

“The worst that I had yet witnessed”

Mormon diarists cross Iowa in 1846

by Loren N. Horton

“As we journeyed onward mothers gave birth to offspring under almost every variety of circumstances imaginable, except those to which they had been accustomed—some in tents, other in wagons, in rainstorms, in snow storms. I heard of one birth which occurred under the rude shelter of a hut, the sides of which were formed of blankets fastened to poles stuck in the ground, with a bark roof through which the rain was dripping—kind sisters stood holding dishes to catch the water as it fell, thus protecting the newcomer and its mother from a shower bath as the little innocent first entered on the stage of human life.”

Eliza Snow, who wrote this reminiscence, was among the nearly 20,000 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who abandoned their homes in Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1846, following the murder of their prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. in 1844 and subsequent mob violence and persecution. Leaving property and possessions behind, and huddling under insufficient shelter without enough to eat or wear, the Mormons migrated westward across southern Iowa.

A brilliant organizer, Mormon leader Brigham Young had divided the migrants into companies of hundreds, fifties, and tens, the number indicating adult males

in each company. He knew that the first companies must establish permanent camps or way stations for the thousands of Mormons who would later follow. It was mandatory that the Saints cross Iowa and move into the unsettled areas in the mountains west of the Great Plains. There, so they thought, they would be safe from persecution by hostile and jealous neighbors. Young expected to move west, but by what route and at what speed, no one knew.

The difficulties encountered tested the Mormons' resilience and adaptability, particularly that of the first groups in 1846. When crossing uninhabited territory, they had to seek out their own route and create their own trails and bridges over icy cold streams. When moving through inhabited areas, they sometimes encountered hostility from non-Mormon settlers.

Most Mormon migrants agreed that the months spent crossing Iowa were among the worst of the entire experience. Not only did they face an unknown and sometimes hostile environment, they also faced frigid temperatures, snow, rain, and clay mud that clogged the wheels. Traveling at the worst time of the year, the Mormons were crossing the Southern Iowa Drift Plain, characterized by a multitude of hills and valleys, rivers and creeks

and gullies, and much timber and brush. The trail was at right angles to the waterways, meaning frequent bridge-building and fording, and delays from spring flooding.

Their way stations and temporary camps served as oases for the migrants. They also served as burial grounds for the unknown numbers who died crossing Iowa. “Worse than destitution stared us in the face,” Zina D. Young recalled in her reminiscences. “Sickness came upon us, and death invaded our camp. Sickness was so prevalent and deaths so frequent that enough help could not be had to make coffins, and many of the dead were wrapped in their grave clothes and buried with split logs at the bottom of the grave and brush at the sides, that being all that could be done for them by their mourning friends.”

An amazing variety of Mormon diaries, journals, letters, and reminiscences vividly describe being dislocated from one's home. Mormon John Steele, for instance, wrote in his diary about departing Nauvoo: “I got up and left all my furniture standing as we were wont to use it. The clock hung on the mantel piece, and every thing as though we were just gone out on a visit, only the beds were gone but not the bedsteads. I wanted a hammer for something after I started and returned to the house and found three of our enemies quarreling who should have the clock. I opened my toolchest, took out my hammer, closed the lid and sat down upon it, and heard them awhile, then started on my journey.”

The Mormon accounts also describe traveling across unknown territory and difficult terrain. The sampling that follows of Mormon diary entries from 1846

paints a vivid picture of southern Iowa 150 years ago.

"It snows hard, the wind blows, no tent yet. Mr. Sessions sent \$1.00 yesterday for cloth to make the ends of our tent. It has come, but no twine to sew it with." *Patty Bartlett Sessions, February 19*

"The cold has been severe the past night; a snow storm this morning, which continued during the forenoon, blowing from the northwest. . . . Seven p.m., thermometer 12 degrees below zero, Fahrenheit. Mississippi River is frozen over above Montrose." *Brigham Young, February 24*

"On the first day of March, the ground covered with snow, we broke encampment about noon, and soon nearly four hundred wagons were moving to—we knew not where." *Lorenzo Snow, March 1*

"Mother is still failing. She says that she has been thinking that father wants her to come to him, and she thought it would be better to go now and be buried beside him than to go into

"A wet month generally," recorded non-Mormon Jonathan F. Stratton in his diary in 1846, "the streams is higher than they have been since I have been in the country." From his home in southeastern Iowa, Stratton observed that "the Mormons fill the road travelling west all this month some days from 80 to 100 waggons pass."

the wilderness and die by the way and be buried in some hole."

