

WRITTEN FROM GREAT SALT LAKE CITY IN 1849

Edited by

DALE L. MORGAN

IN this centennial year of the California gold rush, it is interesting to search out some of the letters written a century ago by overland immigrants who traveled the Salt Lake route. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to such letters; yet they provide not only an insight into the experiences of a significant proportion of the California immigration but also the earliest reports by outside observers on the new Mormon colony in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake—a colony which was just beginning to take shape as a community when the tidal inundation by the Forty-niners began.

The first travelers to reach Great Salt Lake City in the summer of 1849 arrived on June 16, a pack mule company said to have been commanded by Captain G. W. Paul, though the earliest allusion to overland arrivals that has so far come to light in a Mormon diary is Eliza R. Snow's notation on June 19, "People with pack animals arrive from the States going to California. They expect wagons in 2 or 3 days." By June 23 they were arriving in great numbers, pack parties and wagon companies alike, and Hosea Stout, who the following morning went around to visit their encampment, found them "trading off their waggons, Harness &c surplus clothings &c cheaper than State prices taking in exchange Horses mules saddles pack saddles &c at very high prices."

Two weeks later, writing to his brother Orson, Parley P. Pratt commented, "The present travel through this place, or near it, will, it is thought, amount to some thirty or forty thousand persons." Almon W. Babbitt, who had gone out to the Valley with the Forty-niners, and who returned east with the mail on July 27, guessed that from 12,000 to 15,000 California immigrants had passed through the Valley. No reliable figures exist, but from 5,000 to 8,000 would approximate the total for the year, the whole immigration over South Pass being estimated by Hubert H. Bancroft at about 25,000.

As the summer waned, the immigration slacked off, but isolated parties arrived throughout the fall. The last company to get in, Critcher's party, which had left the States September 24, reached the haven of the Mormon city by the narrowest margin, having to abandon their wagons in Echo Canyon and their horses below Big Mountain, the snow being six feet deep on the level. When the nineteen exhausted men arrived on December 1, they had been virtually without food for four days. They had taken grave risks in making the journey so late in the season, and their arrival gave a proper dramatic flourish to the final curtain for the overland immigration of 1849.

The letters here printed are only the smallest sampling of those that could be brought to light by a thorough search of the newspaper files of 1849-50. Yet

as a sampling it seems likely that they fairly represent the whole. Of eight letters reproduced, seven express an entirely favorable view of the Saints and their young community, while one is wholly unfavorable. Should one examine the daily journals of immigrants who traveled by way of Great Salt Lake City, one would find about the same proportion of favorable and unfavorable comment, and it would be evident that those who took exception to the Mormons usually were antagonistic to the leaders rather than to the Saints themselves. Although in some respects 1849 saw more cordial relations between the Saints and the overland immigrants than prevailed in any subsequent year, until the end of the frontier era it was always true that the body of the Saints fared better than their ruling authorities in the estimation of the overland travelers.

All but one of these letters were printed originally in contemporary newspapers, and this gives them an interest and value beyond their significance as a picture of social and economic conditions in Great Salt Lake City in 1849; being published, they played their part in the struggle of the Mormons to vindicate themselves before American public opinion, a propaganda struggle in which they had had to engage with the most deadly seriousness for more than fifteen years. There can be no doubt that the favorable reports flooding back into hometown newspapers concerning the Mormons in their new mountain home had a constructive effect upon Congress and the President in the endeavor upon which the Mormons were now embarking to obtain a government of their own. Although their cherished State of Deseret was not sanctioned by Congress, the Territory of Utah being set up in its stead, Utah was favored as few territories have been in the number of its own citizens who were named to be its officers. The letters of Dr. John M. Bernhisel to Brigham Young, written from Washington during this critical period, fully emphasize the value to his labors of the cordial letters turning up everywhere in the newspapers.

It has often been said that the Saints were guilty of gouging the needy immigrants who flooded in upon them seeking supplies. But it is evident from these letters that the laws of supply and demand were in usual operation through the summer of 1849. None of the present letters criticizes the Mormons on this score.

I

[Great Salt Lake City]

8th July [1849]¹

We are now encamped in the Mormon City, fourteen hundred miles from the States.² The city is laid off in very handsome style, and is about five miles

1. Reprinted from the Palmyra *Missouri Whig*, October 4, 1849. The *Whig* prefaces the letter as follows: "A friend has permitted us to make some extracts from a letter written at the Mormon city, by Mr. JOHN B. HAZLIP, a citizen of our town, who left for California last spring. The writer had been sick with the mountain fever, but had recovered. Mr. THOS. HARD and Mr. JOSEPH WINLOCK, of the same company, were slightly unwell when the letter was written. The letter is dated 8th July . . ."
2. As measured by the Mormon roadometer in 1847, it was 1,031 miles from Great Salt Lake City to Winter Quarters, on the Missouri River. It may have been about 200 miles farther by the usual trail south of the Platte to Independence.

