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Mormon Trail, The

William Hill

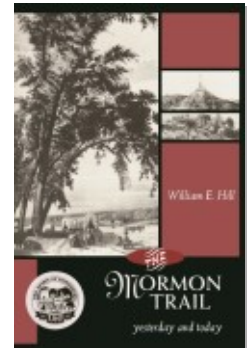
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Nebraska



ELK HORN FERRY—Simons, Collections: Council Bluffs Public Library

The first major crossing for the Mormons and other emigrants after leaving the Omaha area was over the Elk Horn River. There were a couple of main crossing areas. Simons made these drawings of one site in 1854. The first one shows the view from the east side looking southwest at Mormon wagon companies camped and wait-

ing for the ferry across the river.

Here is a similar view of the area today. The river has changed its course since Simons painted the site, but by examining the treeline and fields, the old riverbanks and course can be seen. Horses now graze where the Indian once sat.



ELK HORN SITE—Today



**ELK HORN FERRY—Simons, Collections:
Council Bluffs Public Library**

This view by Simons shows an actual ferry site seen from the west side looking back east at the approaching wagons. Possible remnants of the trail coming down the hill can be found and there are stories of possible graves in the area.

On Saturday, June 11, 1853, Piercy wrote, "The approach to Elk Horn is over a sideling road, and the descent into the lowland which borders the river is difficult. Another wagon was broken...." This is the view of the ferry in 1853 when Frederick Piercy came west with the Mor-

mons. He described the crossing, "On account of the narrowness of the stream they are able to stretch a rope across the river, which, being held by one or two of the ferrymen in the boat, by means of a smaller rope with a noose attached, enables them to guide the boat which is partly carried by the current, and partly dragged by them to the desired point on the opposite bank. The cattle were compelled to swim across." Here is Piercy's view of one of the ferries.



ELK HORN FERRY—Piercy, LDS Church Archives



**HANDCART COMPANY—Simons, Collections:
Council Bluffs Public Library**

Simons made this sketch of one of the 1856 handcart companies. It had come across Iowa, had passed through Council Bluffs, and was then crossing Nebraska.

C. C. A. Christensen had been a member of a handcart company. This painting depicts

the company turning out to rest as some of its members are crossing a small stream in Nebraska. The lady in the lower right can be seen gathering buffalo chips while people at the left are cooking. Where there was no wood, dried buffalo chips provided a hot smokeless fire.



HANDCART COMPANY—Christensen, LDS Church Art Museum



LOUP FERRY—Piercy, LDS Church Archives

Traveling farther west along the Platte River the emigrants came to the Loup River. They were sometimes forced to travel up the river for many miles before being able to cross it safely. While the river was comparatively shallow, it was known for its quicksand. The location where the vanguard party of Mormon Pioneers of 1847 crossed was different from places used in later

years. Piercy made this drawing of the Loup Ferry near the mouth of the Loup in 1853. The drawing shows some wagons being pulled by mules.

The view below of the Loup River near the crossing shows how the area looks today. As with all the rivers in this area the flow has been greatly reduced due to the large amount of water taken out for irrigation.



