

The PISCATORIAL Adventures of Utah's Pioneers

by D. Robert Carter

KNIGHTS OF THE ROD AND REEL

A colorful but seldom-told tale originating from the Mormon trek west is the saga of pioneer fishing in the streams along the trail. Since water was a commodity essential to successful western migration, the Mormon Trail either paralleled rivers and streams or stayed in close proximity to them and other water sources all the way to the Great Basin. Usually, where there are streams there are fish, and where there are fish there are bound to be fishermen. Mormon groups moving westward were no exception to this rule of thumb; they too had their fair share of the Knights of the Rod and Reel.

Recreation offered one reason for fishing. The trek west gave men more opportunity for fishing than many of them formerly had in their everyday lives. Perhaps it will surprise some to find that a common day used for fishing was Sunday. The most convenient days to fish were the layover days when companies stopped to rest, refresh the animals, take care of miscellaneous camp chores, and make repairs to their wagons. Sunday was a common layover day, which made it a popular day to fish because on the Sabbath many men had more leisure time.

Leaders like Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Wilford Woodruff made speeches counseling against hunting and fishing on Sunday. At the beginning of the vanguard company's trek on Sunday, April 11, 1847, Heber C. Kimball made such a plea. He told the group that those who hunted and fished on Sunday would not prosper. Ironically, on that date Kimball's journal records that "after I arrived in Camp, one of my hunters, John S. Higbee, having killed a crane, a Racoon and caught a number of fish, he presented me with a very nice one, which made us an excellent supper."¹

The next Sunday was a layover and Higbee fished again, noting in his journal: "lay by for Sunday caught with my net about 100 fish."² Brother Higbee must have been out fishing the previous week when Kimball made his plea not to fish on Sunday.

Weeks later on a warm Sunday in July while camped on Weber River, Heber C. Kimball again preached a similar sermon, the gist of which was recorded in Horace Kimball



Weber River, 1870. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

Whitney's journal: "It was his mind that the brethren should stay in camp & not go out hunting fishing, &c. but lift up our hearts to God in behalf of the President, & other of the sick & afflicted, that we may be speedily enabled to pursue our journey." At the end of the same entry Whitney wrote, "I walked down to the river this afternoon, where after fishing a few minutes I caught a very fine trout, weighing a pound or more." Whitney shared some very elite company. On that same date Wilford Woodruff wrote in his journal, "Several Brethren caught some trout that would weigh near two lbs. each. I caught 2." This behavior seems typical of the company's entire journey. Such was the lure of the stream.³

The other main reason the pioneers fished was for food. From the outset the Mormon leaders planned for their future wagon companies to use fish as well as wild plants and animals to supplement their food supply while on the trail. The more fish, game, and wild plants they ate, the more provisions they saved for future use on the trail or after their arrival in the valley.

Church leaders printed in the Oct. 29, 1845 edition of the *Nauvoo Neighbor* a list of items considered necessary for a successful journey across the plains. This Bill of Particulars included one seine (a large fishnet) for each company and four or five fish hooks and lines per wagon. There is ample evidence that the leaders' recommendations were put into effect during the westward migration, and fish added zest to a rather dull trail diet.

Even before the first wagon company headed west, members of the Mormon Battalion became the earliest of the pioneer fisherman. Battalion members fished where streams were available on their journey through the Southwest. In fact, on the evening before the famous "Battle of the Bulls" in southern Arizona, Azariah Smith went fishing in the San Pedro River. He caught what he called "two fine Salmon," which were likely what we would call cutthroat trout. Smith also fished in the ocean after arriving in California.⁴

