

Assorted Comments from *The Mormon Trek West*, by Joseph Brown
(The move from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters)

Pioneer Ancestors (Introduction, p. x)

It is a curious fact that the Mormons, who did not want to go west in the first place, were the most successful in doing so. Mormons were not typical westering Americans: whereas others went for a new identity, adventure, furs, land, or gold, they were driven west for their religious beliefs. The pioneer group was not concerned just with getting themselves safely settled but in making the road easier for others to follow. Furthermore, the Mormons transplanted a whole people, a whole culture, not just isolated, unrelated individuals. They moved as villages on wheels and differed profoundly from the Oregon and California migrations. Consequently, the Mormons became the most systematic, organized, disciplined, and successful pioneers in United States history.

The experience of the trail, the crossing of the plains turned into a great event not only in the lives of the pioneers but in the minds of their descendants. It became a rite of passage, the final test of faith. The contemporary U. S. Mormon is proud of nothing in his heritage more than that one or more of his ancestors "crossed the plains." Today a special mythology and clouds of glory surround these pioneers. The most important honor societies in Mormondom are the Sons and Daughters of the Utah Pioneers.

Thomas L. Kane's perception of Nauvoo: (p. 3)

There were other towns in Illinois along the Mississippi, but few could compare with Nauvoo, a town almost as large as Chicago. Months after the February exodus had begun, in fact, a visiting U. S. Army officer, Colonel Thomas L. Kane, could find little but praise for the city:

Ascending the upper Mississippi in the autumn, when the waters were low [Kane later wrote], I was compelled to travel by land past the region of the Rapids.... My eye wearied everywhere to see sordid, vagabond and idle settlers, a country marred, without being improved, by their careless hands. I was descending the last hillside upon my journey when a landscape in delightful contrast broke upon my view. Half encircled by a bend of the river, a beautiful city lay glittering in the fresh morning sun; its bright, new dwellings, set in cool green gardens, ranging up around a stately dome-shaped hill, which was covered by a noble white edifice, whose high tapering spire was radiant with white and gold. The city appeared to cover several miles; and beyond it, in the background, there rolled off a fair country, chequered by the careful lines of fruitful industry. The unmistakable marks of industry, enterprise and educated wealth everywhere, made the scene one of singular and most striking beauty.

Upon Leaving Nauvoo (pp. 44-45)

It was cold, too; even in the spring of early April, the temperature plunged below freezing at night, and when the morning sun eased the chill, it also melted the frozen mud. Inside the tents, beds began to sink into the mud underneath; only by building a supporting foundation of twigs and branches did the Saints manage to stay above the mire. Under such conditions, it was all the pioneers could do to keep themselves comfortable; the animals were turned loose to fend for themselves. Iowa was a terrible discouragement; a people less driven doubtless would have given

up. But the Mormons had something few others had. They had their deep and abiding faith, and in their time of severe trial, it sustained them above all else. On April 11, Pratt summarized it well in his diary:

To any but Saints, our circumstances would have been very discouraging, for it seemed to be with the greatest difficulty that we could preserve our animals from actual starvation, and we were obliged to send off several days' journey to the Missouri settlements on the south, to procure grain. Many of the people were nearly destitute of food, and many women and children suffered much from exposure due to the inclemency of the weather, and from the lack of the necessaries of life, such as they were in former times accustomed to enjoy. But in the midst of all these temporal afflictions, the Saints were comforted in anticipation of better days; they looked forward to the time when these light afflictions would cease, and when they should have the privilege of sitting under their own vine and fig trees, with none to molest them or make them afraid. They were willing to endure hardships and privations, for the sake of escaping the unrelenting persecutions of Gentile Christians, from whom they had received for many years nothing but cruelty and the most heart-rending oppression. Their desire was to establish themselves in some lonely valley of the mountains—in some sequestered spot, where they and their children could worship God, and obey his voice, and prepare themselves for the glory which is to be revealed at the revelation of Jesus Christ. With these glorious anticipations, cheerfulness and joy seemed to animate every countenance, and sufferings were endured without murmuring. The twelve apostles of the church and other of the authorities, met in council, and determined to leave the settlements still further on our left, and launch forth upon the broad prairies of the north-west, which were for hundreds of miles entirely uninhabited.

