

THE GOLDEN PASS ROAD

1848-1850

IN FOLLOWING THE Hastings-Donner trail west from Fort Bridger in July, 1847, the Mormon Pioneers were grateful to find a beaten track already existing across the mountains to the valley of the Great Salt Lake. Reconnaissance made it clear the Donners had found the best if not the only route for crossing the Wasatch along the general line they adopted.

Even so, the Pioneer trail was a difficult, not to say desperate, proposition. It required the crossing of two steep and dangerous heights, and travel in the narrow, crooked canyon bottoms was almost as hard on wagons and animals as the ascent and descent of the two mountains. In East Canyon the road crossed and re-crossed the stream 13 times in 8 miles; after surmounting Big Mountain, it lurched back and forth across Mountain Dell Creek 12 times in the space of 5 miles, "all bad crossing places"; and after struggling over Little Mountain, snaked across Emigration Canyon Creek 19 times in 5 miles before emerging into Salt Lake Valley.¹ He who could find a route which on the one hand would keep out of the bed of the lower Weber River—the original Hastings route—and on the other would evade the stiff grades and serpentine canyons of the Donner route would earn the thanks of the Mormon community and all the Saints yet to reach the valley.

Doubtless there was some preliminary examination of the canyons opening out upon Salt Lake Valley, if only by hunters seeking to augment the precarious food supply, that first winter after the founding of Great Salt Lake City. The first attempt at a formal reconnaissance, however, was by Parley P. Pratt in late June, 1848. Elder brother of Orson Pratt, who had led the vanguard of the Mormon Pioneers across the mountains the previous

¹Compare Clayton's journal entries for July 19-22, 1847, and his *Latter-Day Saints' Emigrants' Guide*, 19-20. The number of crossings of Mountain Dell Creek does not appear from the Mormon journals, but is mentioned by a California immigrant, Beeson Townsend, on August 7, 1849; see Dale L. Morgan, "Letters by Forty-Niners," *Western Humanities Review*, III, April, 1949, 112. As late as 1860 the road up East Canyon still crossed the creek 13 times; see Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints* (London, 1861), 235.

summer, Parley had reached the valley in the early fall of 1847 with the large "second company" which had followed in the path of the Pioneers. With the sanction of the High Council, the governing authority of the tiny Mormon settlement, Pratt left Great Salt Lake City on a tour of exploration June 28, 1848, accompanied by a Brother Workman.² According to Pratt's official report made two days later, he and Workman set out up Emigration Canyon, following the established road as far as Mountain Dell, beyond Little Mountain.³

After crossing the north fork of Canyon creek [Mountain Dell Creek], we took up the south fork [Parleys] of the same traveling nearly due east. This seemed to lead more southward and to head in very lofty mountains, densely covered with forests of fir trees [Lambs Canyon]. We followed up a small branch which came in from the east which I call middle fork.

The country was good for pasturage, well watered and consisting of hills and vallies covered with timbers. There was a very good passage for a wagon road, the ascent to the summit being very gradual.

Having reached the head of Parleys by a route which, from Mountain Dell, is that of US 40 today, the two men descended "by a very gradual and easy passage, among groves of fir, pine and aspen, mixed with open country, for a mile or two, when we found ourselves on a main branch of the Weber river, and 16 miles from the city." They had reached upper East Canyon Creek at present Gorgoza. Following the stream up several miles, they arrived at what has ever since been known as Parleys Park, "a beautiful meadow, or park, nearly circular, averaging 3 miles in length and 2 miles in width, and comprising some three or four thousand acres of excellent land, clothed with grass and interspersed with wild flax and strawberry vines." Large groves of aspen stood here and there in the broad valley, and the surrounding mountains were well-grown with fir and aspen. Ten lovely, clear streams combined in this park to form "the west branch of the Weber river." Continuing their journey east, Pratt and Workman passed over a gentle divide to another little park through which flowed what Pratt

²Probably Jacob Lindsay Workman, but possibly his son, Jacob R.

