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Mormon Trail, The

William Hill

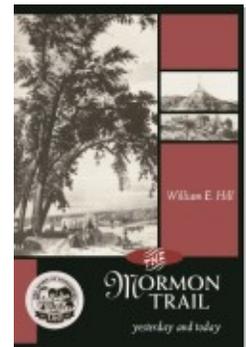
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INTRODUCTION

The Nature of the Mormon Trail

THE MORMON TRAIL EXPERIENCE IS UNIQUE WHEN COMPARED WITH THE experiences of the other major trails of westward migration. Some of the characteristics associated with the Mormon Trail are similar to those of the other trails. When those characteristics are compared or discussed individually, it would seem to lead one to the conclusion that the trail experiences are the same, but it is the combination of those individual characteristics, along with other factors, that lead one to conclude that the nature of the Mormon Trail experience is unique. By examining the motivations, demographic characteristics, practices of the Mormons, planning and organization of the wagon companies, and the methods of transportation, this fact will become evident.

The reasons for the development of the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California Trails and the motivations of many of the emigrants were largely economic. The Santa Fe Trail, the earliest of the major westward trails, was developed in the 1820s primarily as a two-way trail of commerce, which was later used by emigrants. The traders were concerned with bringing needed trade goods from the United States and the Independence, Missouri, area to Santa Fe in Mexico. They knew that goods were scarce in Santa Fe and that large profits were possible. After trading there they would then return to the United States with cash and additional products to sell at a profit. For the first quarter century this was the major use of the Santa Fe Trail. The travelers were almost exclusively men, traders and their hired teamsters and, later, professional wagonmasters with their teamsters.

The emigrants who later began to use the Santa Fe Trail also did it for economic reasons. Some were emigrants traveling to the Southwest

to settle in the area to make a new life for themselves. Many were gold seekers using the Santa Fe Trail as the first segment of their journey to California. From Santa Fe they might have taken a southern trail along the Gila River, or the Old Spanish Trail, which angled northwest from Santa Fe into Utah before turning southwesterly towards Nevada and California. The western section of the Old Spanish Trail was also later incorporated into a route that led from Salt Lake to California. It afforded California-bound emigrants and gold seekers another way west and also helped to open much of Utah and the Great Basin to settlement.

The 1840s brought the development of the Oregon and California Trails. They were originally developed primarily as emigrant trails, but generally followed the route and stopped at sites familiar to those of the earlier trappers and traders. The wagon trail to Oregon was primarily used by emigrants who wanted to settle in the fertile valleys. They had heard stories of the Oregon Territory and the free rich lands of the Willamette River Valley. Many left lands in the Midwest and the East, which had been in the midst of a recession. They left with the intent of traveling as quickly as possible and starting a new life. For the Gentiles, a term used by Mormons for all non-Mormons, the main driving force was to get to the lands of the West Coast. Once they arrived, there was really little concern for the route they used or its further improvements. It was envisioned as a one-way route.

The lands between their jumping-off and destination sites were seen as an obstacle to pass through with little concern for the area itself. Any stopping on the trail was temporary. Some emigrants noted areas which might prove to be rich farming areas, but they did not settle there. They quickly continued on their way to Oregon or California. Some emigrants, after building a raft or ferry to cross a river might stay for a day or two to ferry other emigrants across. This would enable them to earn some extra money for themselves, but then they too quickly moved on. Enoch Conyers, for example, earned \$33.50 in one day and then proceeded on his journey. Samuel Barlow built a toll road over the Cascade Mountains at the end of the Oregon Trail to bypass the dangerous raft trip down the Columbia River to the Willamette River Valley. After he had gotten the money back it had cost him, he sold his interests in the road. Thus, it seems that many of the improvements made were primarily for the developers' benefit and were temporary at best.