In 1848 on their return from California to Utah through the Mormon/Carson Pass, some Battalion men fished with

considerable success in the streams of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The boys also successfully fished the Humboldt River, Goose Creek, Cassia Creek, and other small streams that enlivened the rather drab desert terrain of the Great Basin. Addison Pratt, who had recently returned from a Hawaiian mission, traveled to Salt Lake Valley with members of the Battalion in the Samuel Thompson Company. Pratt cherished memories of Goose Creek and later wrote, "Here we found the greatest abundance of trout of any stream I ever saw. The largest weighing about one pound and a half." The company camped one evening on a dry stream bed not far from Cassia Creek. It was here that Pratt earned the reputation of being an expert fisherman. He had a hunch that in the wet seasons this stream bed had water in it, and in his words, "I concluded there must be trout in it higher up where there was a running stream. After our camping affairs were arranged, I took my rifle, and steered off towards the head of the stream and soon obtained a goodly string and returned to camp with my fish, to the astonishment of all hands, and they gave it as a general opinion, that I could catch a mess of trout, if I could only find rainwater standing in a cow track."⁵ Chubs were also found to be plentiful in streams such as the Humboldt and Malad rivers.

The overwhelmingly male pioneer company of 1847 probably contained more avid fishermen than any other Mormon company. Many of its members were outdoorsmen, and traveling with the group was avid fly fisherman Wilford Woodruff and at least three men who had been professional fishermen, John and Isaac Higbee and William S. Wadsworth. The fishing activities of this company are well-documented. Manuscripts show that they fished frequently and seemed to enjoy it tremendously.

Emigrants fished mostly by using hook and line, and commonly used crickets, grasshoppers, other insects, and meat for bait. A few of the brethren landed some trophy catfish on the Elkhorn and Platte rivers. Mosiah Lyman Hancock came west with Brigham Young in 1848. While fishing on the Elkhorn, he caught a 36-pound catfish. John Pulsipher had to help him pull it out of the water. Fourteen years later Henry Stokes told of seeing a boy catch an 18-pound catfish. Stokes wrote that the boy "could not pull it out of the water. One of the men got a gun and shot it for the boy." The grand champion of them all must have been a catfish brought into the camp of Daniel McArthur's Church Team Company in 1863. It was caught in the Platte and weighed either 70 or 80 pounds depending on story-teller.⁶

Members of Brigham Young's vanguard company found good luck in a small lake near Loup Fork. Soon after they arrived at their evening camping spot, Porter Rockwell discovered a little lake nearby full of sunfish and told William Clayton. Clayton described what happened next: "I took a couple of hooks and lines,

handed some to him; and went to fishing myself with others and we had some fine sport. I caught a nice mess which Brother Egan cooked for supper, and although they were small they made a good dish. Many of the brethren caught a good mess each."⁷ Howard Egan, the cook for Clayton's mess, said the fish tasted "first rate." What else could a chef say about his own cooking?

Wyoming's Deer Creek also provided good fishing. After camp was pitched, William Clayton went to the creek and fished until a little after dark. He caught 24 half-pounders. A week later he fished a small stream near present day Casper, Wyoming. Clayton must have had a smile on his face when he wrote in his journal, "I caught 65 very nice ones which would average half a pound weight each. About six o'clock I started back but found I had got more than I could carry to camp. However, when I got about half way, Brother Cloward met me and helped to carry them. We arrived at camp about sun down pretty well tired."⁸

Some of the companies took seines along. The original pioneer company not only had a seine, but they took their own boat called the Revenue Cutter. They had varied success fishing with their boat and large net. Near the beginning of their journey, John S. Higbee and several others took the boat to a small lake near the Platte and tried their luck. They drew their net three times and their total catch consisted of "a Large snapping Turtle, 4 small Turtles, a small duck, 2 small cat fish, and 2 creek suckers." Choosing not to be discouraged, the next day they fished another small lake and Wilford Woodruff described their catch as "213 fish Buffalo [a strange looking type of sucker with a humped back, hence buffalo] & Carp which was divided in the camp. A Buffalo would weigh 10 lbs & carp 2 lbs & had a good supper."⁹ Some of them had carp and suckers again for breakfast the next morning. Obviously, their fish tastes differed from ours today.

