



# THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

## Mormons and the Mormon Trail

One of the largest organized movements of people in world history began in 1847, an exodus from prejudice and persecution as well as a search for personal and religious freedom. Although the U.S. Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion, there were still those in America who felt that personal beliefs should fit into the accepted mold of mainstream Christianity. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (L.D.S.) did not fit this profile, and their exodus in search of a “promised land” is one of the epic stories of the American experience.

The L.D.S. church was organized on April 6, 1830 by Joseph Smith in upstate New York. The new religion was based on visions Smith claimed to have had of the Christian God and his son, Jesus. An angel named Moroni also appeared to Smith on numerous occasions, eventually leading him to a place near Palmyra, New York called the Hill Cumorah. There Smith unearthed a set of golden plates which he claimed contained the history of ancient people who had once inhabited the North American continent. Smith transcribed the information written on the golden plates, compiling it into what became known as the Book of Mormon, (named for the ancient prophet who engraved the golden plates). The Book of Mormon was never intended to be a replacement for the Christian Bible, but an addition to it.

Smith had a brilliant mind, and quickly organized the L.D.S. church. It was headed by a president (Smith himself), guided and aided by two councilors, as well as a Quorum of Twelve

Apostles. His followers (nicknamed “Mormons” by outsiders) considered themselves a “chosen people,” embodiments of modern saints as opposed to the saints in the Bible. The church grew and flourished, acquiring many converts, who in turn were encouraged to become missionaries. They found fertile ground for their new religion, especially in England and Scandinavia. A branch was established in Kirtland, Ohio, which became the new headquarters of the church. Due to persecution in New York State, Joseph Smith departed for Kirtland with many of his followers. A second colony was established in Jackson County, Missouri, where Smith planned to build a “New Jerusalem.” The L.D.S. Church prospered and grew, becoming politically and financially influential.

The common Missourian felt threatened by the rise of the church, however. Not only were most Mormons from the north and opposed to slavery, they had a different form of worship, and tended to be clannish. Eventually, trouble started and mobs began to terrorize the Mormons, burning out entire communities. On October 27, 1838, Missouri Governor Boggs ordered all Mormons to leave the state or be exterminated. By 1839, 15,000 Mormons departed for Illinois, a move directed by a powerful new convert named Brigham Young.

The Mormons began again, building a new community in Illinois named Nauvoo, or “the beautiful location.” Essentially worthless swampland when they arrived, Mormons quickly

drained the marshes, planned streets, and survived a malaria epidemic. In four years Nauvoo grew to a population of twenty thousand, with a new temple and a university. In fact, Nauvoo was the largest city in Illinois, and was recognized as having great political power. It was at this point that Joseph Smith announced his intention of running for President of the United States; yet at the same time revealed revelations to his people which advocated the practice of polygamy among those church members who could support more than one wife. This teaching was kept quiet, as it violated U.S. laws and would infuriate the already hostile non-Mormon population surrounding Nauvoo. Dissention within the church over this issue caused the Latter Day Saints to split into two factions, and soon news spread to the public at large. Joseph Smith and his brother Hiram were arrested and ultimately murdered in 1844 by a mob which stormed the jail in Carthage, Illinois where they were being held.

Opposition became bolder after Smith's death, as hostile neighbors burned Mormon crops and drove off their cattle. Things became so bad that an exodus from Nauvoo was organized by Brigham Young, the new church leader. The movement was called the "camp of Israel", and represented a total of over 20,000 people. The group was organized into companies of hundreds, subdivided into 50s and 10s, with officers over each group. This pseudo-military organization came in handy during the long trek westward. Maps, diaries and accounts of western exploration, especially those of John C. Fremont, were studied. Church members crossed the Mississippi River on the frozen ice in February 1846 in covered wagons, heading westward toward an unknown "promised land." As the Mormons traveled across Iowa, they traded possessions for food. Temporary communities were set up and crops planted, as way stations for those to follow. When bridges and ferries were not in use by the Mormons, others were allowed to use them for a fee. Revenues collected were used to aid those who were unable to outfit and supply themselves for the journey.

When the saints reached the area of Council Bluffs, Iowa, in June 1846, they were visited by

Captain James Allen of the U.S. Army. Allen carried a message from President Polk, requesting 500 Mormon men to aid in the Mexican War. The so-called "Mormon Battalion," formed from many of the strong young men needed for the push westward, marched off to Fort Leavenworth and on to Santa Fe, then blazed a trail overland to Tucson, Arizona. They arrived in San Diego, California on January 29, 1847.

