

The Mormon Trail in Buffalo County

The Geography of the Mormon Trail Across Nebraska, Olga Sharp Steele, thesis, May 1933, UNL

“The later roads kept to the second bench as far as Gibbon, depending on Wood River for water, then descended to the first terrace near Kearney. From the crossing of the Wood River to the town of Kearney the road was plural, many branches of it paralleling each other across both terraces. The higher roads were straighter and the shortened distances between towns. The Union Pacific railroad and the Lincoln Highway later followed closely the line of the highest road.”

(William Clayton’s) guidebook, however, describes two deep ravines with ‘steep descent,’ which were about two miles west of Kearney in sections 4 & 5, township 8 north, range 16 west.

(According to map in this thesis, the museum grounds are ½ mile north of the early route & 1 mile south of the shorter route.)

Map shows the trail drops down to the Platte between Gibbon & Kearney & then moves slightly farther away once it is past Kearney. Theory is that this was a good camping area so they moved closer to the river.

From Pam Long – DAR Magazine, 1980 (in Ft. Kearny envelope in Archives)

Mormon Trail – “from 1846 to 1869, this route carried 60,000 Later-day Saints westward to Salt Lake City. Only in time of emergency did the Mormons ford the Platte to Ft. Kearney for supplies or other needs....”

From THE FEDERAL UNION, A History of the United States to 1865, by John D. Hicks, (Houghton Mifflin Company, Cambridge, Mass., 1952) p. 483

“The Mormon migration is one of the outstanding episodes of American frontier history. During the spring and summer of 1846, about twelve thousand of the Mormons, four fifths of their total membership, left their homes, including such of their property as they were unable to take with them, and crossed through Iowa to the Council Bluffs, a place-name then given to the region on both sides of the Missouri River adjacent to the present city of Omaha. Early in 1847 Young and a small company of his associates pushed on further west to ‘spy out the land,’ and determined on the Great Salt Lake basin as the best available site for the colony they meant to establish. In September, 1847, the first detachment arrived, 1553 in number, and others followed with such rapidity that by 1850 the Salt Lake settlement numbered over eleven thousand. The ‘Mormon Trail’ usually followed the north bank of the Platte River, continued westward through what is now Wyoming to South Pass, then turned southward to the Great Salt Lake.”

From William Clayton's diary, 1847 (Brigham Young's first train west)

Friday, 30th [April, entering Buffalo County]

'The prairie level and green with grass. We travel on the first bench about three quarter of a mile north of the timber on Grand Island. There are many wild geese on the prairie, also buffalo dung, but none very recent. There are immense patches of blue grass which from appearances, the buffalo are fond of. There are also numerous patches of buffalo grass which is very short, thick on the ground, and curly like the hair on a buffalo's hide, and much resembling it, except in color.'

[Buda area] "...The wagons were formed in an imperfect circle in such a manner as to have all the wagon mouths from the wind which took near an hour to form the encampment. We are about a mile from water and a mile and a half from timber, with very little grass for our teams....Some have had the good luck to bring a little wood with them but it seems as if many will have a cold supper. And some perhaps little or nothing as they have no bread cooked. Eight p.m., the camp has found a good substitute for wood in dried buffalo dung which lies on the ground here in great plenty, made makes a good fire when properly managed....To save the trouble of carrying water so far a well was dug in a short time about 4 feet deep and good water obtained. After supper I went and gathered some dried buffalo dung, to cook with in the morning.'

"Saturday, 1st of May....Soon after we started this morning three buffalo were seen grazing on the bluff about six miles distance....another herd of buffalo were seen to the northwest at the foot of the bluffs about eight miles off. I counted 71....

Soon after the hunters started out a noon [from the stop in the Kearney area] we came to a long range of dog towns and saw many of the little prairie dogs playing around their holes. The extent of this dog town is yet unknown, for we have traveled over, and parallel with it about five miles this afternoon, and they seem to extend still further west.'

[Camped for two days probably in Odessa area following the buffalo hunt which also had taken place there.]

Recorded on Monday, 3rd. "...reported that Brother Empey had discovered a large war party of Indians while he was chasing an antelope. The Indians were in a hollow about twelve miles distance and about three hundred in number....It was thought best to travel with the wagons four abreast and the cannon to go to the rear.'

Started from Winter Quarters (Florence, Nebraska) on April 5, 1847. 143 men, 3 women, 2 children. 72 wagons, 93 horses, 52 mules, 66 oxen, 19 cows, 17 dogs, a few chickens.