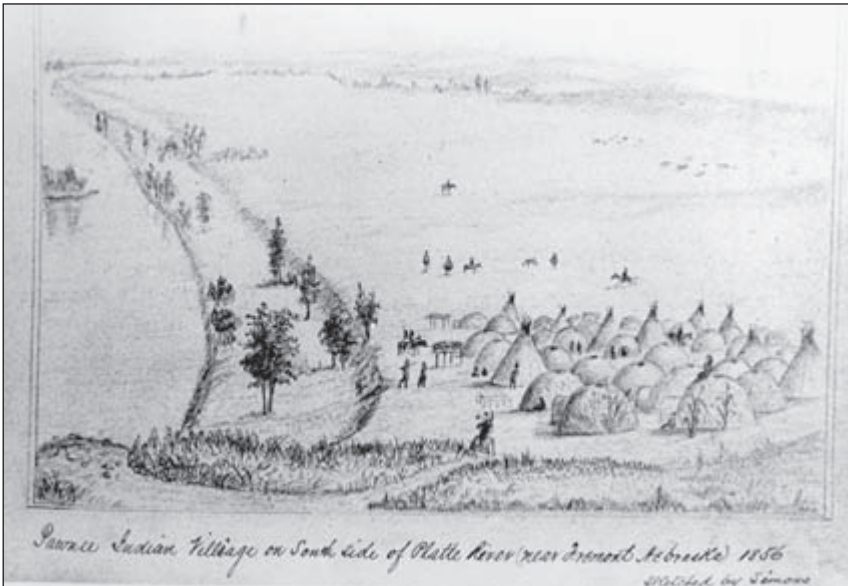
LOUP RIVER—Today



**PAWNEE INDIAN CAMP—Jackson,
Smithsonian Institution Photo #1245-b**

One of the Indian tribes encountered by the emigrants along both the Platte and Loup rivers in eastern Nebraska was the Pawnee. Many of the emigrants had contact with members of this tribe. This 1870 Jackson photo is probably one of the Pawnee camps along the Loup River. The Mormons met the Pawnee near this same area.

Simons also visited the Pawnee and recorded his experience. Today they are gone from the Platte River Valley. A lodge might have lasted about twenty years. A reconstructed Pawnee Indian earth lodge is one of the exhibits at the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer.



**PAWNEE VILLAGE—Simons, Collections:
Council Bluffs Public Library**



**BUFFALO STAMPEDE—Jackson, National Park Service,
Scotts Bluff National Monument**

Probably the animal that best symbolized the Great Plains was the buffalo. This Jackson painting shows a wagon company caught in a large herd while traveling along the Platte River. On Thursday, July 30, 1853, twenty-one days after leaving Winter Quarters, Frederick Piercy wrote, "I saw buffalo this day for the first time in my life. They are very singular in shape and run in a most grotesque manner, and apparently very rapidly. I had no chance of getting near them, but the enthusiasm of some of the hunters in camp drew them out in chase. I wish

them success, for I was tired of bacon." Patty Sessions wrote on Friday, July 16, 1847, "see thousands of buffaloe...after we camped a herd of buffaloe ran in among our cattle."

Whereas buffalo were a common sight to the early emigrants from eastern Nebraska to the South Pass, some of the later emigrants rarely saw more than a few individuals near the trail. Today there are several buffalo associations concerned with increasing the number of buffalo again.



BUFFALO—Today



**LASSOING THE STEERS—Simons, Collections:
Council Bluffs Public Library**

One of the early morning activities was yoking up the oxen. Simons's sketch shows the scene of emigrants catching their oxen while camped along the Platte River. After they were roped the ox yokes had to be put on. For emigrants not used to this, it was quite a trying experience.

Here the oxen at Rock Creek Station, Nebraska, are being brought in after being lassoed. The Mormons who followed the trail from Independence, Fort Leavenworth, or St. Joseph would have passed through Rock Creek.



LASSOING THE OXEN—Today

LONE TREE MARKER—Today

One of the experiences mentioned with enthusiasm by diarists along the trail was the sighting of trees. Most of the Platte River Valley was void of any big trees. Thus, seeing any large tree was a major event. This highway marker tells the story of one Lone Tree and its demise.

Below is the actual site of the tree and another tree that residents planted to replace it. So many trees are now found in the area that it is hard to imagine a lone tree on the prairie. The site is located southwest of Central City near the Platte River. Read Percy's account in the diary section. It describes his similar experience at another Lone Tree which was located a few miles east of Ash Hollow.



LONE TREE SITE—Today



CAMP AT WOOD RIVER—From Piercy's *Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley*

A few days later the Mormons came to Wood River. Piercy made this drawing of their camp on June 26, 1853. The painting shows a beautiful pastoral setting. I am sure that a few months later while crossing the deserts they must have looked back fondly at their camp on Wood River.

