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## Guest Essay

# The Mormon Migrations of 1846-68 in Perspective

*Stanley B. Kimball*

### INTRODUCTION

MEMBERS OF OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION (OCTA) are living in the middle of a Great Western Trails Renaissance. Our historic trails are now becoming better known, more fully appreciated, more carefully preserved, and more clearly marked. In 1968, Congress enacted the National Trails System Act and in 1978 added National Historic Trails designations. (There are now nineteen official historic and scenic trails.) Several publishers are devoted almost exclusively to trail publications, and there are important trail associations such as OCTA, the Mormon Trails Association, the Iowa Mormon Trails Association, and the Santa Fe Trail Association. Additionally, there has been a yearly increase in local, county, state, and federal road signing.

As further evidence of the renewal of interest in western trails, for some time now there has been an annual increase in the number of markers, monuments, parks, schools, businesses, museums, exhibits, events, and tourist attractions that pertain to and celebrate our trail heritage.

### THE MORMON MIGRATIONS

The Mormon Trail migrations of 1846-68, for example, are one of the most documented, studied, and written of events in history. The

Mormon Trail is also a very popular subject now and will become increasingly so as we near the centennials of the states of Iowa and Utah in 1996 and the sesquicentennial of the trail itself in 1996 and 1997. Although the Mormon Trail was not blazed by the Mormons and has at times been known as the Council Bluffs Road, the Omaha Road, the Great Platte River Road, the Omaha-Fort Kearny Military Road, or even the North Branch of the Oregon Trail, it is generally, almost universally, known today as the Mormon Trail.

Seldom, if ever, has the Great Mormon Migration been placed properly in perspective. To what extent, for example, were the Mormons unique among westering people? To what extent were the Saints typical?

We know much about why and what happened. But, what does it all mean? How important was the Mormon experience? What is it, in perspective, in relation to the larger whole of Trans-Missouri migrating experience, including the Oregon and California trail experiences?

Up to 70,000 Mormons followed their trail to the New Zion. Their migration was important because it was well organized, successful, led to a major settlement region, accomplished a religious purpose, and made a difference in the economics and politics of nineteenth-century America.

Let us also note that the Mormons were typical emigrants. They shared trails, camp-

grounds, ferries, triumphs, tragedies, and common trail experiences of the day with thousands of other westering Americans. For example, their daily routine, their food, wagons, animals, sicknesses, dangers, difficulties, domestic affairs, trail constitutions, and discipline were typical.

The Saints differed, however, from other westering peoples in a variety of ways—the main one being that they did not go west for gold, furs, land, adventure, health, as missionaries, or for a new identity. They went west for religious freedom and became the only people going west who did not want to go west. The Mormons also had a unique outlook concerning the Native Americans with whom they shared the trail for twenty-two years. Mormon companies, furthermore, often had many non-American members. The Mormon Trail also went east, as well as west, and Mormons usually were more concerned than non-Mormons with trail improvements. They also did not use professional guides, trusting rather to trail savvy picked up en route.

This paper will differ from my usual micro studies of trail minutiae. Instead, I will use a broad brush in attempting to present the larger picture while answering the greatest question in the study and practice of all history—“So what? So what were the Mormons and their trail?”

One easy, effective, and comprehensive way to present a topic as difficult as this one is to recognize the fact the human activities—past, present, and future—may be grouped into four, and four only, pigeonholes. These are namely political, economic, social, and cultural. There are, therefore, only four kinds of historical events, causes, consequences, and experiences.

#### WHAT IS THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OR MEANING OF THE MORMON TRAIL EXPERIENCE?

It is, quite frankly, rather modest. Of least importance were the cultural contributions deriving from the trail experience. William Pitt's

brass band, for example, played in eastern Iowa, there where a few Mormon schoolteachers, and some preaching was done en route.

Many Mormons were fascinated with the usual flora and fauna along the trail, and noted it occasionally in their journals. At times, they even ventured to try and describe some unusual living thing, taking a stab at taxonomy as it were. One described something, perhaps a lizard, as being “four to five inches long, including a long tail, body short and chunky, light gray, two rows of dark spots (brown) on each side, head shaped like a snake, appears perfectly harmless.” Another described a plant as a “thistle, stem four feet long, six inches wide, one quarter inch thick, ornamented by prickles top and bottom, top is kind of a crown formed by prickly leaves ten inches long and five inches broad.” The Mormons, however, made no real contribution to the biological sciences.