From THE FAR WESTERN FRONTIER 1830-1860, by Ray A. Billington, (New York: Harper Row), 1956

- Page 193 – 1830 – organized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by Joseph Smith
Moved to Kirtland, Ohio (North part of the state)
1837 – Moved to Far West & DeWitt, Missouri (Northwestern part of state)
1840 – Moved to Nauvoo, Illinois
1844 – Smith’s last revelation allowed certain Mormons to practice polygamy, (He also declared himself candidate for President)
- Page 194 – polygamy, (He also declared himself candidate for President)
- Page 195 - Ended in death at Carthage jail, Brigham Young took over leadership.
- Page 196 – 1845 – fall – Young promised surrounding citizens they would move out in the spring
1846 – Feb. – First group crossed frozen Mississippi into Iowa to establish Camp of Israel. By June Nauvoo was deserted.
- Page 197 - Summer – Moved across Iowa to Winter Quarters across Missouri R.
- Page 198 - 15,000 spent winter there. 600 died.
Daily schedule -
Bugle call at 5 AM
Devotions & breakfast while animals grazed
Bugle blast to start daily march
Moved in single file except double when there was danger of Indians
Train divided into groups of 10 wagons, each with lieutenant
8:30 – halt, supper, evening prayer, to bed by 9
- Page 200 – The group of 1,500 arrived the end of August
1847 – First group – a part of Young’s train arrived July 22, 1847. Young & rest of train arrived July 24. Second caravan arrived July 29
Total migration ending in fall of 1847 was about 1,800 people.
1848 – 1,891 more came
- Page 205 – 1849 – Missionary activities started in fall
England, France, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, the Society Islands, later the rest of Europe, Far East, Latin Am. Appealed to poor & dispossessed.
Perpetual Emigrating Fund set up.
- Page 206 – 1856 – Handcarts
& 207 June 9 – first group started) Total 497 persons
June 11 – second group started) 100 handcarts
Singing: Who cares to go with wagons?
Not we who are free and strong;
Our faith and arms, with right good will,
Shall pull our carts along.
Arrived in Salt Lake City Sept. 26, 1856
Third party arrived Oct. 2, 1856
4th & 5th parties started in August, waiting for handcarts to be

finished. Had frequent breakdowns because green lumber had been used & the carts were overloaded since there were not enough wagons to carry heavier foodstuffs. Planned to store up again at Ft. Laramie but they were out of supplies. So, on short rations they headed for South Pass. Children & older people gave out, slowed the train. 1000 in these parties, 225 died.

From WESTWARD EXPANSION, A History of the American Frontier, by Ray A. Billington, (New York: Macmillan Co.), 1960, p. 540-545.

At Winter Quarters Brigham Young taught the Mormons about Plains travel – how to drive their wagons in four parallel columns when danger threatened, to circle the wagons to form a corral at night, to obey orders blindly lest they fall prey to the Indians. He divided the people into groups of 100 with a captain over each group.

First group started mid-April 1847

146 men & women, 73 wagons, herd of cattle

Stayed on north side of Platte

1. higher ground
2. to avoid Missourians who were frequently found on the Oregon Trail on the south side

Daily schedule –

Prayers at 5 A M

Start trailing at 7 A M

Go 20 miles

Stop for night. Corral herd in wagon circle, put tents on outside

Evening prayers

To bed by 9 P M

Reached Ft. Laramie in early June (about 7 weeks travel)

Arrived at Great Salt Lake valley July 24, 1847

Second group of 1553 people followed the first shortly and arrived (in the ?? fall)

Summer of 1848 – 1800 more immigrants from the east

Mormon missionaries traveled to the eastern part of the U. S., England, and the Baltic countries winning converts and urging the to emigrate to the Great Salt Lake. The appealed to the “oppressed lower classes in industrial centers.”

Those who could not afford the equipment and supplies needed to move were provided assistance through the Perpetual Emigrating Fund which had been established in 1849. It was understood that these loans would be repaid as soon as the immigrant was financially secure.

1856 – System devised by Brigham Young. Carpenters from the church were sent to Iowa City (jumping off place for the Mormon Trail) to construct 2-wheeled hand carts.

First “Hand Cart Brigade” of 500 men, women & children traveled that summer, taking about the same amount of time as prairie schooners.

Two more parties arrived safely but two more started too late & were caught by snow in Wyoming mountains. [see Nebraska Quarterly, latest publication]

Many continued using handcarts until 1861.

From “After Winter Quarters and Council Bluffs: The Mormons in Nebraska Territory, 1854-1867” by Michael W. Homer, *Nebraska History*, Nebraska State Historical Society, Winter 1984, page 467-483.

Florence was a rest stop for the handcart companies in 1856. In the four year period 1856-1860 ten handcart companies passed through Florence. By 1859 it had replaced Iowa City as the jumping off place and main outfitting post.

Brigham Young wanted to establish Mormon settlements all along the route from the Missouri River to Utah. In 1860 he directed the Elder at Florence to arrange for families to man stations at Deer Creek [Wyoming], Wood River, and near Ft. Laramie. Joseph E. Johnson, who was living at the Mormon settlement of Genoa [Nebraska], answered the call and established a station at Wood River. He remained there until August 1861 when he and his family moved to Utah.