

### **Trail Junk Becomes a Boon for the Mormons**

(From: *The Trail of Hope -- The Story of the Mormon Trail*. pp. 96-99)

Ten Mormon companies, numbering about five thousand, traveled the trail to Salt Lake in 1850. In contrast, an estimated fifty thousand people headed west that year, most for California. Despite increasing difficulties, Joseph Fish recalled the beginning of his journey with a certain measure of romantic innocence:

As the company stretched out across the broad prairies it presented a picturesque appearance. Bare-footed children, here and there, wending their way along the line of march. Women, some with sunbonnets, some with hats and others with various kinds of protection for the head, traveling along through the hot dust and over the parched plains. Men with their long whips walking beside the lolling oxen that were dragging their heavy loads towards the setting sun. A variety of characters were behind bringing up the rear with the loose stock which was varied as their drivers. All were hastening west as fast as they could over these boundless prairies.

This impression faded and was replaced by other images, such as his father's grave counting. By the time many emigrant trains reached the Sweetwater River, their draft animals began to fail. Emigrants began discarding everything that was not needed to lighten the load on their animals and to increase speed. Samuel Gifford wrote a graphic account of the rapidly expanding trail junkyard:

"The horror that reigned in camps ahead of us cannot be described. Sometimes (places) for miles could be seen, feather beds, blankets, quilts, and clothing of every kind strewed over the plains, also wagon tires and irons of every description, gun barrels, stoves, etc. etc. The bottom of the Sweetwater was also lined with wagon tires, chains and other irons. And fresh graves could be seen in every direction. We met some missionaries going east who said they met companies of the gold emigration that were driving twelve abreast, hurrying to get away from the Cholera."

Joseph Fish recalled a similar scene:

"On August 4th we arrived at the Devil's Gate. At this place we found quite a number of wagons. Several had been burnt. The emigrants going to the mines of California had found it impossible to take all their wagons and loading through, so some left their wagons and others burnt them rather than have them fall into the hands of the Mormons. They were eager to get through to the mines on the coast, and wagons, give out animals and innumerable articles of all kinds were left by the wayside. I even noticed an old broken fiddle. The road along here was lined with these articles as they had been thrown aside to lighten the loads of those who were hastening to the Eldarado of the west."

The trail trash that Fish saw became a windfall for the Mormons in Salt Lake City. Church leaders organized scavenging hunts to recover usable goods discarded by passing emigrant trains. John D. Lee reported finding [Spelling his] "Harness, Tools of Every discription, Provisions, clothings, stoves, cooking vessels, Pouder, Lead, & all most everything, etc. that

could be mentioned." While collecting the discarded windfall, Lee became a beacon of hope to passing non-Mormon emigrant trains:

"Very frequent[ly] some 20 or 30 persons would surround the waggon and plead for a moment's instructions, some of them with consternation depicted on their countenances, their teams worn out, women & children on foot & some packing their provision[s], trying to reach some point of refuge. The general cry was, are you from the Mormon city or valley? Yes. What is the distance? Is there any feed by the way? What will be the charge to get fresh animals, Provisions, vegetables, Butter, cheese, &c. could we winter in the valley? Do pray tell us all you can that will benefit us, for we are in great distress. Stop & write us a way bill. We will pay you all you ask. Apples, Peaches (Dried), coffee, sugar, Tea, Rice, Flour, Bacon, &c., was often brought & presented.... Truly one of the ancient[s] said that the love of money was the Root of all Evil. It was the love of it that has caused thousands to leave their pleasant homes & comfortable Firesides & thus plunge themselves into unnecessary suffering & distress."

Some Latter-day Saints claimed that much of the suffering on the trail fell on travelers from Missouri and Illinois, whom they felt were responsible for much of their previous suffering. William Butler noted, "This year there was great destruction of life and property among the people, mostly of Illinois and Missouri, who were traveling on the Plains to the gold mines of California."

Apostle George A. Smith painted this picture of Mormon reaction to former enemies:

"The very men who were the murderers of our fathers, and our brothers, the burners of our houses, have come here among this people since that time, where they have received protection; they have been fed when they were hungry. The very man who burned the house of Elder Moses Clawson, at Lima, came to him and said, 'Mr. Clawson, I want to get some provisions from you.' Now these very persecutors knew that our religion was true, and that we were men of sterling integrity, or else they never would have thrown themselves in our way, and called upon us for aid afterwards; and I am proud to say, that kind aid and assistance on their journey to the gold mines, have been extended to hundreds of these robbers, and thus the coals of fire have been heaped upon their backs, but their skulls were so thick, it never burned many of them a bit."