The California Trail was also initially used by emigrants intent on starting a new life. Stories of the rich lands of California also provided the early and later emigrants with their motivation. However, the discovery of gold brought a different type of emigrant to California. Economics

was still the motivation, but it was a short-term motive rather than a long-term one. They hoped to find gold, get rich, and return home to their families back east. However, the discovery of gold also brought tradesmen, shop owners, and farmers. These were the ones who really “struck it rich” by selling their products to the gold seekers. With the exception of some of the 49ers who hoped to strike it rich quickly and return to their families back east, the California Trail was mainly developed for one-way travel. Only after California became a territory and then a state did the trail develop into a two-way route with its expanded use by the military and the traders and professional teamsters hauling goods and supplies across the continent.

The gold fever of 1849 and the early 1850s also resulted in a noticeable change in the make-up of the trail travelers. Whereas some of the earlier emigrants included families, the majority of the travelers were now men. Many of the wagon companies, such as J. Goldsborough Bruff’s Washington City and California Mining Association, and the pack trains were exclusively composed of men. The travelers to Oregon, however, remained largely composed of families. Rarely were single women found on the trails unless they were traveling with their parents. Respectable women, both single or married, it seems, did not travel alone.

Thus, for the major trails that existed prior to the Mormon Trail, the economic factor played the central role in their development. Only because of the repeated use and the two-way traffic on the Santa Fe Trail did the traders have a vested interest in making improvements, that is, any improvements that could reduce the time it took to travel back and forth. Also any reduction in travel time could translate into higher profits for the traders. Most of the emigrants, however, were primarily interested in getting to their destination. Any improvements on the trail were seen as a way of making their trip shorter. They were not concerned with improving the route to make it easier for strangers yet to come unless they could make some financial gain from it. The delay caused by building a raft to ferry others across for profit could be tolerated for a few days. Many of the improvements built along the Oregon and California Trails were later further improved or reconstructed by the military or government. They sometimes even surveyed and constructed new cut-offs or routes such as the Lander Road in 1859 and Captain Simpson’s route across central Nevada.

By the mid-1840s the Santa Fe Trail was a well-established and well-known route. The main Oregon and California Trails had been developed and used by more than eight thousand emigrants. By 1846 California-bound emigrants had already pioneered a trail into the Great

Salt Lake Valley, crossed the Salt Lake Desert, and gone on to California. All this had happened before the Mormons entered the valley.

The years 1846 and 1847 saw the establishment of what is now called the Mormon Trail. The first segment of the Mormon Trail from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Omaha, Nebraska, area was used in 1846. It was not over one of the other major established emigrant trails, but it did generally follow territorial roads and trading trails in Iowa. However, the second and major segment of the Mormon Trail, from the Winter Quarters in the Omaha area to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake was over much of the established route on the north side of the Platte River. It was previously used by many of the early trappers and emigrants to Oregon and California. As some historians have noted, with the exception of less than a mile at the mouth of Emigration Canyon in Utah, all of the main Mormon Trail was over the established routes of parts of the Oregon and California Trails.

While economic factors were largely responsible for the migration of emigrants over the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California Trails, religion was the primary reason for the migration of the Mormons along the trail. Many of the beliefs and ideas developed during the early years of the Mormon faith and church were different from the predominant religious views of citizens of that time. These differences led to strained relations with their non-Mormon, or Gentile, neighbors.

Not only do Mormons consider themselves to be Christians, they believe they are the “true” Christian Church, the original church established by Jesus Christ when he lived on the earth—“restored” to its rightful position—and that all present members are saints, “latter-day saints” as distinguished from the earlier saints. Because of this, they are often referred to as “the Saints.” They believe that revelations from God continue in the present time. They hold that Joseph Smith, their founder, was a prophet who spoke with the inspiration and power of God as did the apostles and prophets of the Bible and as do their living prophets today. The Quorum of Twelve Apostles, the main governing body, had its basis in professed revelation, and its first members, including Brigham Young, were chosen for their steadfastness during the Zion Camp’s March from Kirtland, Ohio, to Independence, Missouri, in 1834. The Quorum also has the power to speak with authority from God. In addition to the Bible, the Mormon scriptures include the Book of Mormon, which is claimed to be an ancient record of the early Americas; the Doctrine and Covenants, a collection of contemporary revelations, mostly to Joseph Smith; and the Pearl of Great Price, a collection of other writings and translations of Joseph Smith. These combined

scriptures provide the basis for their faith and the guides for their behavior. Mormons also hold that they themselves are the children of Israel, the “chosen people.”

