

Epilogue

(111 Days to Zion. Knight and Kimball. pp. 255-257)

One hundred and fifty years have elapsed since the first Mormon pioneers settled in Salt Lake Valley, but the impact of their trek continues today.

A modern skyline rising above a tree-lined Salt Lake City is only one part of their legacy. For the pioneers did not simply found a thriving city, they established an empire.

Before the linking of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, nearly 70,000 Mormon emigrants crossed the plains by wagon and handcart. An estimated 6,000 died along the way, almost all buried in unmarked graves. After the railroad was available they still came, but such immigrants no longer were given the lofty title of "pioneer." Sometimes the late-comers were referred to as "Pullman pioneers" because they arrived by rail.

Soon after the first Mormons reached the valley they fanned out in all directions in the greatest program of organized colonization the world has ever seen—founding more than 350 communities from Canada to Mexico (and even across those borders) and from Nebraska to California within 30 years. Side by side with this far-flung expansion they forged a religious empire, creating a theocracy that met not only their spiritual, but also their civil needs. In the early years they often simply ignored the usual government system and handled their affairs through the church organization. This, and the practice of polygamy, infuriated the non-Mormons among them and helped fuel a conflict that would last more than half a century and include, among other things, a bloodless "war" with the U.S. Army.

The hoped-for isolation they sought in a desert empire was only partially achieved. The land soon became U.S. territory as a result of the war with Mexico. Mining, commercial ventures, the California gold rush and the railroad, all brought so-called gentiles into the midst of the Mormons. The peace the pioneers wanted thus eluded them, but their empire was far enough removed that they were in the majority and not subject to the mob violence that had driven them from their earlier homes.

After reaching their goal on July 24, 1847, the first Mormon pioneers did not give a sigh of relief and settle down to build their private lives. They were more like troops in a religious army, dispatched here and there by the orders of Brigham Young. In the first week they explored the valley, sent expeditions south to Utah Lake and north to Cache Valley, met with local Indians, chose a site for a temple, investigated the nearby canyons, made crude roads into the mountains for timber, plowed and planted 53 acres of vegetables and other crops, and started building a boat. They surveyed the city, assigned farming plots according to family size and laid down a number of rules, a chief one being that no land could be privately owned. It wasn't to be bought or sold—just used.

Five days after their arrival the ranks were swelled by another 200 persons when the Mormon Battalion sick detachment, which had wintered at Pueblo, Colo., marched into the valley accompanied by some Mississippi Mormons who also spent the winter at Pueblo. These additions raised the total number of pioneers in the valley to about 350.

Bricks were made, timber cut, and work was started on a fort where Pioneer Park is now located. Corrals were built for cattle.

A baby, Elizabeth Steele, was born Aug. 9, the first Mormon infant in the valley. Two days later, George Therlkill, age 3, wandered away from camp, fell into City Creek and was drowned, an accident that brought gloom to all the new settlers.

Only three weeks after the pioneers entered the valley, many of them turned around and started the long, weary journey back across the plains to Winter Quarters, Neb. A total of 71 men with 33 wagons under the command of Tunis Rappleye and Shadrach Roundy were sent on the return trip to collect their families and guide others across the plains. They made a quick trip, reaching Winter Quarters in only 67 days. Rappleye, Roundy and company left Salt Lake Valley Aug. 16 and were followed Aug. 26 by a larger group of 108 men led by Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball, which made it to Winter Quarters in 68 days.

Samuel Brannan, John Brown and others also left the valley for California with instructions for the Mormon Battalion members there, as well as the New York Mormons who had sailed to the west coast with Brannan earlier.

Departure of all these groups left less than 180 persons in the valley to tend the crops, finish building the fort and get along as best they could until more help arrived.

But their numbers soon were increased by arrival of the "Big Company"—a large group of pioneers who had left Winter Quarters in June and were thus on the trail before the advance pioneers with Brigham reached the valley in July. The various divisions of the Big Company began arriving in the valley in September. By early October more than 1,500 persons and 556 wagons had reached the goal. Brigham Young and the others who went back to Winter Quarters in 1847, returned in 1848 with companies totaling 2,000 Mormons and 4,000 animals of many kinds.

Many of the pioneers in the original company would be on the move much of their lives—an experience common to thousands of the early Mormons. A dozen of the historic first party died violent deaths in accidents or at the hands of Indians. For years, they and others suffered hardship, poverty and hunger. Just as they would get reasonably comfortable, they would be called to move again.

The example of George Wardle was typical. A musician and wheelwright and a native of England who had emigrated to Nauvoo in 1842, he was among those chosen for the historic first trek. After crossing the plains, he went back for his family and brought them to Salt Lake Valley. When he arrived the second time he was asked to start a dancing school, organize a choir and put together a brass band, in addition to working as a wheelwright and blacksmith.

Later he was called to settle in Provo, but had barely finished his house when he was asked to move to Midway, Wasatch County, where he promptly built another home. Then he was moved again to Glenwood, Sevier County, where he prospered for a time. Because the town of Midway had problems, he was called back there. A few years later he was asked to settle in Vernal, where he died at age 81.

To Brigham Young, the test of a man's faith was his willingness to uproot himself and his family time and again and start life anew where he was needed.

The early years of Utah contain thousands of individual stories of hardship, sacrifice, heroic work and devotion to church assignments at incredible cost.

When the area became a U.S. territory, it dashed the hopes of the pioneers to create a "State of Deseret" stretching across what is now several western states. Federal officials appointed to administer the territory often were political hacks of little ability and frequently hostile to everything Mormon. Friction grew, culminating in the Utah War of 1857 when U.S. troops were sent to quell a non-existent "rebellion." The conflict ended by negotiation and resulted in soldiers being stationed at what is now Fort Douglas.

Life was never the same for Mormons after that. Their troubles with the gentiles escalated over the years, mostly about polygamy, but also regarding struggles over political and economic control of the territory. Finally, with many of their leaders jailed or in hiding, church property confiscated and church members deprived of the right to vote or hold office, the Manifesto of 1890 was issued renouncing the practice of polygamy.

Eventually, church property was returned and in 1896 Utah was admitted as a state, finally getting rid of what Mormons had considered "carpetbag" government by appointment.

In the 20th century most of the old conflicts faded away and Mormons rose to prominence in political, business and cultural life all over the nation. But their strict living habits, their placing of their religion as the pivot and center of their lives, and devotion of their time and resources to the church, have kept the Mormons somewhat apart as a "peculiar people."

The gathering to Zion which the trek of the pioneers represented finally ended. The flow began to move in other directions as Mormons flourished elsewhere, supported by a rapidly expanding missionary effort. Although Utah is still the headquarters of the church and holds a special place in the hearts of Mormons, the church has become a world-wide institution and its members number in the millions. But the story of the pioneers remains vibrant and alive—the heritage of all Mormons, including tens of thousands who have never set foot in the United States.