³Except for the first 2 miles up the canyons east of Salt Lake City, the terrain figuring in the history of the Golden Pass Road has been mapped by the U. S. Geological Survey; see the *Fort Douglas* and *Coalville* quadrangles.

somewhat inadequately called the "eastern fork" of the Weber—present Silver Creek: It impressed him that the divide between the two expanses of meadowland was simply "a few hundred yards of sage desert."

Having thus had a preliminary look at the country, Pratt turned back to Great Salt Lake City to recommend that the High Council appoint a committee of two or three persons to make a more thorough exploration. His report concluded:

These parks are from 20 to 25 miles from our city; a good road may be made the entire distance, without any mountains or canyons to pass, except this first canyon through which [Parleys] Canyon creek enters our valley. . . . I would further state to your honorable body that I believe a wagon road may be made in that direction, so as to intersect the present emigrant road in the neighborhood of Bear River, and be much nearer while at the same time it avoids all the mountains and canyons. . . .⁴

Impressed with Pratt's communication, the High Council appointed John Van Cott and Daniel Spencer to accompany him on a more extended reconnaissance. The three men left the city on July 3, 1848, and returned home three days later to report as follows:

Great Salt Lake City, July 8, 1848.

President Smith and the Council:

Gentleman: The undersigned being appointed by your honorable body as a committee to explore a new road from this place towards Ft. Bridger beg leave to submit the following report:

Left the city on the morning of the third inst. proceeded up Canyon creek to the junctions of its two principal forks [Mountain Dell and Parleys] at the eastern foot of the first mountain [Little Mountain]. Found the Canyon extremely rugged, narrow and brushy and about 4 or 5 miles through it.⁵

⁴Parley P. Pratt to Pres. John Smith and Council, Great Salt Lake City, June 30, 1848, original letter in the archives of the L. D. S. Church Historian's Office.

⁵Compare James Clyman's description of June 3, 1846. On this second exploration, Pratt set out up what was then called Big Canyon, but now bears his own name. On the first reconnaissance he had gone by way of Emigration Canyon.

We are of the opinion that a good wagon road can be made through it at a cost of about 800 dollars and thus dispense with the mountain over which the road now runs.

Passing up a fine table land or inclined plain⁶ for about two miles on the south side of the south fork of Canyon creek we crossed it and took up a small branch eastward two or three miles more to the summit of a Divide between east and west Canyon creek, the one putting in to the Weaver river and the other into this valley.

This is an easy pass, scarcely worthy to be called a hill and is about 15 miles from town or answering to the second mountain [Big Mountain] on the road.

Thence two miles down a forest and meadow or inclined plain, interspersed with pine, fir, aspen and open ground, we came to east canyon creek. Thence up that creek three miles south east to Parley's park. Thence eastward three miles over meadow and sage plains to a small stream which we named Silver creek. Thence the new road will pass down said creek, 5 miles through a Canyon of willows and hills down two miles more through an open valley, to the Weaver river. Thence down the open valley of that river 10 miles to the junction of the Old road.

This road is thirty miles from our city to the Weaver and forty miles to the junction of the old road where it leaves Cave [Echo] canyon and comes to the Weaver. The whole forty miles is cut through a mountain or a hill that is unworthy the mention in so rough a country. It is a direct course, or nearly so and winds its way through three principal ranges of mountains, over which the old road runs. And we know it to be the only practical pass to be found for a good road from our city to the Weaver river.

It passes through some of the finest country in the world, and abounds in fine streams, beautiful grassy meadows and a full supply of timber, to accommodate emigration or settlement.

Before finding this pass we were driven south and East about 30 miles by a range of mountains [the West Hills] before we could reach the Weaver.⁷ We were on the Great stream [Provo River] which puts into the Utah Lake. Passed up its valley eastward for many miles. It is well wooded and as large as the Weaver.

⁶See the James Frazier Reed journal, Note 16.

⁷They followed the route of US 40 as far as present Hailstone and then turned up the Provo River, anticipating the route of US 189.

