

BRIGHAM YOUNG

From 1846 to 1869, more than 70,000 Mormons traveled along an integral part of the road west, the Mormon Pioneer Trail. The trail started in Nauvoo, Illinois, traveled across Iowa, connected with the Great Platte River Road at the Missouri River, and ended near the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Generally following pre-existing routes, the trail carried tens of thousands of Mormon emigrants to a new home and refuge in the Great Basin. From their labors arose the State of Deseret, later to become the Utah Territory, and finally the State of Utah.

THE TRAIL EXPERIENCE

The Mormon pioneers shared similar experiences with others traveling west: the drudgery of walking hundreds of miles, suffocating dust, violent thunderstorms, mud, temperature extremes, bad water, poor forage, sickness, and death. They recorded their experiences in journals, diaries, and letters that have become a part of our national heritage.

The Mormons, however, were a unique part of this migration. Their move to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake was not entirely voluntary, but to maintain a religious and cultural identity it was necessary to find an isolated area where they could permanently settle and practice their religion in peace. This was a movement of an entire people, an entire religion, and an entire culture driven by religious fervor and determination.

February 4, 1846. First wagons leave Nauvoo, Illinois, and cross the Mississippi River. "The great severity of the weather, and...the difficulty of crossing the river during many days of running ice, all combined to delay our departure, though for several days the bridge of ice across the Mississippi greatly facilitated the crossing."
BRIGHAM YOUNG, February 28, 1846

The Mormon pioneers learned quickly to be well-organized. They traveled in semi-military fashion, grouped into companies of 100s, 50s, and 10s. Discipline, hard work, mutual assistance, and devotional practices were part of their daily routine on the trail. Knowing that others would follow, they improved the trail and built support facilities. Businesses, such as ferries, were established to help finance the movement. They did not hire professional guides. Instead, they followed existing trails, used maps and accounts of early explorers, and gathered information from travelers and frontiersmen they met along the way.

An early odometer was designed and built to record their mileage while traveling on the trail. In the end, strong group unity and organization made the Mormon movement more orderly and efficient than other emigrants traveling to Oregon and California.