholera, smallpox, mumps, measles, or scurvy, getting stabbed or shot by a fellow emigrant, or more often accidentally shooting yourself through carelessness, or dying from fatigue and exposure. The average distance traveled from the Missouri River to the Pacific coast would be around 2,000 miles, and over a period of 25 years a highly conservative estimate would be 10,000 dead emigrants, or five graves for every mile. Yet with full knowledge of these hazards, one-half a million people took the plunge and went west by covered wagon. They did so entirely on their own, with nothing but their meager possessions, including the family Bible, and confidence that they would somehow make it with the help of God. The only government aid they received was in the form of a few widely scattered military posts, set up too little and too late to benefit the biggest migration years.

What lesson is to be derived from this chapter in American history? It took an emigrant about 4 months to go from the Missouri River to California. We can get there from Omaha today by car in three days, and by air in three hours. While we are inclined to feel smug about our speed and sophistication we have more apprehension of the future in 1983 than did the emigrants of 150 years ago. I will not dwell upon the perils that confront us all today. I suggest only that we need to

reanimate the spirit of the covered wagon pioneers—expressed in self-reliance, the courage to recognize and confront reality, and confidence in the future bolstered by faith in God.

At the outset I spoke of anniversaries. Now I want to refer to the birth of Martin Luther 500 years ago tomorrow, and I urge your reading of a magnificent tribute to him in the October issue of the *National Geographic*. Here is a man who risked burning at the stake to defy the dominant Church of the Middle Ages, the mightiest power of his day, by contending that God was directly accessible to every human being without the need of priestly intercessors. "The defiant German monk changed the course of history. He ignited an explosion that continues to this day."

Another nuclear explosion of the human spirit occurred in 1776, in a revolution that was formalized by a peace treaty made 200 years ago. Today the trust of this American Revolution—*freedom for all with responsibility by all*—is in danger from intellectual perversion and subversion from within and armed aggression from without. What can save us? More billions of paper dollars for more social engineering projects? No, I say that what will save us is a reinvigoration of the American character with the virtues of the American pioneer. President Theodore Roosevelt said that America was "the last best hope on earth." But he also sounded this warning which is far more applicable today than it was in his own day: "If we seek merely swollen, slothful ease and ignoble peace, if we shrink from the hard contests where men must win at the hazard of their lives and the risk of all they hold dear, then bolder and stronger peoples will pass us by, and will win for themselves the domination of the world."