Meanwhile, the main body of L.D.S. members set up a temporary city on the Missouri River in Nebraska called "Winter Quarters." On April 5, 1847, a "pioneer company" of 143 men, 3 women, and 2 children, led by Brigham Young, set out for the West. Young decided against using the Oregon Trail, instead breaking a new road on the north side of the Platte River to avoid conflict with other westward-bound people and have more feed for cattle. Young insisted that buffalo be killed only for meat, and that journals be kept of each day's travel, including detailed odometer readings.

On June 27, 1847, the Pioneer Company reached South Pass, where they met the trapper and scout Major Moses Harris. Harris described the basin of the Great Salt Lake, and gave an unfavorable report of the region. Brigham Young decided to go against this advice, and led the Pioneer Company southwest. On July 24, 1847, Young first saw the Great Salt Lake, and is reputed to have declared, "This is the place." Two hours later, the first Mormon plow began to break the plains.

The Mormon pioneers constituted a small group of people with scant provisions, 1000 miles from the nearest settlement to the East and 700 miles from the west coast. Rules were immediately established for the new Mormon community, declaring that no man could buy land, which was parceled out and given to family heads by the church, and that there would be no private ownership of streams or timber. The Mormons set to work plotting out Salt Lake City; a temple site was chosen, and streets planned to be 132 feet wide. A common field of 5,000 acres was plowed and planted. Luckily, the winter of 1847 was a mild one, and in the spring, a good grain crop came up. Suddenly, droves of crickets arrived, which began to consume the grain before it could be harvested.

The Mormons tried beating, burning and drowning the insects, but to no avail. Suddenly, great flocks of white-winged seagulls flew into the area and ate the crickets, saving most of the grain.

In 1848, Brigham Young made the return journey to Winter Quarters, leading 1,200 more emigrants back to Salt Lake City, traveling 1,000 miles in 116 days. By 1852, Mormon colonies spread in a 300-mile radius from the Great Salt Lake, and included over 20,000 inhabitants. A planned Mormon state, called "Deseret," was to include parts or all of Utah, Idaho, Arizona, Nevada and California.

The "Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company" was formed in 1849, into which Mormons poured thousands of dollars, aiding at least 40,000 people in their journey to Utah between 1850 and 1880. The fund was not large enough to finance purchasing wagons and other amenities, however, and new European arrivals were encouraged to form "handcart companies" to make the journey westward. The handcarts were modeled after those of street sweepers, 6 or 7 feet long and 5 feet wide. They were able to carry about 500 pounds of flour and bedding, a tent, cooking utensils, and a few extra clothes. Between 1856 and 1860, ten companies totaling 3,000 emigrants reached Utah by pushing their belongings along the Mormon Trail in a handcart. Tragedy struck in 1856, however, when a group was caught by early snows, and 77 out of 404 people died. After a second party lost 15% of their number, handcarts were forever abandoned in favor of oxen and wagons.

The goals of the Mormon state were to build economic independence without encouraging an influx of non-Mormons. But even in the farthest reaches of the West, the Mormons could find no haven from persecution. In July 1857, stories were spread that the Mormons were in rebellion in Utah. In the largest military operation since the Mexican War, 2,500 U.S. soldiers marched from Fort Leavenworth to Utah. Luckily, influential people persuaded President Buchanan to send a peace commission to discuss the matter with the Mormons, and a compromise was reached.

In 1860, the pony express passed through Salt

Lake City, and in 1869, the completion of the transcontinental railroad brought an end to the relative isolation of the Mormons. Controversies engendered by the Mormons continued, however, especially regarding polygamy. Congress passed several laws aimed at the L.D.S. Church, and saw the Mormon domination of Utah and Idaho as a threat to the separation of church and state. With U.S. pressure bearing down heavily, church leaders began to reassess their policy regarding polygamy, and in 1890 issued a manifesto ending plural marriages. On January 4, 1896, Utah was finally admitted to the Union as a state.

The Mormons traveled a long, rough road to reach their "promised land." The overland travels of successive waves of emigrants to Utah constitute one of the epic tales of American history -- over 47,000 Mormon pioneers traveled the Mormon Trail between 1847 and 1860 alone. They were the first agricultural colonizers of the intermountain states, and some of the most determined, entrepreneurial, and resourceful settlers of the American West.

