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The Prophet in England

No Small Miracle

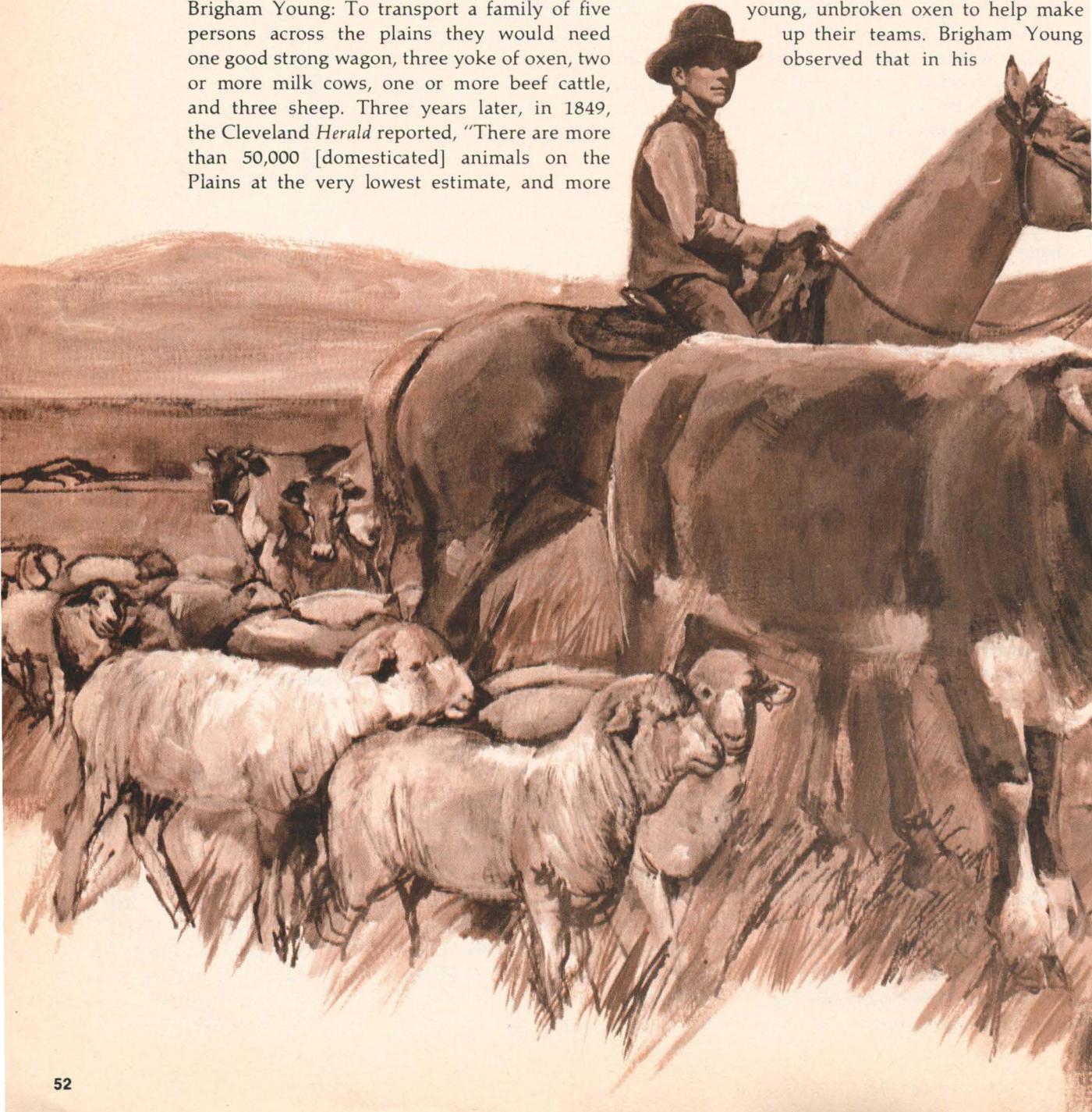
By Audrey M. Godfrey

Before the Saints left Nauvoo, they received this instruction from President Brigham Young: To transport a family of five persons across the plains they would need one good strong wagon, three yoke of oxen, two or more milk cows, one or more beef cattle, and three sheep. Three years later, in 1849, the *Cleveland Herald* reported, "There are more than 50,000 [domesticated] animals on the Plains at the very lowest estimate, and more

than nine tenths are traveling along the same track."