Of much more significance were the Mormon emigrant trailside newspapers. The *Frontier Guardian*, founded by Orson Hyde in present Council Bluffs, lasted from 1849 until 1852. It contained important and useful information for Mormon and non-Mormon emigrants. After Hyde left for Utah in 1852, his paper was absorbed by the competing, more or less Mormon, *Weekly Western Bugle*, founded by another Mormon, Almon W. Babbitt. One might argue that in the beginning, at least, the *Deseret News* of Salt Lake City was a trailside, emigrant newspaper.

The trail experience produced a little art—from the scribbles in journals to important works. In 1853, Frederick H. Piercy (1830-1891), an English artist, made some trail drawings. These were later widely published as engravings of scenes along the emigrant route from New Orleans to Salt Lake City. His series is the earliest extant of the Mormon Trail and have been reproduced many times and are well known. Many of his original paintings and drawings are now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1861, George M. Ottinger (1833-1917), a wagon emigrant from Philadelphia, did some

on-site oils that included "Chimney Rock" and "Burial at Wolf Creek." Some time later, the Danish convert C. C. A. Christensen (1831-1912) did his, now famous, *Mormon Panorama* of twenty-three large (6 feet x 10 feet) tempera paintings of the pre-Utah history of Mormonism. These included "Crossing the Mississippi on Ice, Leaving Nauvoo," "Wagons Preparing to Leave Winter Quarters in 1847," "Handcart Pioneers," and "The Pioneer Company." Christensen's work is by far the best of Mormon Trail-related art and is well known and respected. These paintings were published in 1958 in *Art in America*.

Some of the best "journal art" was done by Danish Peter O. Hansen, an adopted son of Heber C. Kimball, in 1846-1847. He sketched Mount Pisgah, Cutler's Park, mountain men, Indians, U. S. soldiers, and Council Bluffs. (I reproduced these in my 1981 biography of H. C. Kimball.) Some of these works of art are currently on exhibit at the Museum of Church History and Art—a museum which should not be missed by OCTA members.

Some trail journals were decorated with fancy end and title pages. Most journal art, however, consisted of quick, rude sketches of places like Chimney Rock and Fort Laramie.

Some few emigrants also tried writing poetry and songs en route. Eliza A. Snow, the famous poetess, priestess, and "presidentess," for example, dashed off a few. Her "Song of Exodus" is typical of the better ones:

The camp, the camp—its numbers swell—  
Shout! Shout! O camp of Israel!  
The king, the Lord of hosts is near,  
His armies guard our front and rear,

William Clayton's stirring and justly famous trail song/hymn "Come, Come Ye Saints" of 1846 surely will remain as one of the glories of Mormon emigrant contributions. The first verse is as follows:

Come, Come Ye Saints  
No toil nor labor fear  
But with joy wend your way.

Though hard to you this journey may appear,  
Grace shall be as your day.  
Tis better far for us to strive  
Our useless cares from us to drive  
Do this, and joy your hearts will swell  
All is well! All is well

Most trail poetry, however, was of the following quality as written by Joseph Curtis, a thirty-year-old pioneer from Pennsylvania who in 1848 was at Indian Creek, Iowa.

The first night we camp't 'twas on the Indian crick  
[creek]  
And my wife that very night was taken sick  
And before the night was over  
The wife gave birth to a daughter.

We can thank James McKnight, going east in 1860 to his mission in Ohio, for noting the "Missionaries Camp Song" of 1862 which had eight verses, one of which gives the general idea.

Come! while the fires around us blaze—  
While heartily our animals graze;  
We'll sing our grateful song of praise.  
As we go on our mission.

chorus:

Hey the mission—to the missions  
Hey the holy mission.  
To tell the world what God has done  
We go upon our mission.

Some verses were humorously set to the tune of "Old Dan Tucker," recorded, if not written, by James Palmer, an English convert en route to Utah in 1850.

