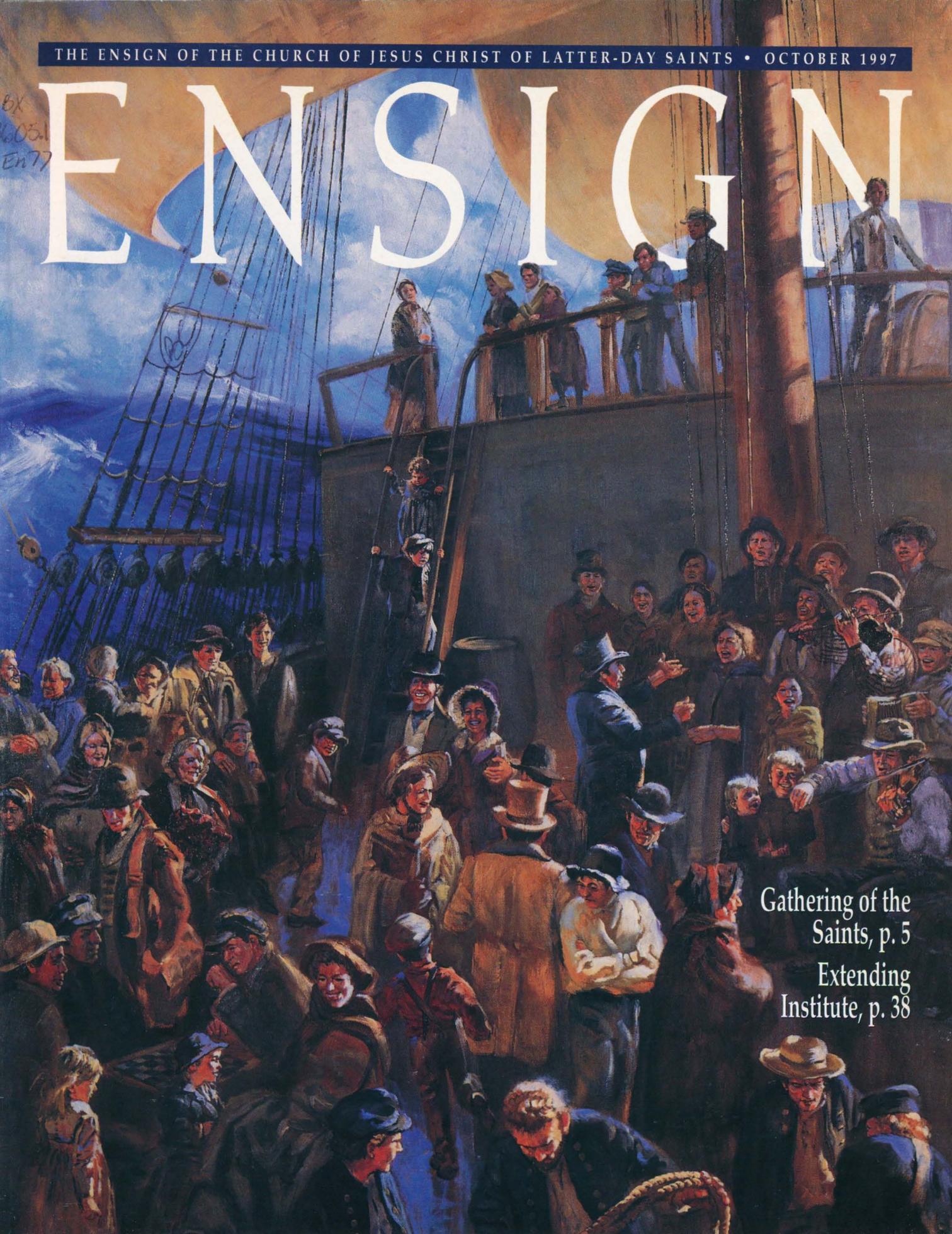


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LETTING THE WORLD KNOW

BY LARENE PORTER GAUNT, Associate Editor,
AND JENNIFER SHUMWAY BALLARD

On 22 July 1997, the Mormon Trail wagon train reenactment reached its culmination with an emotional flourish as an estimated 50,000 people greeted the 61 wagons, 9 handcarts, 45 horseback riders, and 380 walkers at This Is the Place State Park near the mouth of Emigration Canyon in Salt Lake City, Utah.

"You have done something really extraordinary," President Gordon B. Hinckley told the trekkers. "You have caught the imagination of all of us. . . . You have brought to the attention of millions upon millions of people across the world the story of the unparalleled migration of our people from Nauvoo, and from Liverpool and beyond, to this valley in the mountains."

In all, nearly 10,000 people participated—some for only a few hours, days, or weeks, and others for the entire 93-day journey of more than 1,000 miles from Omaha, Nebraska, to Salt Lake City, Utah. The wagon train reenactment has been a means of letting the world know of the Mormons and their westward migration.