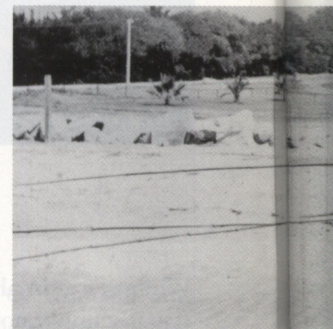
The vanguard company later used their boat and seine on the Laramie Fork. Reports of their success differ. John Higbee wrote that he caught about 50 fish. William Clayton described a catch of 60 or 70 small fish, and Heber C. Kimball's Journal claims they caught 60 or 70 very large fish.¹⁰ Fishermen haven't changed much through the years.

Other companies also used nets. James Smithies headed west later in the year 1847. His company stopped on the Elkhorn River and drew their net. According to Smithies, "Several wagon loads of Boffalo-fishes was caught in the river. we had some for supper last night."

Brigham Young's 1848 Company also fished successfully with a net in a small lake near the Elkhorn and not quite so successfully in the Green River in Wyoming where they brought in only a few trout. Sarah Moriah M. Cannon told of the Hoffheins & McCune Company using a net on the Sweetwater River just east of Rocky Ridge in 1857. In an hour and

"We found the greatest abundance of trout of any stream I ever saw. The largest weighing about one pound and a half."

Addison Pratt



**"I took a couple
of hooks and
lines, handed
some to him;
and went to fish-
ing myself with
others and we
had some fine
sport.**

William Clayton

a half the fishermen caught what she called, "fish sufficient for three hearty meals for the entire camp." They even salted some of the fish for future use.¹¹

At Greasewood Creek (now called Horse Creek) members of Brigham Young's 1848 company used neckerchiefs and aprons instead of their seine to net fish and caught a great quantity. Other companies carried no nets and had to improvise. In 1848 members of the Zerah Pulsipher Company used a sheet for a net as they fished the Sweetwater River. Daniel Wood described how the two bottom corners of the sheet were held underwater while the two upper corners were held above the surface of the stream. Two or three men would then enter the water some distance upstream and drive the fish toward the makeshift net. When the fish swam into the trap the lower and upper corners of the sheet were closed together and the fish were taken from the water. Men in the Thomas E. Ricks Church Team took off one of the new wagon covers and used it for a seine near Ft. Laramie. Lorenzo Hadley wrote that "they must have taken out one ton of fish with just one drag." The Charles A. Harper Company of 1855 used a tent to catch a great number of fish in the Sweetwater.¹²

In 1863 some of the down-and-back wagon trains also used unconventional methods to fish the drought-stricken Platte River. Water was found only in the deepest holes of the river bed. G.G.R. Sangiovanni wrote that in these holes "there were fish by the thousands—catfish, pike, chubs, suckers, and principally improvised tackle was used to catch them. They made spears from butcher knives, forks or bits of iron. Many times they would wade in and catch them with hands." James Mills Paxton, an English emigrant, was one of those fishing with a knife secured to a pole when his attention was "attracted by a pretty little striped cat running along the bank. Being an expert with a knife on the end of a pole I gave him a poke

and was very much alarmed to see everybody holding their nose or turning them Heavenwards. But it was considered a brave act for which they presented me with a Suit of clothes."¹³

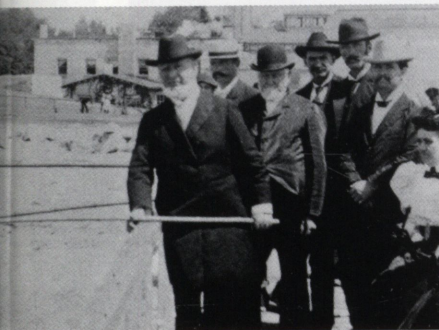
Wilford Woodruff was very possibly the first man to try an artificial fly on the trout streams of the West. Woodruff fished prior to reaching the trout streams, which had their sources west of the Continental Divide, but it wasn't until a layover at Ft. Bridger that he finally had enough time to break out his Liverpool trout rod and fix his reel, line and artificial fly. He caught 12 that day and he claimed that "all the rest of the camp did not ketch during the day 3 lbs of trout in all which was proof positive to me that the Artificial fly is by far the best thing now known to fish trout with."¹⁴ Many of today's devotees of Isaac Walton would heartily agree.

