

# Mormon Pioneer

## Historic Resource Study



### CHAPTER 3: ACROSS IOWA IN 1846

#### LEAVING NAUVOO

The approximately 1,300-mile-long Great Trek must be divided into two parts: The nearly 265-mile-long section across Iowa in 1846 (see Appendix A, Map 6) and the 1,032 (as measured by Clayton in 1847 [1])-mile-long segment across the Great Plains of Nebraska and Wyoming into Utah in 1847 (see Appendix A, Maps 7-9). The Iowa portion of the trail was used relatively little, mainly by the Mormons fleeing Illinois in 1846, and by some other Mormons jumping off from Keokuk, Iowa, in 1853. It was also used in 1856-1857 by seven companies of Mormon Handcarters from Iowa City who intersected the 1846 Mormon Trail at what is now Lewis, Cass County. (See "The Handcart Emigrants" in Chapter 6.) Thousands of other Mormons also crossed Iowa up to as late as 1863 on variants of the 1846 trail and on completely different trails, but all these trails intersected the trail of 1846 somewhere in western Iowa. [2]

Across the monotonous, rolling Central Lowlands of Iowa, the trail of 1846 generally followed primitive territorial roads as far as Bloomfield, Davis County, then vague Potawatomi (the name exists in different spellings) Indian and trading trails along ridges from one water source to another and to an Indian agent's settlement on the Missouri River at what is now Council Bluffs. The trail always fell within 50 miles of the present Missouri state line. There is very little of the old trail left in Iowa. Time and the plow have erased almost all remains. What little can still be seen is described in Chapter 7, "Historic Sites along the Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail."

The Iowa portion of the trek was the worst. In spite of long preparations for quitting Nauvoo, the Mormons were not at all well prepared when they left during February and March of 1846. For one thing they left earlier than was necessary or had been planned. The year 1846 began badly. The charters of the Nauvoo Legion and of the City of Nauvoo were revoked in January, thus curtailing what legal and military protection the Mormons had. Rumors were spreading that the U.S. Government would prevent the Mormons from leaving because they were suspected of counterfeiting and that federal troops from St. Louis were planning to march on Nauvoo. [3] Apparently these rumors led church leaders to decide to begin the evacuation of Nauvoo as soon as possible, rather than to await the agreed-upon spring departure time. (For an artist's version of this exodus from Nauvoo see Appendix D, Illustration 5.) In the beginning the weather was terrible, and the vanguard of Saints, a mixed group of men, women, and children, were inexperienced as well as unprepared. It took a month to cover the first 100 miles—an average of only 3 miles per day.

On February 4, 1846, the first wagons, belonging to a Charles Shumway, pulled out of Nauvoo, crossed the Mississippi River on ferries near the present Exodus to Greatness marker (NR, see Historic Site 1, Chapter 7) [4] in Nauvoo. After crossing the Mississippi the pioneers traveled west some 7 miles to a staging ground at Sugar Creek, Lee County, Iowa (see Historic Site 3), to await the arrival of Brigham Young and other church leaders who joined them

February 15th.

The initial crossing and camping were neither orderly nor disciplined, and few people had followed advice regarding adequate food supplies. (See Appendix B, Document 1, for "Bill of Particulars": items recommended for a Mormon family of five.) In addition to this suggested "outfit," which cost about \$250, the pioneers needed all the clothing, bedding, and other foodstuffs they could acquire. For example, although Heber C. Kimball, an apostle, reached Sugar Creek with a two-year supply of food, the mismanagement and unpreparedness of others caused his store to be consumed within two weeks. (See Appendix D, Illustration 6 and Appendix C, Biographical Sketch 4.)

In spite of this and other difficulties attending the evacuation, months of planning and preparation made the exodus, even though several months ahead of schedule, more orderly and successful than is generally believed, and far from the tragic route of folklore.

Because of the weather, general unpreparedness, and lack of experience in moving large groups of people (except for Zion's Camp of 1834), the crossing of Iowa in 1846 was much more difficult than the migration west of the Missouri in 1847. [5] The skills they learned while crossing Iowa in 1846 made the much longer part of the trek from the Missouri River to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847 easier. Through this part of the journey, the pioneers also set the pattern for settling the Great Basin.

