

Women Among the Wagons

A Pioneer “Legacy”

Editor's Note: Throughout The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, its women were honored by a special “Legacy” observance last month. The PIONEER is pleased to join in this celebration of LDS women by publishing this article. It is one of a series appearing each issue through the efforts of City Creek Chapters, Sons of Utah Pioneers.

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The Mormon migration to the Salt Lake Valley was usually a family project. Women and children had important parts to play in the journey. Sometimes women were partners with their husbands in getting the family to Utah. Other times they were temporarily heads of families who later joined their husbands at the end of the trail.

Often women became permanent heads of families when their husbands died or refused to follow the Church into the desert. Single women often traveled as temporary members of other families for the journey. Many of these were young girls who hoped to be reunited with family members in the Valley. The reminiscences and journals of these women give us interesting details concerning life on the plains.

Bathsheba Bigler Smith, wife of apostle George A. Smith, remembered the hard time the European immigrants had in adjusting to frontier travel. She wrote:

Twenty four of the wagons of our company belonged to the Welsh Saints, who had been led from Wales by Elder Dan Jones, they did not know

anything about driving oxen. It was very amusing to see them yoke their cattle; two would have an animal by the horns, one by the tail, one or two others would do their best to put on the yoke whilst the apparently astonished ox, not at all enlightened by the guttural sound of the Welch tongue seemed perfectly at a loss what to do or to know what was wanted of him.

An English widow, Jane Rio Baker, saw it from another point of view. She wrote in her diary:

I can just fancy how you would laugh, could you see us, taking our first lesson in ox-driving, and our cattle taking every direction, except a straight forward one.

The wagons would be home for the family on the journey and temporary shelter after arrival until a log home was built. Women had the responsibility to make the wagon comfortable. Bathsheba Smith wrote:

I had hanging up on the inside a looking glass, candlestick, pin cushion, etc. In the center of our wagon we had room for four chairs in which we and our two children sat and rode when we chose. The floor of our traveling house was carpeted, and we made ourselves as comfortable as we could under our circumstances.

Many times women had to drive the wagons. When Joseph Mount's hired teamster left him part way in the journey, his wife had to drive the extra wagon. She would yoke and unyoke the oxen in addition to her other duties. Her daughter, Mary Jane Mount Tanner, describes her mother's difficult time:

As we reached the mountains the roads were very rough and she often had to spring from the wagon to guide the cattle



Jane Rio Griffiths Baker

*An English widow
who brought
her family
to Utah
in 1881*

The Mormon Migration From Another Perspective

and keep the wagon from being upset. One of her oxen would never learn to hold back, and when going downhill she had to hold his horn with one hand and pound his nose with the other to keep him from running into the wagon ahead of him. Many times the bushes caught her dress in the wagon wheels and she had no choice but to run on, leaving pieces behind her.

Besides helping at the births along the way, women often did other necessary medical work. Jane Rio Baker wrote in her diary:

Ferried over the Elk Horn (River) in safety; except one of Chatterley's company who caught his hand in a chain, bursting one of his fingers, making a rent of one and one half inches long. Mrs. Joseph Pierce and I sewed it up between us and dressed it well as we could.

Margaret Gay Judd Clawson was a teenager when she traveled with her family to Utah. Her reminiscences of the trip are full of teenage enthusiasm. She wrote:

Oh, the monotony of camp life when not traveling. How delighted we all were when we started our journey for good. Everything was bright and beautiful. I was young and healthy. (Life was) colored rose for me. The responsibilities, anxieties and cares rested on my parents. In traveling as we did, one day was very like another. After jogging along all day we camped at night. The men took care of the cattle, while the women got supper. After that was over the young folks generally made a bonfire and sat around it, talked, told stories, sung songs, and etc.

There were several nice young men in our company which made it interesting for the girls.

Sarah Burbank was also a teenager during the trip, but she performed many adult duties. She wrote:

Abby died with cholera and was buried without a coffin by the Platte River along with others. We had to go on in the morning, never to see their graves again. The night that Abby was buried the wolves were howling. It was awful to hear the dirt thrown on their bodies. A young lady and I were the only ones to wash and dress her with what we could find--her underclothes and nightgown. We sewed her up in a sheet and quilt. That was all that could be done for her burial. All the women in the camp were afraid to prepare the body for burial for fear they would catch the cholera from her. This young girl and I were not afraid to take care of the body. We were only sixteen years old but brave in that case.

When the companies would stop, the women washed and mended their clothes; cooked food and tended their babies as well as nursed the sick and buried the dead. Some would also write in their journals. Martha Spence Heywood explained her chance to write:

The breaking of an axeltree has given me an opportunity to journalize a little and here I will record a providential incident. On Tuesday morning Sister Butterfield lost an ox and was obliged to start without making as much search as wished, which grieved her very sorely and did not feel reconciled to give up hunting him. In the course of the day

an ox was found by Capt. Barry's ten (where she is) that was so weak from the "scours" (dysentery) (evidently left behind by some forward company) that the men rejected him but Sister Butterfield thought she could cure him and drove him along with some trouble at first but today (Thursday) he travels well and turns out to be a better animal than the one she lost. Our axeltree is almost replaced and in ten minutes we will be rolling.

Sister Butterfield, like so many pioneer women, knew what she and her family needed and worked to get it. It took courage to go against the judgement of the men of the company, but she was rewarded by getting the ox she needed. The pioneer women were strong and were made a little stronger by their experiences.

Jane Rio Baker wrote in her diary on September 26, 1851:

We had this day a view of Salt Lake Valley from the summit of a mountain...The descent of the mountain was awfully steep and dangerous for about four miles. I took our little stranger (her new grandson) in my arms and walked the distance, for it was as much as Eliza could do to hold herself firmly in bed...When I arrived at the base of the mountain, I turned to look at the coming wagons and was actually terrified to see them rushing down, though both wheels were locked. No accident occurred.

When these women arrived in the Salt Lake Valley their destination had been reached, but their pioneering did not stop. The skills that they developed on the trip helped them and their families as they settled the Great Basin.