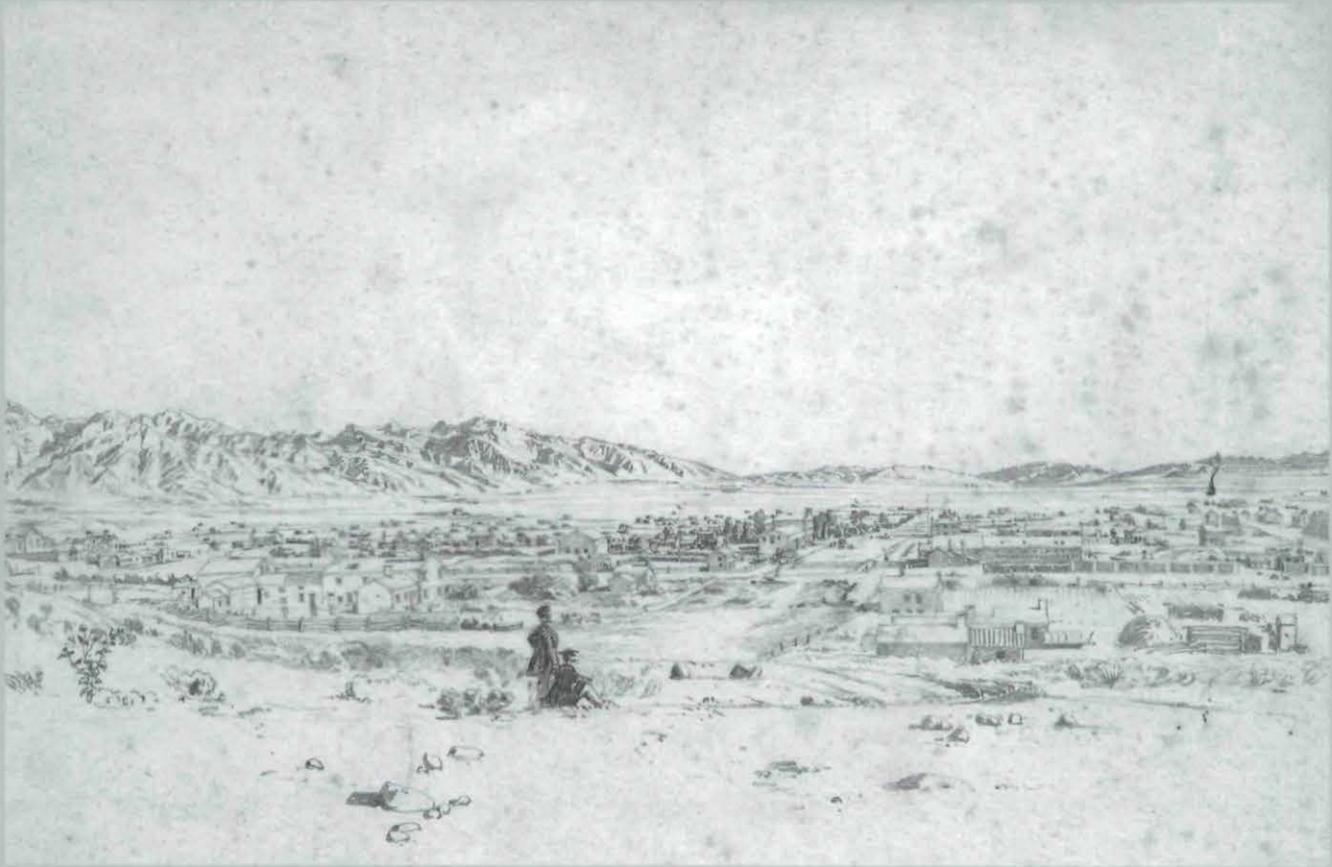
The old states marshal came to town.  
He searched the temple up and down.  
He told the Saints that he had come,  
To serve writ on Brigham Young.  
So, get out of the way you old states marshal  
You can't have the Twelve Apostles.  
For they're on their way to the Rocky Mountains  
Far above Archaen fountains....

Of most importance culturally, however, are



*George M. Ottinger, a wagon emigrant, did some oil on canvas paintings of the Mormon migration. These included "Chimney Rock, August 3, 1861" (above) and "Mormon Immigration Train at Green River, 1861" (below). ("Chimney Rock, August 3, 1861" and "Mormon Immigrant Train at Green River, 1861" by George Ottinger, © The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art, Salt Lake City, Used by permission)*





*Frederick Piercy is well known for his series of drawings that provide a visual account of Mormon experience. This pencil drawing is entitled "View of Great Salt Lake City." (Gift of Maxim Karolik, Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)*

the Mormon Trail accounts, of which over 1,000 are known. Many emigrants seemed to enjoy keeping journals; for others it was obviously a chore, and most kept none. From the existing journals, we learn much of trail life and conditions. Most Mormon journals are pretty bare-boned, full of daily routine—distances, vegetation, and weather. The latter was of critical interest.

Bare-boned and naive though most Mormon accounts are, collectively they form, without doubt, the greatest single corpus of western trail accounts extant and provide an unparalleled documentary source regarding life at that time and place. In the long run, this body of trail accounts may emerge as the greatest, single lasting cultural contribution of the whole westering experience.

While the cultural perspective or meaning of

the Mormon Trail experience is modest, my reading causes me to believe it compared favorably with similar Oregon and California experiences.