## **TREK COMMENCES/DIFFICULTIES/SKILLS LEARNED**

By the beginning of March the first group of Mormons were ready to vacate their staging ground on Sugar Creek, where they had been gathering since February 4th. No accurate record was kept of how many wagons and people were at Sugar Creek that March 1st—estimates vary from four to five hundred wagons and from three to five thousand individuals. Five hundred wagons and three thousand people is probably close to the truth. [6]

What from the start was known as the "Camp of Israel" began to lumber out from Sugar Creek about noon to the "gee-haws" of teamsters and the yells of herdsmen and children. Thereafter, Old Testament parallels to a Zion, a Chosen People, an Exodus, a Mount Pisgah, a Jordan River, a Dead Sea, to being "in the tops of the mountains," and making the desert blossom like the rose, were noted, devised, cherished, and handed down. The Mormons resembled ancient Israel in other ways: they were divided into groups of fifties and tens (Exodus 18:21) and, at times, were fractious and whiny.

A few trail journals give a romantic cast to the exodus across Iowa, that "Mormon Mesopotamia" between the Mississippi and the Missouri rivers, but as most other trail accounts make clear, the worst part of the entire journey from Nauvoo to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake was the beginning. No part of the long trek surpasses the tragedy and triumph of this hegira across the rolling, open prairie of Iowa Territory, which then consisted of little more than bluestem prairie grass and stands of oak and hickory forests along the numerous rivers and streams and dangerous swamps and bogs. Often, when roads did exist, they were most primitive. Some Mormons may have reflected often on the frontier sarcasm that it was a middling good road when the mud did not quite reach one's boot tops—while astride a horse. Although the Mormons made some improvements along the roads and trails they followed across Iowa, they did little, if any, trailblazing.

Along the Iowa trail, the basic skills of immigrating and colonizing were practiced and permanent camps were established. This part of the westward march influenced Mormon history long afterward. The Saints had learned only the rudimentary lessons of immigration during the Zion's Camp march from Ohio to Missouri in 1834; the advanced training had to be

acquired in Iowa.

Through the settled parts of eastern Iowa, the Mormons tried to earn what money they could by hiring themselves out to anyone who would pay them. From 1846 through the early 1850s, they found sporadic work plowing; planting; fencing; digging wells; cutting logs; splitting rails; husking corn; making shingles; digging coal; and building bridges, homes, barns, jails, and river locks. They also did some plastering and brick work, and Pitt's Brass Band, a group of musicians from this pioneer company, played for dances.

Although it was generally well known among the Saints that the Camp of Israel was headed beyond the Rocky Mountains and into the Great Basin, little was said about where the camp would cross the Missouri or where they would pick up the Oregon Trail. They had little intention of returning to Missouri and crossing at Independence, Weston, or St. Joseph, and the only other well-established point of crossing to the north was Council Bluffs, Iowa Territory, which was closer to Nauvoo. In August 1845, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (in charge of the church between the death of Smith and the presidency of Young) sent several men on a reconnaissance mission to find the best route across Iowa. They reported favorably on the Council Bluffs crossing. [7]

## **ORGANIZATION IMPROVED**

As the camp moved west some changes and improvements in organization became necessary. Only the fundamental arrangement of the trek had been effected at Nauvoo and Sugar Creek. For various reasons, many of the original families had returned to Nauvoo, and bad roads and weather had scattered others.

On March 7th the camp reached a place they called Richardson's Point (see Historic Site 5, Chapter 7), which became the second rest stop in Iowa. The pioneers stayed here until March 18th. At Richardson's Point they lightened the loads of some of the wagons by burying some cannon balls and shot in the ground, intending to get them at some other time.

On March 22nd on the Chariton River, near present-day Sedan, Appanoose County, the remaining emigrants were called together and urged to maintain better order. To this end they regrouped into three companies, each consisting of one hundred families. All three companies were then subdivided into fifties and then tens, each unit led by a captain, the most important leaders of which were those of the six groups of fifty—Brigham Young, Heber Kimball, Parley P. Pratt, Peter Haws, John Taylor, and George Miller. [8] (See Appendix D, Illustrations 4, 6, 7, 8 and Appendix C, Biographical Sketches 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.) This Chariton camp became the third temporary camping place in Iowa. The pioneers remained there from March 22nd through March 31st.

Thereafter, the line of march continued somewhat to the southwest until the companies found themselves on Locust Creek (see Historic Site 6), either close to or in Missouri, where they made a fourth temporary camp. At that time, since the Missouri boundary was about 10 miles north of where it is today, some of them actually dipped into what was then Putnam County, Missouri.