Michael Otterson, Church Public Affairs media coordinator for the wagon train, knows firsthand of the media frenzy of recent weeks as well as the ongoing coverage. A sampling of national and international coverage includes spots on ABC's *Good Morning America*, NBC's *Today*, CBS's *This Morning*, and Fox National News; and feature articles in *Newsweek*, *Time*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*. Mitchell Productions traveled the entire distance to create a video for the Odyssey Channel. In addition, television crews from Britain, Germany, Russia, Romania, Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Belgium each filmed with major documentaries of 30 to 60 minutes in mind. International newspaper coverage included BBC World Service, which serves nearly 140 countries; and *Asahi Shimbun* (*Evening News*), the largest newspaper in Japan.



The idea for the reenactment of the 1847 Mormon Trail wagon train grew out of discussions among three independent companies that organize wagon train reenactments. As plans progressed and the complex

logistical requirements were faced, it became obvious that more resources were needed. A nonprofit company called Mormon Trail Wagon Train—150 Years, Inc. was created specifically for the purpose of handling the legal and financial aspects of the wagon train.

"Though The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints didn't sponsor the trek, it supported those who did by making financial contributions and providing public affairs missionaries along the trail," says Brother Otterson.

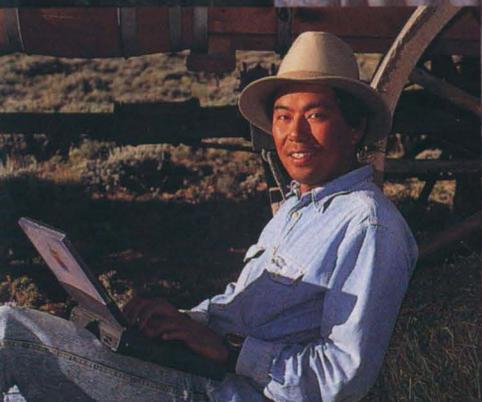
And so the journey began on 21 April 1997 from the Mormon Pioneer Cemetery at Winter Quarters in what is now Omaha, Nebraska. The trekkers were a mix of Latter-day Saints and those of other faiths—all with motivations born of their own hearts. President Hinckley was there to wish them well. Though the reenactment was of a historical event wherein the end was known, the trek took on a life and spirit of its own. Gradually, experiences of service, conversion, healing, and rescue filled this trek just as they had filled the Latter-day Saint pioneer treks of 1847–69.

"If she offers you an orange, she brings it to you peeled," a fellow trekker says of Nanc' Adams of the Conifer Ward, Golden Colorado Stake. Her attitude is typical of what became known as the spirit of the wagon train.

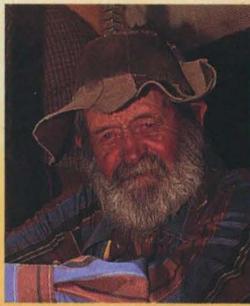
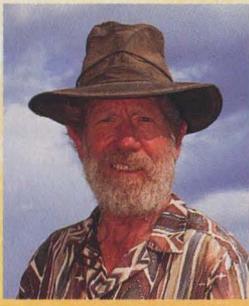
Kimberly Herterich of the Hemet Second Ward, Hemet California Stake, who traveled alone with her four children because her husband could not afford to leave work, says, "I came with the determination that I could do this on my own. I quickly learned that, like our pioneer forebears, I couldn't make it alone. Others had felt as I had, but soon everyone was helping each other."



Roger and Lisa Holgreen, who are brother and sister, revel in the emotional moments atop Big Mountain when trekkers got their first view of the Salt Lake Valley. Far left: As in this picture of Ken Dicken and his horses with a television satellite dish in the background, the Mormon Trail reenactment and its press coverage were never far apart.



Journalists shared the story with the world. Osamu Sekiguchi, trekker and journalist from Tokyo, wrote of the trek in Japanese.



Left to right: Jackie, four-year-old daughter of Nanc' Adams, was the youngest to make the entire trip. Grant Packard, 69, was the oldest person to walk the whole way. J. Weldon Beck, at 86, was among the oldest to make the journey. Background: Sunrise at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, campsite. Inset, right: Libbi and Sarah Cate Sorensen added music as part of the Authentic Camp made up of volunteers from This Is the Place State Park.



Above: This handcart from Siberia carried homemade dolls and a book filled with the testimonies of Russian Latter-day Saints. Above, top: The wagon train left Omaha on 21 April 1997. Top right: Gordon Beharrell pulls his handcart over Rocky Ridge in Wyoming, while others help push. Right: Entering Utah.