The valley of this river, and that of the Weaver connect in a singular manner, forming an easy pass from the Weaver to the Utah Lake.

At the junction of these two streams or rather the junction of the valleys through which they ran, we found a beautiful park 10 miles long and 3 broad. Embracing some thousands of acres of land well watered and well supplied with timber, grass and free stone.⁸

The Weaver issues from a high range of mountains [Uintah Mountains] eastward of this park, and sweeps through it in a south western direction, lined with a majestic forest of cotton woods.

We camped on its banks after being drenched with the rain on Tuesday the 4th of July.

Wednesday the 5th. Passed up its Canyon eastward for two or three miles between rugged mountains, and then abandoned any further progress because of the thickets of willows and the steep hill sides, and returned down the Weaver.

It is about thirty miles down the stream to the old road from where it breaks from the mountains. And the whole distance is bounded on the east by a lofty range of mountains which separate the Weaver from Bear river.

If there is a pass to be found south of Cave Canyon it is the pass where the Weaver breaks from this range of mountains, for there is no other.⁹ We think that a pass may be found in that direction at some future day.

We passed down the open valley of the Weaver nearly 30 miles and returning up the same some ten miles. Encamped for the night near the mouth of Silver creek which here enters the Weaver. We had seen its head branches before.

Thursday the 6th, passed up the Canyon of Silver Creek and home where we arrived at sundown weary and worn, and some of us without shoes, and nearly without pantaloons. The Canyon having robbed us of these in a great measure, and of much of our flesh and skin, the first morning of our ride.

We would suggest to the Council that as many hands as possible be raised forthwith with axes, shovels, spades,

⁸Kamas Prairie. In geologically recent times the Weber and Provo rivers met here and flowed as one stream down Provo Canyon; later the Weber found an independent channel by which to escape from the mountains.

⁹Curiously, Pratt and his associates were so little impressed as not even to mention Chalk Creek Canyon, the first major opening in the mountain wall south of Echo, and the only one up which a usable road to Bear River has ever been made.

etc., and that the road be diverted from the other side of the first canyon or mountain to the Weaver which will not cost more than \$500 and that the big canyon be put off till after harvest.

Should companies arrive they can then repose a day or two in the parks within 15 or 20 miles of us, or they can come within ten miles. We can then join with them and open the canyon, or pass them over the mountain as is thought best.

A messenger should also be sent to [Fort] Bridger, or to meet any camp this side of Bridger with instructions to the first companies to leave the old road as soon as they reach the Weaver, and take up that stream ten miles; in the meantime sending into town for a pilot.

We have the honor to subscribe ourselves your obedient servants and brethren

Parley P. Pratt,
John Van Cott
Daniel Spencer¹⁰

Pratt's explorations opened up some interesting long-range possibilities as to whether a new route could be found that would intersect the established immigrant road at Bear River, Fort Bridger, or even farther east. More immediately to the point, on the basis of actual investigation, it seemed established that the immigration could be diverted from the Pioneer road at the mouth of Echo Canyon and conducted by this new and superior route into Salt Lake Valley. As late as mid-August it was supposed that the 1848 Mormon immigration would be able to come in by the new route. A letter of August 9, written from the valley to the westbound companies, announces: "We are making a new road for you as far as the Weber which will shun the mountains. When you arrive at Weber you will turn up the river about ten miles, then up a canyon about eight miles into a beautiful valley in the tops of the mountains, called Antelope or Parleys Park, then up a plain. Ascending a little, then down a hollow and canyon about 20 miles, following Big Canyon creek to the valley and fort."¹¹

¹⁰Original letter on file at the L. D. S. Church Historian's Office. For copies of this letter and others preserved by the Church I am indebted to my old friend, the late Alvin F. Smith, who as Church Librarian made me unfailingly welcome in visits I made to the Historian's Office over a period of many years. I am saddened by his passing, which occurred in Salt Lake City on January 4, 1948.

¹¹John L. and A. B. Smith to George A. Smith, Great Salt Lake City, August 9, 1848, quoted in L. D. S. Journal History for this date.