Their organization, starting at the family level and continuing through to the highest positions in the church’s organization is patriarchal. The father’s authority over the family is considered supreme. All males twelve years and older who are considered worthy “hold the priesthood.” In addition, there is a history of a strict giving, known as tithes and offerings, to the church and the belief that the commandments from God come first. However, the legitimate needs of the family, the basic unit of church organization, receive highest priority. Mormons feel that God did not prevent their suffering and persecution in order to test and refine them.

During much of the 19th century, they practiced polygamy as a revealed tenet of their faith. Many of these ideas and beliefs served to strengthen the church and build a strong Mormon discipline, but they also served to separate the Mormons from most other Americans. The theocratic nature of their political organization also conflicted with much of the popular political thinking at the time. All of these ideas and practices tended to separate the Mormons from others, and thus made them more susceptible to persecution. As religious persecution increased, the Mormons were forced to move from one place to another throughout the United States looking for a place to establish their Zion and live in peace.

The Mormons were first centered in New York, then they moved to Ohio and a variety of places in Missouri, and then to Nauvoo, Illinois. The Nauvoo site was selected by Joseph Smith in 1839. Originally it was only the tiny hamlet of Commerce. Much of the land surrounding it was miasmatic marshlands that nobody wanted or thought could be used. Here Smith hoped that they could finally live in peace. Temporary structures may have been of logs, but the Mormons planned to stay. Nauvoo was built as a permanent center. The area was drained and the city was laid out in a grid pattern. Permanent structures were built. Homes and shops were constructed of brick. Education was considered important and a university was planned. A charter was obtained for the first city university in the country. The large temple structure of stone was built high on the hill overlooking the city and the Mississippi River. Nauvoo soon rivaled Chicago, Illinois, as the largest city in the state and became one of the twenty largest cities in the United States. But, as had happened in all the other places Mormons settled, persecution was soon to follow. Following the murder of Joseph Smith the Mormons were again driven out and forced to look for a new place to live and to practice their faith freely.

Thus, the reason for the Mormon migration was religious in motivation, and the migration itself was unlike most of the migrations of other emigrants traveling to Oregon and California. The Mormons had their migration forced upon them. For nearly two decades after their founding, the Mormons were forced from areas in which they lived. Later, many sought voluntarily to emigrate to Salt Lake City to live in their new Zion or Promised Land.

Another related facet of the Mormon migration that distinguished it from that of the other trails was the composition of the emigrants and their organization. It was noted earlier that most of the early American travelers on the Santa Fe Trail were males and relatively few women and children traveled on the trail. During the gold rush years those en route to California were also almost exclusively males. Even during the earlier years relatively few women traveled on that route. However, women, married and single, and children were more commonly found as members of companies on the Mormon Trail. Women and children often comprised the majority of the members of Mormon wagon companies. Only in the first Pioneer Company of 1847 was the population almost exclusively males. It was composed of 143 men (including three African Americans), 3 women, and 2 young boys. In addition, it should be noted that about 500 men had entered into military service and had formed the Mormon Battalion, which was sent south over the Santa Fe Trail to California during the Mexican War. The impact of both the Pioneer Company and the formation of the Mormon Battalion could explain why many of the later 1847 Mormon companies were composed mainly of women and children. However, an exodus of mostly women and children continued in later years.