Warren Foote, March 1

"They gathered around the bonfires to hear Pitt's band that evening. Some of the band played for local residents of the area who were so delighted with the band that they donated 8 bushels of corn." *Orson Pratt, March 2*

"This morning President Brigham Young gave instruction to the teamsters not to crowd their teams or endeavor to drive over one another, realize and try to create friendships or they would not prosper." *John Lyman Smith, March 3*

"Sis. M. baked a batch of eleven loaves but the washing business was necessarily omitted for the want of water, an inconvenience the present location suffers more than any previous one." *Eliza Snow, March 9*

"About nine o'clock P.M. it began to roar in the west, and the wind began to blow. I stepped to the door of my tent and took hold

to hold it, but in a moment there came a gust of wind and blew the tent flat to the ground. My next care was to hold my carriage, which was under the tent, from blowing away. The rain came down in torrents so fast that it put out the fire. In a few minutes it was all darkness, and it was so cold that it seemed as though I must perish. I stood and held the end of the carriage about one hour. The rain wet me through and through, and I never felt in my life as though I must perish with the cold more than I did then." *Lorenzo Snow, Chariton River campsite, March 23*

"At 12 o'clock at night, wind west, rains hard through the night. Wind blew down Brother Tanner's tent. Very muddy, unpleasant time. Streams high. All well." *William Huntington, April 2*

"I rose this morning, the sun shining with splendor which gladdens our hearts. Our wagon cover is frozen hard, and the mud and water is a little frozen. Froze our shoes in the tent." *Patty Bartlett Sessions, April 5*

May begins on Friday

a wet month generally the streams is higher than they have been since I have been in the country

not much corn planted until the latter part of the month

+ The Mormons fill the road travelling west a this month some days from 80 to 100 waggons pass



SHSI (IOWA CITY); PHOTO BY DEBBY ZIEGLOWSKY BAKER

Mormon wagons crossed Steel Creek in Wayne County, then climbed this hillside, as evidenced by two sets of wagon-wheel ruts still visible.

"About 2 o'clock in the morning I was called to go back about two miles; it then snowed. Rode behind the man and through mud and water some of the way, belly to the horse. . . . Her child was born before I got there. She had rode 13 miles after she was in travail. Crossed the creek on a log after dark. Her husband carried her over such things as was necessary." *Patty Bartlett Sessions, April 6*

"This day capped the climax of all days for traveling. The road was the worst that I had yet witnessed, up hill and down, through sloughs on spouty oak ridges and deep marshes, raining hard, the creek rising. The horses would sometimes sink to their bellies on the ridges. Teams stall going down hill." *Hosea Stout, April 6*

"The mud and water in and around our tents were ankle deep, and the rain still continued to pour down without any cessation. We were obliged to cut brush and

limbs of trees, and throw them upon the ground in our tents, to keep our beds from sinking in the mire. Those who were unable to reach the timber suffered much, on account of the cold, having no fuel for fires." *Orson Pratt, Locust Creek campsite #1, April 9*

"Heber and band came up and encamped on the same ridge which we were on. It formed a beautiful sight to see so many wagons and tents together and could be seen for miles on the prairie." *Hosea Stout, April 14*

"Today eight rattlesnakes were killed by our company, and two of the oxen in the same were bitten." *Horace Whitney, April 16*

"Our principal hunters, Brothers Higher and Smith, went out before starting this morning and cut down two bee trees, bringing into the commissary three pails of first rate honey; they also killed two deer and turkeys during the day which were distributed to the company." *Horace Whitney, Pleasant Point camp, April 17*

"Beautiful day, the birds begin

to sing, the grass to grow and everything assumes a pleasant aspect." *Horace Whitney, April 20*

"We will leave some here because they cannot go farther at present. They can stay here for a season and recruit, and by and by pack up and come on, while we go a little farther and lengthen out the cords, and build a few more stakes, and so continue on until we can gather all the saints and plant them in a place where we can build the House of the Lord in the tops of the mountains." *Brigham Young, Garden Grove camp, April 26*