## **"COME, COME YE SAINTS" COMPOSED**

It was here on April 14th that a courier arrived with a letter from Nauvoo informing William Clayton, the camp clerk, of the safe birth of a son. (See Appendix D, Illustration 9 and Appendix C, Biographical Sketch 9. Many pregnant women were left behind in the relative safety of Nauvoo until the advance company of pioneers worked out the best way to travel from the Mississippi to the Missouri. Messengers were frequently sent back to help guide the

other Mormons who went west in 1846.) The next morning, walking off by himself, he wrote in joy and gratitude the words of the now-famous hymn "Come, Come, Ye Saints," often called, with some justification, the "Mormon Marseillaise" or the "hymn heard around the world." The verses epitomized the Mormon motivation for going west and their experience on a dozen trails, some well known, some totally forgotten, between New York and Utah from 1831 to the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. (For the words to this hymn, see Appendix B, Document 2.)

## **GARDEN GROVE ESTABLISHED**

From Locust Creek the camp bore more to the north to get away from their old enemies, the Missourians. By April 24th the pioneers had reached a place that they named Garden Grove (REC, see Historic Site 7 and Appendix D, Illustration 10). [9] It was about halfway across Iowa, 144 miles west of Nauvoo and 120 miles east of Council Bluffs. Here, on the east bank of the Weldon Fork of the Grand River, they established the first of several permanent camps between Nauvoo and Winter Quarters. In three weeks they had broken 715 acres of tough prairie sod, built cabins, and established a community. [10] Although nothing of the pioneer camp exists, there is a town by the name of Garden Grove near this old campsite and the local school district is named the Mormon Trail District.

## **MOUNT PISGAH ESTABLISHED**

When the camp moved out of Garden Grove on May 12th, enough families were left behind to maintain the community and to help later Nauvoo exiles, of which there would be thousands. Six days and about 35 miles later, they established another permanent camp and resting place. This site, on the middle fork (Twelve-Mile Creek) of the Grand River and on Potawatomi Indian land, was selected and named Mount Pisgah (REC, see Historic Site 8 and Appendix D, Illustration 11) by Parley P. Pratt, who, when he first saw it rising above the Iowa prairie, was reminded of the biblical Pisgah (Deuteronomy 3:27), where Moses viewed the Promised Land. There they built cabins and planted several thousand acres of rich bottomland lying to the west of the rise with peas, cucumbers, beans, corn, buckwheat, potatoes, pumpkins, and squash. Mount Pisgah was maintained as a camp until at least 1852. At its height it had over 2,000 inhabitants, most staying until their future homes in what is now Utah were more certain. [11]

At Mount Pisgah, after over two and a half months of Iowa mud and other assorted troubles, Mormon leaders felt the need for divine guidance, so they withdrew to the isolation of the limitless prairie, clothed themselves in temple robes, formed a prayer circle, and invoked God for the good of the people and the success of the venture. All along the trek such special group prayers were held. [12]

About 35 miles farther west they deepened some trail ruts still visible today—the only good ruts this author has found in Iowa (REC, see Historic Site 10 and Appendix D, Illustration 12). Mormon Trail ruts are very rare in Iowa for several reasons: the Iowa portion of the trail was much less used than the Nebraska and Wyoming portions, the soft soil did not hold and preserve the ruts well, and most of the ruts that did remain after the Mormons passed have since been destroyed by the plow.

## **COUNCIL BLUFFS REACHED**

Late on June 2nd, the camp moved on toward Council Bluffs, some 90 miles to the west, leaving behind enough people to improve and maintain Mount Pisgah for the benefit of future Saints going west. This last section of the 1846 journey was relatively pleasant: the sun dried the roads, grass grew, and wild strawberries flourished. On June 13th, the camp reached the Council Bluffs area at the Missouri River, and the first portion of the march was nearly over.

The vanguard had taken a full four months, 120 days, to cross some 265 miles of southern Iowa, averaging only about 2.25 miles per day. (For a historical view of Council Bluffs and a generalized map of the whole area on both sides of the Missouri, see Appendix D, Illustration 13 and Appendix A, Map 13.)

Despite the troubles experienced while crossing Iowa, the Mormons survived as a community, a community that grew stronger on the Missouri River, across the trans-Missouri west, and in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.

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