For Sister Herterich the journey was a constant reminder of the Relief Society's theme, "Charity Never Faileth." Other sisters who also trekked without husbands joined with Sister Herterich. These women found strength and support from one another and together overcame loneliness, exhaustion, and pain.

Many modern-day pioneers carried the memory of a pioneer ancestor as motivation for the trek. Sarah Robinson, who had been released from her mission in time to join the wagon train, was among them. Though she had had four foot surgeries and needed two more, she still chose to walk, often finding herself limping and in pain. "My ancestor came by herself to Zion with a handcart company and frostbitten feet," said Sister Robinson upon entering the valley on 22 July 1997. "I did it alone to pay tribute to her."

Love blossomed on the trail in 1997 as it did in pioneer times. Amy Freestone of Provo, Utah, and Brent C. Moore of Scottsdale, Arizona, met, fell in love, and became engaged using a horseshoe-nail ring, also known as a prairie diamond. Theirs was not the only romance on the trail. All acknowledged that "you really get to know a person when you work and sacrifice daily for a common goal."

Two men chose to be baptized while on the trail. John Buelow, now a member of the St. Paul Third Ward, St. Paul Minnesota Stake, first made contact with the Church in the fall of 1996, but it wasn't until Brent and Susan Saetrum invited him out to the wagon train that he felt the Spirit of the Holy Ghost. After a morning of fervent prayer alone on the Scotts Bluff National Monument in Nebraska, John chose to

be baptized the next day in the North Platte River.

Twenty-five-year-old Larry "Turbo" Stewart was the youngest teamster to have driven in both a 1996 wagon train reenactment from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters and this year's trek from Winter Quarters to Salt Lake City. He loved the pioneer lifestyle so much that he said he had been "born in the wrong era." He gained a testimony while on the trail and was baptized in a pond at This Is the Place State Park by Elder Hugh W. Pinnock of the Seventy after the wagon train's arrival in the Salt Lake Valley on 22 July 1997—a tender benediction to a wonderful day and to the trek.

Unfortunately, after the trek was over, Brother Stewart sustained critical head injuries on 2 August. He had returned briefly to his home in Iowa, then traveled back to Farson, Wyoming, to pick up his covered wagon. As he was loading his 2,800-pound wagon onto a flatbed truck, it slipped and pinned him against a van.

Grant Packard from the San Luis Obispo Second Ward, San Luis Obispo California Stake, at age 69 was the oldest person to walk the entire distance. Brother Packard will long be remembered as the "hero of the handcarts." He decided to make the difficult journey despite being involved in a serious car accident in 1996 that left him with a metal pin in his leg. Others quickly learned that around Brother Packard there is no negative talk. His gentle rebuke, "No murmuring," was frequently heard on difficult days. He encouraged others to sing and to pray instead. Many were humbled to watch Brother Packard limp along without a word of discouragement, even on the hardest days.



Above: Entering This Is the Place State Park on 22 July 1997, most trekkers felt as Shauna Picken of Plymouth, Washington, who said, "I had enough challenges to know what the original trek was like, but not more than I could handle." Top inset: Larry "Turbo" Stewart worked as a teamster on both the 1996 trek from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Council Bluffs, Iowa, and the 1997 trek from Council Bluffs to the Salt Lake Valley. Left: Returning missionary Sarah Robinson and Los Angeles Times reporter Kathy Stickel (in hat). Below: Happy to be home, Kasandra Anderson feels secure in her father's arms.



Though some called this a "Tech Trek" because of the presence of laptop computers, cell phones, recreation vehicles, running shoes, and video cameras, the trekkers nevertheless experienced the challenges of torrential rains and sand hills in Nebraska, rocky paths and wind in Wyoming, and desert heat and steep mountain roads in Utah. Many slept in tents on the ground. Some walked every step of the way. The blisters, sunburns, and aching muscles were real.

The dangers and the protection were real also. Many called upon the power of the priesthood and were blessed. Among those was Brenda Lowe Cornell, who was dragged more than 100 yards by a runaway team of mules north of Farson, Wyoming. Jerked from the wagon seat, Brenda held tightly to the



PHOTO BY TAMARA HAMILIN

lines as she was pulled behind the mules, all the time fearing she would be run over by her wagon if she let go. By the time the wagon broke apart, she had injured six ribs and damaged her spleen. It seemed as if the trek was over for her when she was hospitalized in Rock Springs. However, through a priesthood blessing she was healed and returned to the wagon train in just a few days.

For Gordon Beharrell of the Shrewsbury Branch, Newcastle-under-Lyme England Stake, the real spirit of the wagon train was what others did for him after he had to be rushed to the hospital near Scotts Bluff in Nebraska for emergency surgery. A good friend, Ted Moore, left the wagon train to help Brother Beharrell and then made up the nearly 100 miles he had missed on what would have been rest days. Sister Pam Wilkinson of the Wrexham Ward, Chester England Stake, carried the British flag in his stead. When he did return to the trek, Brother Beharrell rode in his handcart for about 10 days while others willingly pulled him in it.