Woodruff fished most of the trout streams along the trail from Ft. Bridger into Salt Lake Valley. He worked the Bear River with what he referred to as "all sorts of luck good bad and indifferant." His journal entry for July 12, 1847, demonstrates his excitement: "I some of the time would fish half an hour & Could not start a fish. Then I would find an eddy with 3 or 4 trout in it & they would jump at the hooks as though there was A bushel of trout in the hole. And in one instance I caught two at a time. I fished some of the time on horsback riding in the middle of the stream... And I knew not at what moment I would have A griselly bear upon my back or An Indian Arrow in my side for I was in danger of both. Some of the time I would have A dozen bites at my hook in one & nearly drown 3 or 4 trout & not get one."

If Woodruff were alive today, he would still be flipping that fly.

Fishing along the trail provided recreation and palatable food for a significant number of emigrants. Many of them likely would have agreed with the phrase G.G.R. Sangiovanni used to describe the bonanza of fish the hungry people of the McArthur Church Team found in the unseasonably dry Platte River in 1863: "It was 'manna' for the Saints." ▼

1. Horace Kimball Whitney, Journal, 11 April 1847, Typescript, LDS Church Archives; Heber C. Kimball, Journal, 11 April 1847, Typescript, LDS Church Archives. 2. John S. Higbee, Reminiscences and Diary, 18 April 1847, Holograph, LDS Church Archives. 3. Whitney, 18 July 1848; Scott G. Kenney ed., Wilford Woodruff's Journal 1833-1898 Typescript, Vol. 3 (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), p. 231. 4. David L. Bigler Ed., The Gold Discovery Journal of Azariah Smith (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), pp. 55 & 82. 5. S. George Ellsworth Ed., The Journals of Addison Pratt (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), pp. 353 & 355. 6. Mosiah Lyman Hancock, "The Life of Mosiah Lyman Hancock," p. 25, Typescript, LDS Church Library; Kate B. Carter, Our Pioneer Heritage, Vol. 6, "Henry Stokes Journal," (Salt Lake City, DUP, 1963), p. 56; G.G.R. Sangiovanni, "Overland Trips Across the American Desert," Young Woman's Journal 23:8, (Salt Lake City, 1912), p. 427; Elijah Larkin, Diary, 14 August 1863, Typescript, LDS Church Archives. 7. William Clayton, William Clayton's Journal (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1921), p. 102. 8. Ibid., pp. 241-42. 9. Kimball, 19 April 1847; Woodruff, p. 153. 10. John S. Higbee, Reminiscences and Diaries, 2 June 1847, Holograph, LDS Church Archives; Clayton, p. 211; Kimball, 2 June 1847. 11. James Smithies, Diary, 18 June 1847, Typescript, LDS Church Archives; Thomas Bullock, Thomas Bullock Camp Journal, Journal History of the Church, 23 July 1848, LDS Church Library; Lorenzo Brown, Reminiscences and Diaries, 30 May 1848, Typescript, LDS Church Archives; John Pulsipher, A Short Sketch of the Life and Labors of John Pulsipher, p. 41, Typescript, LDS Church Archives; Sarah Moriah M. Cannon, Diary, 29 September 1857, Typescript, Utah State Historical Society. 12. Bullock, 10 August 1848; Daniel Wood, Autobiography and Journal, pp 43-44, Holograph, LDS Church Archives; Lorenzo Hadley, Interview, "Utah Pioneer Biographies," Vol. 12, pp. 14-15, LDS Church Family History Library; Thomas Evans Jeremy, Journal, 30 September 1855, Holograph, LDS Church Archives. 13. Sangiovanni, p. 427; James Mills Paxton, Autobiography, p. 6, Holograph, Harold B. Lee Library Special Collections. 14. Woodruff, 8 July 1847.



**"I fished some of
the time on
horsback riding
in the middle of
the stream..."**

Wilford Woodruff