What is it like to move this army of animals across half a continent? What do you feed them? How do you drive them? And what about wild animals along the way? A look at the subject reveals not a small miracle, but an undertaking of staggering proportions.

The first difficulty for the Saints was to acquire the needed livestock to start the journey. Joseph Fielding, an early pioneer and great-uncle of President Joseph Fielding Smith, reported that his family had to use cows and young, unbroken oxen to help make up their teams. Brigham Young observed that in his



camp of nearly four hundred wagons there were less than half of the teams necessary to make the trip.

As the Saints crossed the Mississippi, an early tragedy foreshadowed many more to come. The oxen were unused to being on the water, and when a rude man spit "ambear" into the eyes of one of the oxen, immediately the ox plunged into the river, dragging the ox yoked to him also. The second ox kicked off one of the bottom planks of the boat, causing the water to flow in. As it approached the shore, the boat sank. There were no human victims, but the two oxen were drowned.

Much of the road to Winter Quarters was through woods and thick underbrush. It was difficult to keep the sheep in sight, and they began to diminish in number. Many times the travelers would have to stop a few days to round up their herds, and not a few animals were permanently lost.

There were other problems, too. The hills were steep, and cattle, weakened from lack of corn and hay, were strained to the limit of their strength to pull the loaded wagons up the inclines. It was necessary to double teams, and even then the animals, in repeated ascents to get all the wagons over, almost fainted and would stop on the steepest places and pant as if taking their last breath. By the time they had achieved the goal, the cattle would be exhausted and the drivers would unyoke them and turn them out to graze. Although many times milk cows had to be used to help draw the load, they would still be called upon at night to furnish milk for the family, which was understandably but a pittance.

Numerous tributes have been given concerning the heroic part the oxen played in the trek

Sister Godfrey, a free-lance writer, is the mother of four children and activity counselor in the YWMA of the Uintah Ward, Weber Heights Stake, in Ogden, Utah.



No Small Miracle CONTINUED

westward. Consider this moving excerpt from a pioneer girl's history.

"How I do enjoy traveling. I like to stand with my hands on the front of the wagon box and watch the big, clumsy feet of the oxen as they plod on, the front and hind feet treading in the same tracks every time. Then when we camp I can wonder at their wide horns and look into their kind eyes, and wonder if it was God who made them so strong and gentle, and taught them whoa and gee, so they would take us safely through the rivers and woods and over the mountains." (Cluff Family Journal, p. 23.)

As a boy, Joseph F. Smith walked beside the wagon on long, thirst-provoking drives through sandy, rough roads. His team consisted of two yoke of oxen. The leaders, Thom and Joe, had been raised from calves. The wheel team were called Broad and Berry. In describing in his diary how he felt about these fine animals, President Smith later recalled the many times when his oxen were lowing with heat and fatigue and he would "put my arms around Thom's neck, and cry bitter tears. That was all I could do. Thom was my favorite and the best and most willing and obedient servant and friend. He was choice!"

Upon arrival at Winter Quarters, each group was advised to send its horses to an island about eight miles from camp. The oxen and cows were sent to feed on rushes about twenty miles away, and the sheep were collected into a general flock numbering around fourteen hundred. When the grass on the prairie was gone, the sheep were fed hay and a little corn. This could not sustain them, so they were sent back to their masters. Many sheep died as some families lost more than half their flocks.

As the settlement became crowded with more and more livestock, rules had to be made to regulate their care. Brigham Young called the camp together and addressed them in regard to organizing a guard and retaining order in the camp. He made regulations concerning the bringing of corn and hay to a central place and having pens built to accommodate these supplies. Captains of one hundred, fifty, and ten were called together and instructed to make a report of everything in camp—persons, horses, cattle, etc.—so that the provisions and grain might be distributed fairly. The report was to be received before any corn would be given out,

which resulted in greater order and less waste, as a man was allowed only enough to feed his stock.

In June 1847 an order was passed to keep all cattle and horses out of the cornfield at Winter Quarters. If any were found therein, the owner was to pay one dollar per head for cattle and twenty-five dollars for sheep. A stray pen was constructed here and at each camp along the trail, to hold stock that was found wandering. Fines were imposed upon the owners of the derelict animals. Hosea Stout, captain of the guard, indicates that not only cattle and horses were found wandering, but dogs and sheep also often ran at large, especially at night.