Fair as was this promise, it could not be redeemed, neither in 1848 nor in 1849. It was 1850 before the new route was opened to travel. Clearly the proposed road ran into unanticipated difficulties—and at its eastern end, for the heavy labor required to work a road through the rugged gorge of lower Parleys Canyon need not have prevented bringing the immigration to the eastern foot of Little Mountain by way of Silver Creek, Parleys Park, and upper Parleys Canyon. It would seem that Silver Creek Canyon was the stumbling block, for Pratt never did get his road through this canyon; when finally completed, the Golden Pass Road was carried through the West Hills by way of Threemile Canyon, the next canyon to the south.

The reasons for the change of route become evident from some notations in the journal of Captain J. H. Simpson, who reconnoitered Silver Creek Canyon on August 29, 1858, ten years later. The first mile or so, as he rode down the canyon, Simpson was disposed to think that a road could be made "with some little side cutting." But through the remaining $5\frac{3}{4}$ miles he found "the canon quite narrow, side hills close to stream which is full of Beaver dams, forcing us along left slope up bank, along an Indian Trail—The route is scarcely admissible for packs, & is entirely out of the question as a wagon route—The labor to make it would be immense, & the greater part of it is rocky." In his journal next day he added, "It would be a difficult route for pack mules in the winter on account of the very steep sidling rocky places, over which the trail goes."¹³

Despite the blighting of his first hopes, Parley P. Pratt retained his faith in the route he had explored, and after the Forty-Niners commenced to pour into Great Salt Lake City in June, 1849, he undertook to build it himself as a toll road. His *Autobiography* relates:

¹³J. H. Simpson, manuscript journals in the records of the War Department, Corps of Topographical Engineers, National Archives, Washington, D.C. I am indebted to Dale L. Morgan for a transcript of this journal, kept while Simpson was exploring a military road from Camp Floyd to Fort Bridger. Also see Simpson's instructive *Preliminary Map of Routes Reconnoitered and Opened in the Territory of Utah . . . in the Fall of 1858*. For the country between Fort Bridger and the valleys lying west of the Wasatch, this map is far more illuminating than the one that accompanies his published report of 1875.

I commenced in July [1849] to work a road up the rugged Kanyon of Big Kanyon Creek. I had the previous year (1848) explored the Kanyon for that purpose, and also a beautiful park, and passes from Salt Lake City to Weber River eastward, in a more southern and less rugged route than the pioneer entrance to the valley. . . . I soon had so far completed my road as to be able to obtain a large amount of fuel and timber. In November I ceased operations in the Kanyon and broke up my mountain camp and returned to the city.¹³

It would seem that Pratt's road, while under construction, was a topic of much speculation in Great Salt Lake City. There is an odd allusion to it in a letter of July 8, 1849, by John B. Hazlip, a New Yorker enroute to the gold fields: "The city of the Lake has appropriated \$5,000 for the purpose of making a good road from the city to the North Fork of the Platte river, which will be the means of turning a great number of the emigrants in this direction." A second letter by a California immigrant, written in October, remarks more accurately that the Mormons were "making a road through the mountains from the Webber to this place."¹⁴ The following spring, as early as possible, Pratt resumed his road-building, and he describes its completion in this language:

Some time in this month [March, 1850] I again commenced work on my road in Big Kanyon Creek, and in getting out timber and wood from the same. I continued this operation during the remainder of the season—obtaining much building and fencing timber and a large quantity of poles. In July I had so far completed my road as to open it for the California emigration. The amount of toll taken this first season was about one thousand five hundred dollars.¹⁵

Utah's first newspaper began publication just in time to herald the opening of the new route. The third number of the *Deseret News*, June 29, 1850, featured the following advertisement:

¹³Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt* (New York, 1847), 407. Although it was not published until 18 years later, Pratt had written this autobiography by 1856.

¹⁴Dale L. Morgan, "Letters by Forty-Niners," *Western Humanities Review*, III (April, 1949), 100, 116.

¹⁵Parley P. Pratt, *op. cit.*, 413.