Many of the non-Mormon, or Gentile, wagon companies were composed of a variety of people, including families, their relatives, and friends. Often members came from a particular area of the country. However, frequently there were also strangers who joined the company. Most companies were organized with both democratic and military elements. Leaders were chosen by the male members of the wagon company. All the members of the company were then expected to follow the orders of the captain. However, it seems that very few companies stayed together for the whole length of their journey or ended with the same officers as when they began. Records indicate that some companies started to break up within a few weeks. Emigrants frequently recorded in their diaries information about individual families that would drop out. Other diarists recorded how they picked up another wagon or family that had dropped out of a nearby company. Sometimes it was recorded that a

lone wagon or family had been passed on the trail. It seems that the pressures of trail travel, the changes in their destination, or just the individualistic desires of these independent-minded emigrants brought a constant ebb and flow to wagon company membership. Sometimes harsh realities of disease or breakdowns forced members to fall behind and necessitated a change. The pressures of travel and the experience on the trail also caused companies to change their leadership. One of the rare companies that did not experience all this turmoil was the 1849 Washington City and California Mining Association company under the leadership of J. Goldsborough Bruff. Not until they were already in California and a few days from their goal did the company leave someone on the trail. It was their leader himself, J. Goldsborough Bruff, who had become too sick.

Mormon wagon companies, on the other hand, were much better organized. They often included large family groups and whole communities and generally remained together under the same leadership for the entire journey, helping each other all along the route. There were a number of factors that contributed to this. Within a few years after the development of the Mormon faith, its members tended to “gather” and to live in communities. However, as persecution increased, they tended to move into relatively unsettled areas where they established their own, separate communities. Because of increased persecutions, whole communities were forced to move. This was reflected in the main movement of Mormons from Kirtland, Ohio, to Jackson County, Missouri, in 1836, then to Far West, Missouri, in 1838, then in the Exodus from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters in 1846, and finally in 1847 when they moved from Winter Quarters to Salt Lake City.

Organization was not only a characteristic of travel in the United States. The Mormon immigrants from Europe usually came as an organized group on a chartered ship, then traveled together by train or riverboat to the jumping-off sites, and then finally migrated together in wagon or handcart companies to Salt Lake. Thus the Mormons traveled together in common groups with members who were well known to each other. Since there was a large number of people involved it was sometimes necessary to divide them into more than one wagon company, but even then the companies remained in close contact with one another. They were not a group of strangers who got together only for convenience, but rather they traveled with and remained together because they were organized to do so in order to help and support each other.

Some aspects of Mormon belief tended to result in much better organized companies. In January of 1847, Brigham Young, who was then head of the Mormon Church, received a revelation known as “The Word

SECTION CXXXVI

The Word and Will of the Lord, given through President Brigham Young, at the Winter Quarters of the Camp of Israel, Omaha Nation, West Bank of Missouri River, near Council Bluffs, January 14th, 1847.

1. The word and will of the Lord concerning the Camp of Israel in their journeyings to the West.

2. Let all the people of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and those who journey with them, be organized into companies, with a covenant and promises to keep all the commandments and statutes of the Lord our God.

3. Let the companies be organized with captains of hundreds, captains of fifties, and captains of tens, with a president and his two counselors at their heads, under the direction of the Twelve Apostles ;

4. All this shall be our covenant, that we will walk in all the ordinances of the Lord.

5. Let each company provide themselves with all the teams, wagons, provisions, clothing, and other necessities for the journey that they can.

6. When the companies are organized, let them go to with their might, to prepare for those who are to tarry.

7. Let each company with their captains and presidents decided how many can go next spring ; then choose out a sufficient number of able-bodied and expert men, to take teams, seeds, and farming utensils, to go as pioneers to prepare for putting in spring crops.

8. Let each company bear an equal proportion, according to the dividend of their property, in taking the poor, the widows, the fatherless, and the families of those who have gone into the army, that the cries of the widow and the fatherless come not up into the ears of the Lord against this people.

9. Let each company prepare houses and fields for raising grain, for those who are to remain behind this season, and this is the will of the Lord concerning his people.