#### WHAT IS THE ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE?

Mormon emigrants along the trail contributed much to the economics of migrating, both as producers and consumers. As producers they earned what they could en route, contributing to the local economies by their skills, brute labor, and crafts—making chairs, goggles, and washboards, for example.

The Mormon migrations, especially that of 1846-1847, has been described by an early Mormon historian, B. H. Roberts, as the "march of an Industrial Column." The poor Mormons were rich in labor power, and along the trail

were successful in securing contracts for husking corn, splitting rails and fencing fields, for grading stretches of roads, constructing bridges over troublesome streams, removing fallen dirt from coal beds, digging wells, building houses, clearing farms, and whatever offered itself as honorable employment to earn money and supplies.

In 1856, "Gentiles" (non-Mormons) in Iowa City offered skilled handcart Mormons good wages if they would stay and work. Few did. There were many European-skilled artisans in Mormon companies—missionaries deliberately sought them out in Europe to build up the physical Zion in the American West.

Mormons provided vital trailside services such as ferrying and blacksmithing, cutting down stream banks, and building bridges. They also furnished supplies and services to other westering peoples after they reached Utah.

Mormon emigrants also established several communities along the trail such as Garden Grove and Mount Pisgah in Iowa and Florence (now North Omaha) and Genoa in Nebraska.

Mormon emigrants along the trail also provided labor on the Union Pacific Railroad and the overland telegraph. Too, Mormons ferreted out many of the natural secrets of the Inter-Mountain West.

As consumers, they chartered immigrant ships in Liverpool, used boats and trains east of the Missouri River, and outfitted themselves with wagons, draft animals, supplies, and services at Missouri River jumping-off places. It took a lot of money to send up to 70,000 people west. Especially when, per capita, Mormons may have spent more at outfitting centers because European Mormon converts had to buy all their supplies and equipment. Most other westering peoples utilized their own wagons, draft animals, and provided many of their own supplies.

This reality of the Mormon migration is, of course, why the Mormons had agents in Europe, New Orleans, St. Louis, and on the Missouri River; agents helped cut the cost by bulk purchases. It is also why the Mormons devel-

oped that unique trail economic practice called the Perpetual Emigration Fund, a fund that advanced money to European converts who were expected to pay it back after they reached Zion. (Some actually did; but by 1877, \$1 million was owed the fund. Most of this was written off, in Old Testament style, during the Jubilee Year of 1880.)

While Mormon emigrants contributed much to the economics of the communities in the western outfitting industry such as Independence, Westport, St. Joseph, Council Bluffs, and Omaha, cities as far away from the trail as St. Louis and Chicago also garnered Mormon dollars. (The Espenschied Wagon Factory in St. Louis, for example, was one beneficiary.) Over the years, Mormon agents bought hundreds of wagons, thousands of cattle, and tons of emigrant supplies in St. Louis.

As consumers, the Mormon emigrants appear to have been typical in that they needed what everyone else needed. As producers and trail improvers, however, the Mormons differed from most other westering Americans especially in doing many kinds of work to earn money and providing trailside services.

#### THE SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE AS A MANY SPLENDORED THING

From the social perspective, the Mormon Trail experience was especially significant in the creation of group solidarity—no small task when many, if not most, Mormon companies consisted of a great mix of peoples, genders, ages, backgrounds, countries of origin, and physical conditions. My reading of the sources causes me to believe that Mormon companies were much less homogeneous than typical Oregon or California companies.

It is true that much social cohesion had developed among Mormons in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois in pre-trail years, but the trail experience reenforced this sense of community. Furthermore, for the many thousands of European Mormons, who had missed this earlier socializing, the trail welded the new converts together

and reenforced their natural group solidarity and helped homogenize the great mix of people. It was sort of a basic training experience before arriving in Utah where new convert immigrants were expected to quickly assimilate into communities and congregations.

As Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton have noted in *The Mormon Experience*, "The trek west added migration to the processes of conversion, gathering, and persecution in the Mormon panoply of formative experience. It was a refiner's fire from which emerged tougher saints."

While the trail experience homogenized Mormons religiously and socially, it certainly did not do away with cultural differences, native tongue newspapers and congregations, and folk customs. By 1860 the Inter-Mountain West contained immigrants from England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, the Jersey Islands, France, Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Holland, India, South Africa, and various Italian and German states.

Since some of these European converts decided, for various reasons, to drop out and not go beyond the wide Missouri, they also contributed to the early cultural development of western Iowa and eastern Nebraska.