From time to time while the Saints were at Winter Quarters, it was necessary to have a cattle hunt to round up strays from the "big herd." Since this herd was scattered over several miles, it became customary for all who wanted any of their cattle to go on Saturdays to drive all that could be found so that every man could look out for his cattle more easily. (Individually a man might not find his animals in a week.) One such hunt was divided into two groups, one going west and the other east. The men were to walk until, at the sound of a bugle, all were to shout and then march abreast, driving cattle, horses, and sheep before them into the camp.

During the winter and spring of 1846-47 at Cutler's Park, Omaha Indians began to steal livestock from the Saints, using any method they could. To combat the thievery, it was decided the bishop of each ward would form the cattle in his jurisdiction into a herd and appoint a captain and guard armed with guns to defend the cattle. One individual helped take care of a herd of about four thousand for a month, camping with them and watching both day and night.

As the various companies began to make preparations to leave Winter Quarters, they again found difficulty in getting teams for the last phase of the journey. Once more cows and unbroken oxen were employed, slowing the travel down as the animals were broken in.

The cattle improved in their condition until they crossed the Platte River. Here at the various crossings hardships for man and beast were renewed. Joseph Fielding's group crossed at the Loup Fork, where Brigham Young's company met them. John D. Lee wrote in his diary:

"It was an interesting sight to behold in the morning a string of oxen, reaching from one side of the river to the other, about a mile, from Brigham's company coming to assist us in crossing, for the wagons sunk into the sand, and it was hard drawing for the cattle, so we put our cattle to our wagons and put an extra team to each and got through well."

Getting the cattle across the river was the job of young herd boys, who stood with naked feet on the oxen's backs, goading them across. It must have been exciting to watch the agility with which the boys jumped from back to back, yelling and poking to encourage the herd. John R. Young reports that early in the morning a boatload of cattle would be taken across and held on the opposite shore of the river. Then the herd, sometimes numbering a thousand, would be driven upstream some distance and forced into the water. It was at this point that the boys would climb onto the backs of the oxen, at times slapping them on the sides of the faces to guide them into the current. Soon a string of animals stretched from one bank to the other. It was a lively and exciting time, one that called for courage and physical endurance.

This endurance was important as the journey progressed. A boy who was assigned to herd sheep would start his flock about four-thirty in the morning and by noon the wagons would catch up to him. Then he would again start early from the noon camp in order to keep up with the wagons.

Each night the wagons and carriages were placed side by side with their tongues to the outside of a hollow square, and a fore-wheel was locked to the hind wheel of the next wagon. The animals were corraled inside. Open spaces were left on two sides and were guarded to keep the cattle enclosed. Sometimes when the camp was near a river or lake, the formation was a half-moon shape from two points near the water, the bank forming sufficient protection on the water's edge.

Now came buffalo country. Huge herds were sighted, sometimes taking a full day to cross the trail. Their largeness and wildness incited the drooping cattle to stampede. At times a whole train of one hundred wagons would be "running pell mell over the country. With great difficulty and much energy and tact teamsters succeeded in quieting their crazy

teams." (Cluff Family Journal, pp. 53-54.)

As they neared the mountains, the way became exceedingly difficult. First came mountains of sand, in places so deep that in hot, dry weather it was hard for the oxen to labor through. Much of the road was covered with saltpeter or "salaratus," which was very injurious to horses and cattle. The water was almost entirely alkali. Many fine animals died and their remains marked the road. The Saints were glad to reach the Sweetwater Valley, which abounded in the best of grass.

"A whole train of wagons would be running pell mell over the country"

The winding streams and creeks were sometimes crossed several times. But finally the valley was reached. On their last night out, John D. Lee's family, reminiscing about their journey, gave thanks. They had been 125 days on the road and had traveled 1031 miles, averaging a little less than eight miles per day. Lee's diary included the following summary:

"Four . . . oxen had died and one hive of bees had melted down, but . . . two horses were in fair condition, the nine chickens and the dog still alive. They had no sheep, but their herd of cows and loose cattle had made the journey."

Arrival in the valley did not mean the end of dependence upon the animals. During the first rain of the fall, mice almost overran the houses and a cat was a luxury that was passed from house to house. Horses and oxen continued to pull loads of wood and rock and to till the fields. Due to the scarcity of wool, dogs were shorn annually and their hair woven into cloth and used for clothing.

It would be hard to estimate the actual number of animals involved in this great migration. One hesitates even to attempt such a task. But it is certainly easy to envision the importance of each of these animals involved. There could have been no journey without them. They formed the basis of farm power, dairy herds, and industry, the means that made the Great Basin thrive and yield to the men who settled it. ■