Settlements Along the Way (pp. 46-47)

Colonel Stephen Markham had been assigned the task of leading about one hundred pioneers ahead of the main group to build and repair roads, make bridges, select campsites, establish temporary places of shelter, and scout around for sites where permanent camps could be built for Mormons who would follow in the months ahead.

The site near the Grand River seemed ideal for the last assignment. There the pioneers established their first permanent "base" since crossing the Mississippi, almost two months before. They named it Garden Grove, and a small town of that name still stands there today. Within two days, nearly four hundred Saints trudged into the camp. They found the soil rich and the timber plentiful. Work parties were chosen to turn the barren site into a livable community. Some dug wells, while others strung fences; one hundred were designated as tree cutters, while still others set to work erecting permanent dwellings, plowing fields and planting crops.

. . . Garden Grove became an instant haven in the wilderness. Arriving after days of slogging through ankle-deep mud, William Huntington called it "as butiful a site as ever was seen in this region of cuntry a city of tents and waggons inhabited by the saints of the last days." Huntington may be forgiven an understandable exaggeration, but in its 750 acres the Saints had built their town of solid log houses almost overnight and had broken the rich soil around it to plant crops. In his memoirs, John R. Young later described the construction of the community:

All were . . . employed, and the camp became presently like a hive of bees. There being no room for idlers, all seemed happy.... Samuel Bent, Aaron Johnson, and David Fullmer were chosen to preside over those that should remain. They were instructed to divide the lands among the poor without charge; but to give to no man more than he could thoroughly cultivate. There must be no waste and no speculation. Moreover, the settlement was not regarded as more than temporary; for as soon as our leaders should find the "place," all energies were to be centered in gathering to that place. As yet, however, no one, not even Brigham Young, knew where the "place" would be; but it was talked at the campfires that President Young had seen, in vision, a wonderful valley, so large that all our people could be gathered into it, and yet so far from civilization, the mobs could not come at night to burn and whip and kidnap. Strange as it may seem, this vision formed the most entrancing theme of our conversations, and the national song of Switzerland became our favorite hymn: "For the strength of the hills we bless thee, our God, our fathers' God."

. . . Brigham had led an advance party out of Garden Grove after a nine-day stay in the new community. Parley P. Pratt was sent ahead as a scout to find a location for the second permanent camp in Iowa. More difficult to locate today than Garden Grove, it lay near the Grand River in what Hosea Stout later described as "a beautiful grove of hickory." In his autobiography, Parley Pratt describes how he felt at seeing the place for the first time, and how he gave it its name:

I came suddenly to some round and sloping hills, grassy and crowded with beautiful groves of timber; while alternate open groves and forests seemed blended in all the beauty and harmony of an English park. While beneath and beyond, on the west, rolled a main branch of the Grand River, with its rich bottoms of alternate forest and prairie. As I approached this lovely scenery, several deer and wolves, being startled at the sight of me, abandoned the place and bounded away till lost from my sight amid the groves. Being pleased and excited at the varied beauty before me, I cried out, "This is Mount Pisgah."

At Mount Pisgah, the Mormons cleared three thousand acres of land, built permanent homes as they had at Garden Grove, and once again planted crops. William Huntington was made president of the encampment, with Ezra T. Benson and Charles C. Rich designated as counselors. Despite Parley Pratt's encounter with deer and wolves, the area generally had been thinned of game by a local tribe of Indians, the Potawatomis, "whose trails and old campgrounds could be seen in every direction," as Orson Pratt described it. Yet the richness of the soil more than made up for lack of animals. Mount Pisgah became an even more important way-stop than Garden Grove.

A look at the travel schedules of the pioneers who left Nauvoo after February is a good indication of how the bitter Iowa winter had affected the advance party of Saints. It is also a barometer of their endurance and indomitable will. Wilford Woodruff, for instance, a member of the Council of Twelve and later fourth president of the LDS, did not leave Illinois until May 26, after the advance party had hacked a community out of the woods at Mount Pisgah. Yet he arrived at the Mormons' second permanent community on June 15. Hosea Stout, William Clayton, Brigham Young and the others had trudged for *three months* to reach the site; Woodruff made it in *three weeks*.