Additionally, the Mormon Trail experience introduced three radical social ideas to the trail and early Utah life—polygamy, equality of Indians, and the Mark of Cain.

Polygamy reached the Inter-Mountain West via the Mormon Trail. According to a study by George Smith in *Dialogue* (Spring 1994), there were at least 153 polygamous families in Nauvoo at the beginning of the exodus in 1846; this comprised nearly 1,500 people. If we add to this figure the number of plural marriages through 1848, when Winter Quarters were pretty much abandoned, we have something like 1,600 individuals. Since most of these husbands, wives, and children went west, polygamy was, indeed, an important and unique dimension of the Mormon migrations. This is true only through 1848, after which almost all members of polygamous families

were in Utah, not on the trail. (This one topic deserves a paper by itself.)

The Mormon introduction of this exotic alternate lifestyle into the act of emigrating to and settling in the Far West socially differentiated them from other westering Americans, and it brought great opprobrium and stress into the Mormon experience for decades.

The Mormon understanding of and positive attitude towards Indians was another unique aspect of their migration. It was a social situation differing from that on other western trails. Mormons considered Indians as descendants of Book of Mormon peoples under a curse, and the Mormons were to foster and turn the Indians into a "white (or pure) and delightful people." Therefore, Mormons consistently tried to be fair in their dealings with Native Americans on and along the trail—a fact noted and appreciated by the Indian.

Thirdly, the Mormons held a unique, or at least unusual, understanding and attitude towards the blacks with whom they shared the trail. Slavery and the Curse of Cain entered New Zion via the trail and existed and was condoned in early Utah. Seldom did southern convert emigrants feel the necessity of manumission just because they became Mormons. Thus, Mormon emigrants contributed to the growth of white supremacy in the Far West.

Admittedly, there were few slaves in Utah, only twenty-six according to the 1850 census. Actual servitude was not the real issue. The real issue was the Mormon doctrine that blackness was a curse, branding all under that curse as second or third-class citizens, if citizens at all. The curse was not lifted until 1978—that is 1978, not 1878. It is important to note, however, that the Territory of Utah, under the doctrine of Popular Sovereignty, could have become a slave territory any time between 1850 and the Civil War. Obviously, the Mormons never considered that unholy option.

## POLITICAL

The Mormon Trail experience, however, was

most meaningful and powerful in the area of politics. Mormons were part of the great Trans-Missouri westward movement and their trail *cum* road greatly facilitated the political development and evolution of the whole Trans-Mississippi West.

Mormon emigrants through their trail improvements and explorations also played a small role in the "Great Reconnaissance" of the West. In 1848, William Clayton, for example, produced an *Emigrants' Guide* that was so good, it was pirated.

They planted hundreds of colonies (358 under Brigham Young alone) in present Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, California, Colorado, and Arizona. These areas still exist with a Mormon stamp.

When the Mormons arrived in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake in July 1847, they were in Mexico. By the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago of February 1848 which ended the war with Mexico, they were back in the United States.

One year later, in February 1849, the impatient Mormons organized the sprawling provisional State of Deseret and applied for statehood; this act was not recognized by Congress. Nineteen months later, in September 1850, the greatly reduced Mormon empire was organized by Congress as the Territory of Utah through the Compromise of 1850. (This created the free state of California and the territories of Utah and New Mexico out of land acquired from Mexico.)

This Compromise of 1850 was an extension of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny—a doctrine of expansion and a belief that Anglo-Europeans were to rule from "sea to shining sea." Without the Mormon emigrants in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, at the crossroads of the West, Manifest Destiny would have proceeded, but at a much slower rate.

Back to polygamy. This doctrine and practice was both a political as well as social aspect of the whole trail experience. On the one hand, emigrants introduced an unusual marriage system and social custom into the Far West. On the other hand, polygamy greatly retarded the

political evolution of the Mormons. One could argue that polygamy was more important, or detrimental, politically than socially. Largely because of polygamy, "the twin relic of barbarism," Utah was denied statehood until 1896. How Utah senators and representatives might have benefited their state and have voted on key issues in Congress between 1850 and 1896 would make an interesting parlor game. As it was, all the Utah Territory and the Mormons had in Congress for forty-six years was one non-voting representative.

### CONCLUSIONS

To place the Mormons (and the Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail) in historical perspective is difficult for they were both unique and quintessentially American. In many ways, they were just like their contemporaries; in other ways different. My answer to "So what the Mormons and their trail?" is that it was more important than heretofore realized and that the Mormons and their trail made important contributions to the development of the Trans-Mississippi/Missouri West in all aspects of life—culturally, economically, socially, and politically.

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