10. Let every man use all his influence and property to remove this people to the place where the Lord shall locate a stake of Zion ;

11. And if ye do this with a pure heart, in all faithfulness, ye shall be blessed ; ye shall be blessed in your flocks, and in your herds, and in your fields, and in your houses, and in your families.

12. Let my servants Ezra T. Benson and Erastus Snow organize a company ;

13. And let my servants Orson Pratt and Wilford Woodruff organize a company.

14. Also, let my servants Amasa Lyman and George A. Smith organize a company ;

15. And appoint presidents, and captains of hundreds, and of fifties, and of tens,

16. And let my servants that have been appointed go and teach this my will to the Saints, that they may be ready to go to a land of peace.

17. Go thy way and do as I have told you, and fear not thine enemies ; for they shall not have power to stop my works.

18. Zion shall be redeemed in mine own due time,

19. And if any man shall seek to build up himself, and seeketh not my council, he shall have no power, and his folly shall be made manifest.

20. Seek ye and keep all your pledges one with another, and covet not that which is thy brother's.

21. Keep yourselves from evil to take the name of the Lord in vain, for I am the Lord your God, even the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob.

22. I am he who led the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt, and my arm is stretched out in the last days to save my people Israel.

23. Cease to contend one with another, cease to speak evil one of another.

24. Cease drunkenness, and let your words tend to edifying one another.

25. If thou borrowest of thy neighbor, thou shalt return that which thou hast borrowed ; and if thou canst not repay, then go straight way and tell thy neighbor, lest he condemn thee.

26. If thou shalt find that which thy neighbor has lost, thou shalt make diligent search till thou shalt deliver it to him again.

27. Thou shalt be diligent in preserving what thou hast, that thou mayest be a wise steward ; for it is the free gift of the Lord thy God, and thou art his steward.

28. If thou art merry, praise the Lord with singing, with music, with dancing, and with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

29. If thou art sorrowful, call on the Lord thy God with supplication, that your soles may be joyful.

30. Fear not thine enemies, for they are in mine hands, and I will do my pleasure with them.

31. My people must be tried in all things, that they may be prepared to receive the glory that I have for them, even the glory of Zion, and he that will not bear chastisement, is not worthy of my kingdom.

32. Let him that is ignorant learn wisdom by humbling himself and calling upon the Lord his God, that his eyes may be opened that he may see, and his ears opened that he may hear.

33. For my spirit is sent forth into the world to enlighten the humble and contrite, and to the condemnation of the ungodly.

34. Thy brethren have rejected you and your testimony, even the nation that has driven you out ;

35. And now cometh the day of their calamity, even the days of sorrow, like a woman that is taken in travail ; and their sorrow shall be great, unless they speedily repent ; yea, very speedily ;

36. For they killed the Prophets, and them that were sent unto them, and they have shed innocent blood, which crieth from the ground against them ;

37. Therefore marvel not at these things, for ye are not pure ; ye can not yet bear my glory ; but ye shall behold it if ye are faithful in keeping all my words that I have given you from the days of Adam to Abraham ; from Abraham to Moses ; from Moses to Jesus and his apostles ; and from Jesus and his apostles to Joseph Smith, whom I did call upon by mine angels, my ministering servants ; and by mine own voice out of the heavens to bring forth my work,

38. Which foundation he did lay, and was faithful and I took him to myself.

39. Many have marveled because of his death, but it was needful that he should seal his testimony with his blood, that he might be honored, and the wicked might be condemned.

40. Have I not delivered you from your enemies, only in that I have left a witness of my name?

41. Now, therefore, hearken, O ye people of my church ; and ye elders listen together ; ye have received my kingdom,

42. Be diligent in keeping all my commandments, lest judgements come upon you, and your faith fail you, and your enemies triumph over you.--So no more at present. Amen, and Amen.