"We arrived at camp at four P.M. about five or six miles. This was what was called 'the farm' then but was afterwards called 'Garden Grove.' When I came to the edge of the timber I found a number of men at work clearing and cutting house logs. It was a pleasantly situated place from the first appearance and presented a beautiful thick wood of tall shell bark hickory the soil uncommonly rich and so loose now that our teams could but draw their loads through." *Hosea Stout, April 27*

"A large amount of labor has been done since arriving in this grove; indeed the whole camp is very industrious. Many houses have been built, wells dug, extensive farms fenced, and the whole place assumes the appearance of having been occupied for years, and clearly shows what can be accomplished by union, industry, and perseverance." *Parley Pratt, May 10*

"I traded a feather bed for 127 lbs. of flour and \$1.10." *Warren Foote, May 16*

"Our treat was serv'd in the tent, around a table of bark, spread on bars, supported by four crotches drove into the ground; and consisted of light biscuits & butter, dutch cheese, peach sauce, custard pie & tea." *Eliza Snow, May 17*

"Many brethren have come up from Nauvoo. Taylor came home from Nauvoo. We went to see him but can hear nothing from our children by any one. I fear they will not get here until we shall leave. I know nothing when they will come. My feelings I cannot describe, but my trust is in God." *Patty Bartlett Sessions, May 23*

"Rain this morning again. Brother Kimball comes to the wagon, says I must not feel bad. I was crying when he came. . . . In the afternoon Sister Eliza Snow and Markham came up to the wagon, said they were glad to see me once more. It gave me joy for I had cried most of the day." *Patty Bartlett Sessions, May 25*

"Sister Rockwood gave me some tallow. I panned 17 candles. I thought it quite a present. Sister Kenneth Davis gave me a piece

of butter. Thank the Lord for friends." *Patty Bartlett Sessions, May 29*

"The wagon is long enough for both our beds made on the flour barrels, chests, and other things. Thales and I sleep at the back end, and F. and Irene at the forward end while we were travelling if we camped too late to pitch our tent." *Ursulia Hascall, letter, May 30*

"This place was called Mount Pisgah and the main settlement was situated on a long ridge running North and South. To the west was a large deep valley or bottom land of good prairie and groves were teeming with men and cattle engaged in the busy hum of improving and planting. The whole woods and prairie seemed alive to business and a continual stream of emigration pouring in which looked like the entire country would be inhabited as a city in a short time." *Hosea Stout, June 1*

"I got wet to my skin last night milking. I went to bed with my clothes wet. 12 o'clock the sun came out dried my bed and clothes but my tears will not dry up." *Patty Bartlett Sessions, June 1*

All of these obstacles did not deter the Mormons from proceeding on to the Missouri River, which they reached during the summer but too late to make the rest of the journey across the Great Plains that season. Hard times continued to prevail, as Eliza Snow noted on August 9, 1846: "It is a growling, grumbling, devilish sickly time with us now." The Mormons wintered over along both sides of the Missouri and some commenced

the rest of the trip the following year, 1847.

This journey by the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which began in February 1846, did not end until all of the members who wished to make the trip to Salt Lake City had done so. The last remaining members from Nauvoo finally made the trip across the Great Plains in 1852.

Even that was not the end of the story of the Mormons crossing Iowa. In 1856 and 1857 converts from Europe came as far west as the railroad went, to Iowa City. There they built handcarts and pulled them on to Salt Lake City. This was an arduous journey of a different kind, but by 1856, and even by 1848, the trail was clearer, and the permanent camps or way stations were producing food and had repair shops to fix broken equipment. It was the so-called "Pioneer Trail" of 1846 where the most obstacles had been faced.

The story of the women, men, and children who made the trip from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters during 1846 stands as a wonderful example of faith supporting a group of people. It is one of the great stories of organized migration in the history of the American frontier experience. ❖

Loren Horton served in a variety of positions at the State Historical Society of Iowa since 1973, most recently as senior historian, until his retirement this year.

NOTE ON SOURCES

These excerpts were gathered from published and unpublished diaries, journals, letters, reminiscences, and autobiographies housed in libraries and archives from Illinois to California.