Here is a similar view of the area today along Wood River just south of Grand Island. The river is off in the trees on the right. Although the author found cattle grazing in the same area, they walked away and appear only as specks in the background.



WOOD RIVER AREA—Today



ASH HOLLOW—Jagger, California Historical Society

Ash Hollow marked one of the locations where those emigrants who had been following the Oregon Trail on the south side of the Platte River met the North Platte River. It served as a reference point for the Mormon vanguard pioneers in 1847. D. Jagger, a '49er, made this sketch of the outlet on his journey to California. The Mormons traveling with Piercy saw the site from the north side of the North Platte River, a half mile away. Piercy wrote on July 13, 1853,

“We passed Ash Hollow, which is on the south side of the Platte, where we could see an immense herd of buffalo, which good judges said could not number less than 10,000.”

Here is a view of the mouth of Ash Hollow today. The course of the creek has been moved and channeled. For the emigrants who followed the early Oregon Trail from Independence, Missouri, the drop into the head of Ash Hollow was steep and dangerous.



ASH HOLLOW OUTLET—Today



TRAIL REMAINS—Today

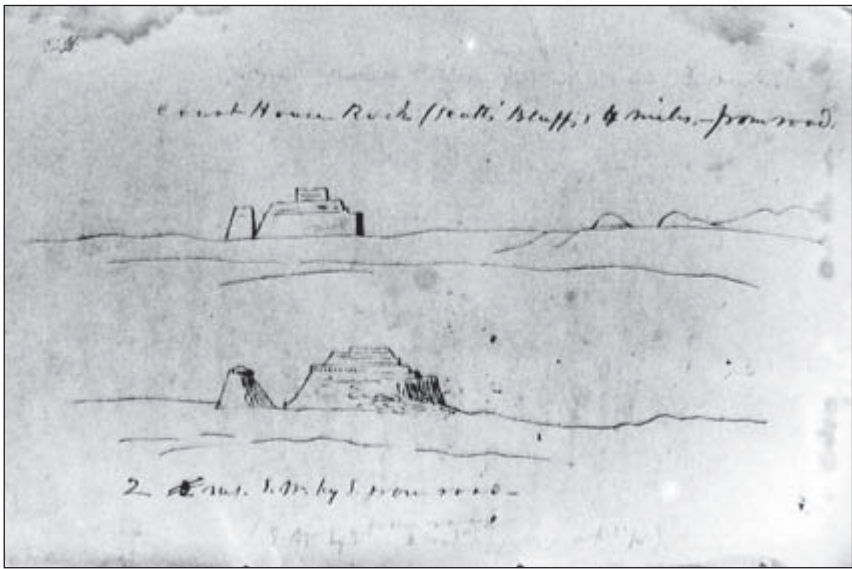
Two days after passing Ash Hollow, the Mormon Trail approached “Ancient Bluff Ruins.” The trail along the Platte River was often very wide. This view shows the width of the trail a few miles east of Ancient Bluffs Ruins just off Highway 26 as the trail approaches what Clayton called “high bluffs,” known today as Indian Lookout Point. Very often parallel paths were cut into the plains.

This is a view of the famous “Ancient Bluff Ruins” just to the north of the present-day Highways 26 and 92 west of Lisco. It was first

named “Bluff Ruins” by Dr. Richards, who was traveling with the 1847 Pioneer Company when they camped there. Later Mormon companies frequently camped in the area and climbed the bluff as members of the Pioneer Company had. Harriett Buckingham wrote in 1851 “...climbed the highest ruin which commanded a fine view of the country...we left our names upon a Buffalo bone which lay bleaching on the top from the river it presents the appearance of a fortified city falling to decay, but the nearer you draw nigh the illusion vanishes.”