THE END.

and Will of the Lord.” One aspect of it included the plan of organization for migration to the West. This document is unique in the history of westward migration. It helps explain the success of the migration. The Mormon wagon company leaders were not democratically elected but were selected or appointed by church leaders. There were captains for the groups of wagons or families of hundreds, of fifties, and finally of tens. Because Mormons believed that their leaders spoke with authority from God, they were much less likely to question any of the orders or directions given by their leader or voice their disagreement with him. They also believed in the natural hierarchy of authority. Everyone was expected to follow those who had authority over them, and anyone below was expected to follow the directives of the leader above. Even the daily routine was prescribed. During the exodus from Nauvoo, Brigham Young set down the pattern which was followed. At five o’clock the bugle was sounded. People were awakened, prayers said, meals were cooked and eaten and teams were fed. At seven o’clock the bugle was sounded again and the wagon company was off. Each able-bodied man was assigned to his post, and he was not allowed to leave it without permission from the officers. There were rules for noon and evening stops. By eight thirty in the evening the bugle would sound again for evening prayers, and by nine o’clock the camp was to be at rest. It was also practice not to travel on Sundays. Gentile wagon companies sometimes followed this practice, but not as strongly as the Mormons did. Some historians hold that not traveling on Sunday for religious reasons had the added benefit of allowing both people and beasts to recuperate. This benefit may have actually offset any loss of travel time. Thus, the Mormon wagon companies and trains tended to run much more efficiently than the non-Mormon companies. Non-Mormon emigrants frequently commented in their diaries about the efficient organization and movement of the Mormon companies.

Another related difference concerns the professional organization and sponsorship of wagon companies. For the most part non-Mormon wagon companies were not professionally organized. Most organized themselves either at the jumping-off sites or after a few days out on the trail. There were only a limited number of attempts by professionals to organize companies which emigrants could join for a fee and where the business enterprise would provide the wagons, animals, supplies, etc. Most of these attempts failed because the companies were insufficiently supplied and lacked a sense of unity. The Pioneer Line was probably one of the most famous of these failures in its attempt to take emigrants quickly and safely to California in 1849.

As the number of Mormons wanting or needing to go to Salt Lake City grew, the Mormon Church became more involved in the development of the transportation systems to bring them to Salt Lake City. From the 1850s into the late 1860s the church sponsored three different systems to help Mormons migrate to Salt Lake. First was the establishment of the Perpetual Emigration Fund system. It was to help finance the migrations for those who could not afford it. Those emigrants who used the funds were expected to repay the system. Two systems were specifically developed to provide transportation for the emigrants to Salt Lake City. One was the “handcart system” developed in the mid-1850s, and the other involved the use of “down-and-back” wagon trains in the 1860s. Individual Mormons also provided considerable assistance in building the transcontinental railroad through Utah. The Golden Spike, which symbolized the completion of the transcontinental railroad by joining the tracks of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads, was driven at Promontory Point, Utah, on May 10, 1869.

At the same time that the Mormons were converting new members in the United States, missionaries were sent across the seas to convert even more people. Another source of Mormon emigrants were the Mormon converts from Europe. As early as 1842 church leaders such as Brigham Young were sent to Europe as missionaries. By the mid-1850s thousands of converts came to the United States from a variety of European countries. The British Isles and the Scandinavian countries provided the largest number of converts, but others came from France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and Italy. The Mormons were also active in South America, South Africa, and the South Seas. After the converts arrived, those going west migrated along the Mormon Trail to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, while those from the Pacific coast traveled east into the valley. From there they spread throughout Utah, Arizona, Idaho, Nevada, and even into California.