As the stories unfolded, the media coverage of the trek became twofold, with the stories of the 19th-century pioneers mingled with stories of the 20th-century pioneers. The media began to see that this was a three-month story and not just the story of a wagon train leaving Omaha or arriving in Salt Lake City.

Coordinating the media coverage had its challenges. "One concern was how we could give the media access to the wagon train without them intruding on the experience," says Brother Otterson. "From the beginning, we told them we would not ask the wagon train to detour, backtrack, or otherwise do anything it wasn't already going to do. When the wagon train moved, it moved. The media simply had to take advantage of what was happening as it happened."

With that rule in place, everyone did as much as possible to make it easy for journalists to get their stories. Public Affairs missionaries Tom and Sandy Van Leeuwen manned an RV for journalists and helped them in whatever way they could, including the use of a laptop computer with E-mail and cell phones with strong antennas.

In the beginning, media coverage was primarily in Nebraska and Utah. It received a boost in May when the CBS program *This Morning* covered the story. After that, there was a gradual buildup of interest. From 22 June, when the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* both ran front-page stories, the interest was overwhelming.

"We all wanted to follow Elder M. Russell Ballard's counsel that this was more than a wagon train—it was an opportunity to tell the story of the Restoration," says Brother Otterson. "We tried to help each journalist understand the reasons the people 150 years ago made this trek; that's what makes this story unique. California and Oregon pioneers went for economic opportunity, but Mormon Trail pioneers went looking for a place of refuge from religious persecution where they could build the restored Church. Once journalists got out with the handcart group where they could walk for a couple of miles, they'd pick up story after story. Almost without exception, at the end of their stay they would say we've got far more than we can use. I've never seen journalists so excited. In some cases, they shed tears."

The story hit a dual climax on 21 July with a frightening accident in the morning as a wagon careened down a steep hillside and, later in the day, when the trekkers had their first view of the Salt Lake Valley from the top of Big Mountain, only 20 miles from the valley.

The media brief for 21 July had a full-color photograph of the hill and a written description of the best place to stand for good photographs. When the wagon train came over the hill, one team of mules ran out of control. Val Robins was thrown from the wagon, breaking his wrist. The wagon bed flew 15 feet up in the air with three children and two grandmothers inside, then landed hard on the ground. The frightened mule team, still pulling the undercarriage and wheels, ran wildly down the steep hill and tumbled over each other at the bottom.

Miraculously, injuries were minor. Three film crews got it on tape, including KSL, the NBC affiliate in Salt Lake City. KSL ran the spectacular footage, then dubbed it for the other stations and by early afternoon, it was on CNN and went worldwide—a powerful reminder that even in a reenactment the dangers were real.

The magic moment for most was at the top of Big Mountain. Here, for the first time after trudging across a thousand miles, the trekkers could finally see the Salt Lake Valley. There was whooping and shouting. Some knelt with their face heavenward and arms outstretched. Then quietly, everyone knelt in prayer. Tears flowed freely.

The next day, media from all over the world covered the arrival of the wagon train. Many of the journalists were deeply moved by their experiences. One reporter from Germany noted that she had covered some big stories in the past, like the fall of the Berlin Wall, but she felt that this was one of the greatest stories she'd done. A member of a U.S. news crew said, "I don't know how we're going to convey the feeling of this to our audience."

Nearly 300 media representatives—national and international—conveyed the spirit of the wagon train to the world. The powerful images of covered wagons silhouetted against a golden sunset, women and little girls in long dresses and sunbonnets playing together after mealtime, and the wagon master on horseback leading the wagon train in the predawn haze transported us back in time. We began to wonder what it would have been like 150 years ago. As stories of the 1997 Mormon Trail wagon train mingled with stories of the 1847 pioneer company and other treks, our Latter-day pioneer heritage came alive for everyone regardless of background.

"They are my pioneers too," says Walter Okamoto, Japanese translator for LDS trekkers from Tokyo—Osamu and Takako Sekiguchi and their two sons. "We all benefitted from their faith, courage, and sacrifice. What those pioneers did, they did for all of us."

Eighty-six-year-old J. Weldon Beck of Burley, Idaho, who was among the oldest to make the entire trek, summed up everything when he said, "We're letting the world know that Latter-day Saints have a heritage that we're proud of and we want to maintain it." In 1997 the Mormon Trail wagon train shared that pioneer heritage with all the world. □

Jennifer Shumway Ballard serves as Relief Society secretary in the American Fork Sixth Ward, American Fork Utah Central Stake.

Gospel topics: Faith, pioneers, Restoration, sacrifice