ANCIENT BLUFF RUINS—Today



COURTHOUSE AND JAIL ROCKS—Bruff, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

While these two landmarks were not on the Mormon Trail on the north side of the North Platte River, they could be seen by the Mormons. Clayton's guide had earlier noted, "Castle Bluffs, south side the river" referring to the various interesting land formations west of Ash Hollow for the next eighty miles to Scotts Bluff.

Some may even have thought that this was Chimney Rock. For the Mormons who travelled on the south side this was the view they would have seen. Those on the north side had a more distant view.

Here is a similar view of the same area today.



COURTHOUSE AND JAIL ROCKS—Today



CHIMNEY ROCK—Piercy, Nebraska State Historical Society

This is one of two drawings of Chimney Rock by Piercy. Writing in his journal he noted, "Travelled 13 miles and camped on the Platte, Chimney Rock in sight all day, and Scott's Bluffs in the evening. Chimney Rock is on the south side of the Platte, and on my journey home I made the accompanying sketch of it...which is taken nearer by three miles than it could be obtained from the north side." Some Mormons first reported seeing what they thought was Chim-

ney Rock by climbing some bluffs two miles west of present-day Lisco, Nebraska.

Here is a view similar to Piercy's. Of all the landmarks on all the emigrant trails, Chimney Rock is the one most frequently mentioned in diaries. Lucy Canfield, a Mormon emigrant, camped opposite Chimney Rock September 1, 1862 and wrote, "Tis a wild and romantic country around this rock." It still is today. Wagon train rides are available in the area.



CHIMNEY ROCK—Today



**SCOTTS BLUFF—From Piercy's *Route
from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley***

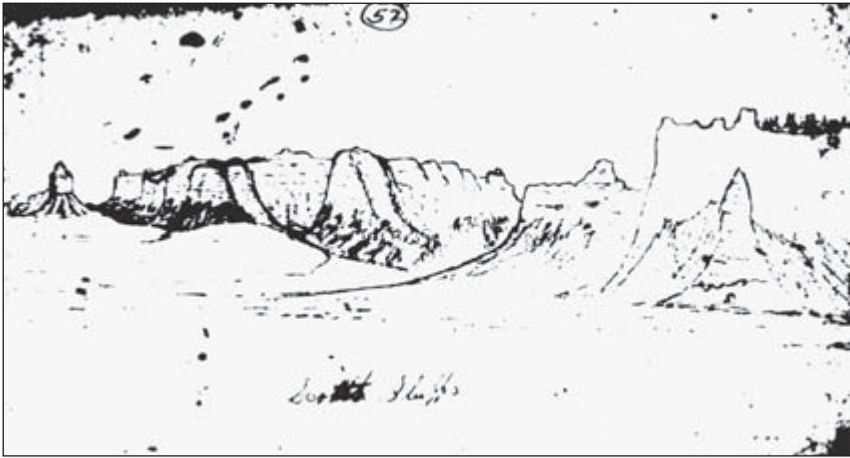
Piercy noted in his journal, "Scott's Bluffs were in view all day. They were certainly the most remarkable sight I had seen since I left England. Viewed from the distance at which I sketched them the shadows were of an intense blue, while the rock illuminated by the setting sun partook of its gold, making a beautiful harmony of

colour. They present a very singular appearance, resembling ruined palaces, castellated towers, temples and monuments."

Today the buffalo are gone from the area and tall corn grows where the prairie grasses grew. Here is a view from near the same location.



SCOTTS BLUFF—Today



SCOTTS BLUFF—Simons, From Merrill Mattes's *The Great Platte River Road*, Nebraska State Historical Society

Simon's view of Scotts Bluff is from a few miles closer to it. His sketch is more basic than Piercy's drawing. However it is still possible to point out specific parts. Notice Dome Rock at the left, then the main south bluff, and the north bluff including the portion known today as the "saddle."

Here is a similar view of the area today from the north side of the river. This is the view the Mormons and other emigrants on the north side had. It is about one mile west of Rebecca Winters's grave.



SCOTTS BLUFF—Today