Thousands had been converted in Europe, and this resulted in a problem of transporting them safely across the sea and then to Salt Lake City. The establishment of the Perpetual Emigration Fund in 1850 helped to solve this problem. It was established “to promote, facilitate, and accomplish the Emigration of the Poor.” In typical Mormon fashion, much planning and organization went into the program. Once the fund was established, it was intended to be self-sustaining. Emigrants could borrow from the fund to help pay for passage to the United States and then for their journey to Salt Lake itself. It was expected that the emigrants making use of the fund would repay it after they became established. As is often the case with programs such as this, the monies

were not always repaid. However, the Church continued to support the program with funds raised by the tithes of all Mormons. Mormon agents would contract for the use of a ship, provide for food on the journey, and then arrange transportation by rail or ship to the jumping-off sites of the Mormon Trail. By 1887, when the program ceased, perhaps as many as 100,000 Mormons had been assisted on their journey to Zion. Later converts arrived in Salt Lake on the transcontinental railroad.

One of the truly unique features of the Mormon Trail was the development and use of handcart companies, which, for a few years, supplemented the use of wagons. The wagon was the usual method of transportation employed by both Mormons and non-Mormons alike on the trails. The emigrant wagon was not the large Conestoga wagon used back east on the National Road or similar wagons sometimes employed by traders on the Santa Fe Trail, but was typically a small farm wagon about eight to ten feet long and usually between thirty-eight to forty-two inches wide. It might be pulled by oxen, mules, or horses. Emigrants often argued amongst themselves about the advantages of each type of team. Oxen were usually stronger, slower, cheaper, and could eat a wider variety of vegetation and, thus, could subsist better along the trail. They were also a little less likely to be stolen. Mules were less expensive than horses but more expensive than oxen, but they could travel faster than oxen. Horses were the fastest, the most expensive, and had feed requirements that were the hardest to provide for during the early years of trail travel. They were also the most likely to be stolen by the Indians. Although all draft animals were used by Mormons, it seems that oxen were employed most often.

There are a few examples of the use of carts by non-Mormons on the emigrant trails. At first people did not even think that wagons could be taken west over the Oregon and California Trails. Some of the early trading companies used carts and wagons to bring supplies out to the early mountain men rendezvous in the Rocky Mountains. But none of these were handcarts and none had ever taken them all the way over the mountains. One of the first attempts to bring an emigrant wagon west actually ended with the wagon being cut in two and being used as a cart to finally complete the journey to Oregon. This was the case in 1836 when the missionaries Marcus and Narcissa Whitman went west. At Fort Hall they were forced to cut their wagon and to continue to Oregon with it as a cart. Carts were associated with two other areas. One area was in the Red River Valley of the Dakotas and Minnesota. Carts were also used in the Southwest by the native Mexicans. However, it was the Mormons who perfected the system of handcart companies for the mass movement of people and goods west.

In the 1850s Iowa City, Iowa, was located near the western terminus of the eastern railroad. Mormons from Europe and the East came west to Iowa by train. The handcart companies were developed to bring the Mormons from the end of the railroad to Salt Lake City. The Mormon Church financed the construction of the handcarts and their use. While there seem to have been different sizes of handcarts, the typical cart had a bed approximately three feet wide, four feet long, and nine inches deep. The wheels were four feet in diameter with ten spokes. They were much cheaper to build than wagons, but they also only carried about 500 lbs, much less than wagons. This necessitated re-supply locations, or way-stations, along the trail. The carts were harder on the emigrants because draft animals were usually not used to pull them. The emigrants themselves provided the power to pull or push them. From 1856 until 1860 ten handcart companies carried about three thousand Mormons to Salt Lake City. Generally they traveled faster than wagon companies and were considered to be a success. Many people, however, only remember the stories of the Martin and Willie Handcart Companies that got caught in blizzards in Wyoming in 1856. They suffered great loss of life and became the worst recorded disasters on the emigrant trails during the period of westward migration. It should also be noted that when individual Mormons were given a chance to select their method of transportation and could afford it, the wagon was preferred over the handcart.

From 1860 until 1868 the church was involved in providing the physical wagons, stock, and supplies necessary for emigration to Salt Lake City. These could be considered to be professional companies. They were known as “down-and-back” companies or wagon trains. They were organized in Salt Lake City to go back and forth between Salt Lake City and the jumping-off cities. Geographically, the church was subdivided into stakes and wards, each with their own officers. In its early period, the local level of organization, or ward, usually consisted of between 200 to 1,200 people. Approximately ten wards were combined to form a stake. Under the leadership of Brigham Young and the church, all Mormon wards were required to provide wagons, draft animals, supplies, drivers, and other equipment necessary for a possible six-month trip. Thus, the wagon train only had to pick up the emigrants at the jumping-off sites. The emigrants did not have to purchase their wagons, etc. All the “down-and-back” wagon companies successfully made the journey to Salt Lake City. The first four church companies of 1861 included 203 wagons, 235 teamsters and guards, and 1,699 oxen with 136,000 pounds of flour. During this whole period more than 2,000 wagons with 2,500 teamsters brought over 20,000 emigrants to Salt Lake City. With the

completion of the railroad in 1869 the church no longer had to organize wagon companies to bring Mormon emigrants into Utah.

Another way in which the Mormon's highly organized nature was reflected was in their desire to make the trip for subsequent Mormons easier. They established communities and made improvements along their route. This was first done during their exodus from Nauvoo. They knew that it would not be possible to evacuate everyone at once. In Iowa, three centers, or way stations, were established along the route to their Winter Quarters area. They were Garden Grove, Mount Pisgah, and the Kanessville camp, which became present-day Council Bluffs. These camps, located in Iowa, were not temporary camps. At Mount Pisgah, shelters were built, fields were cleared and fenced, crops were planted, a mill was built, and a tabernacle was constructed. Similar locations were established along the trail to Salt Lake City. Fort Supply was built near Fort Bridger in Wyoming. One of its functions was to aid the Mormon emigrants by providing supplies to those coming across the plains. In 1861 four camps were established by the "down-and-back" wagon companies. Three were in Wyoming at Rocky Ridge, North Platte Bridge, and Deer Creek, and one was located in Nebraska at Wood River. This practice was continued in other parts of the United States as the Mormons spread out from Salt Lake City to surrounding areas.

Crossing rivers was a major obstacle for all emigrants. For the rivers that were too deep to ford, ferries were used. The Mormons built a number of ferries along their route. They established three ferries over the Missouri River in the Kanessville or Omaha area. Perhaps the most famous of the ferries was the Mormon Ferry at present-day Casper, Wyoming. Another important ferry was established further southwest on the Green River. The ferries served two purposes. One was to ensure safe passage for the Mormon emigrants, and the second, by charging a fee, was to provide additional funds to the Mormon Church in an area where cash was hard to come by. All along the route to Salt Lake City, Mormons made improvements on the established trails by building ferries, clearing the trails, putting up mileage signs, and establishing communities to provide shelter and supplies for the later migrating Mormons.

Thus, one can see how a variety of factors combined with the practices of the Mormon faith and church made the Mormon Trail unique in the history of westward migrations.



JAMES & MARGARET REED—California
Department of Parks and Recreation

James and Margaret Reed were members of the 1846 Donner-Reed Party. They had heard about Hastings's new cutoff to California. At Fort Bridger the party turned off the established trail. They had already fallen behind the main companies but hoped they could catch up to those companies which were being guided by Hastings. When the Donner-Reed Party arrived at the Weber River, they met Hastings. Hastings suggested that the Donner-Reed Party take a different route which he said would be easier than the difficult route down the Weber River that he used to take the earlier parties. The new route was over the Wasatch Mountains. It

turned out to be much worse than the river route. The Donner-Reed Party had to cut the route over the mountains. This was an extremely difficult task that further slowed their party's progress. Because of the loss of time there and later on the trail to California, they were ultimately caught in a snowstorm and were forced to stay the winter on the east side of the Sierras. The rest of their terrible ordeal is well known. Their contribution to the development of the Mormon Trail was their cutting of the section of trail over the Wasatch and down Emigration Canyon into the valley that the Mormon pioneer vanguard party followed in 1847.