square.—The inhabitants number five thousand at this time, and are increasing in number every day. They have erected a fort, and are about commencing some five [fine?] buildings. The city is watered by two or three fine streams. They have to water their wheat and corn, and vegetables. They have now fifty thousand acres in wheat. Flour is scarce here; I do not know a single family in the city that has a supply. Every family was desirous to purchase from us, and offer from ten to fifteen cents per pound.—They do not want money here; they want sugar, coffee, tea and flour. I had my mules shod in the city, and they charged me four dollars per mule. Coffee is selling at 50 cents per pound, and rice at 25 cents. If you can accomplish the plan of a Rail Road from the States to the Salt Lake City, this will be one of the greatest places of trade in the known world. They have one of the finest warm springs for bathing, and the most healthy that is known. There is a boiling spring and a tar spring, and a cold spring also; and salt water in abundance.³ They have the finest salt here you ever saw, and any amount of saleratus; they gather it up in a pure state, and it makes splendid bread. The city of the Lake has appropriated \$5,000 for the purpose of making a good road from the city to the North Fork of the Platte river, which will be the means of turning a great number of the emigrants in this direction.⁴ I find the Mormons very accommodating, and willing to extend to the emigrants all the hospitality they possibly can. We leave Sunday Morning for the gold diggings, with a fine prospect before us. One man can raise from fifty to a hundred dollars per day. They are packing dirt from fifteen to twenty miles on mules, from what they call dry diggings, to water. Tell the boys to come on—this is the only chance they will ever have to get rich. The gold dust is inexhaustable, if the representations here are correct. If we keep our health, we shall be home in eighteen months. I would advise all persons who intend to emigrate to California this summer or next, to start with a light carriage and eight stout mules, from six to ten years old, and enough provisions to last four men through. Work four mules one day, and four the next, so as to rest them; and by travelling in that way, they can make forty miles per day, and not injure their mules. Start with a very light load; you can make the trip in 55 days.

After coming through the South Pass, the ridge that divides the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific, we had to ferry two streams, South Fork of Platte River,⁵

3. The warm spring is the present municipally operated Wasatch Springs, and the boiling spring the present Beck's Hot Springs a short distance northwest. The tar spring was located not in the vicinity of Great Salt Lake City but in present Wyoming, a little southeast of the crossing of Bear River.

4. This appears to be a mistaken reference to the toll road Parley P. Pratt was building, referred to in Letter VIII, and which was finally opened about July 1, 1850. It separated from the old road at the mouth of Echo Canyon, ascended the Weber River to present Rockport, crossed the divide, and then by the route of present State Highway 530 and U. S. 40 climbed to the head of Parleys Canyon and descended this canyon to Great Salt Lake City.

5. Normally the South Fork of the Platte was forded without any difficulty. The North Fork generally had to be ferried; in fact, the Mormons maintained a ferry there for some years after 1847; and the writer may have had the North Fork in mind.

and Green River. A company built a boat on the Platte, and about the time they crossed, Mr. Armstrong, of Monroe, and another company, offered Capt. Finley, the owner of the boat, \$250 for the boat. Capt. Finley told them that himself and company had crossed, and all others might go to hell; and then cut the boat in pieces before their eyes. This Captain Finley is from Illinois, and the wretch should be published in every newspaper in the U. States. A company from Pennsylvania, the Monroe company, and our company, built a boat and after our companies crossed we handed it over to the next train that arrived. This Capt. Finley is well known on the road from the Platte to California, and will be pointed out to every company and hissed at.

[JOHN B. HAZLIP.]

II

City of the Great Salt Lake,
July 8th, 1849.⁶

I arrived here several days since, very sick with the mountain fever. I am now convalescent⁷ and will leave to-morrow for the Sacramento valley. My mules are in fine condition, and I think will go through in thirty days from this place. Mr. [Heber C.] Kimbal[1], one of the leading members of the Mormon church, to whom I had a letter of introduction, received and treated me with great kindness.

There is a great deal of sickness among the emigrants—some deaths—and for the last five hundred miles the road has been literally strewn with dead animals. The rush has been so great, that many have hurried on without the proper regard for their stock, and the consequence is they will have to stop and resuscitate them. I have passed more than three hundred teams. I left Vancourt's train at the upper crossing of the [North] Platte, all well. Davis's train at Green river crossing, some of whom had been sick, but were well when I saw them. G. W. Coon's train at Green river crossing. These trains hail from St. Louis. Coons had so severe an attack of bilious fever at Pacific creek, that I remained with him three days, but when I left him at Green river he had entirely recovered, and is coming on by the Salt Lake route. John Christy took Sublett[e]'s Cut-off.⁸ Capt. Lafferty left here ten days since. The Telegraph company passed here on Monday [July 2] last, all well. I have not heard of our friends Radford, Bay, Kennerly, &c., since I left them at [the crossing of the] Kansas.

6. Reprinted from the St. Louis *Missouri Republican*, September 27, 1849, which prefaces the letter by saying, "To the kindness of a friend we are indebted for the following extract from a private letter, written by a well known young emigrant of this city."

7. He may have been doctored by the Thomsonian practitioner, Priddy Meeks, who gives an engaging account of his ministrations to immigrants this year in his journal, published in *Utah Historical Quarterly*, (1942), X, 183-185.

8. Sublette's Cutoff was so named this year by Joseph E. Ware, in an *Emigrants' Guide* very popular among the Forty-niners, the name evidently given in honor of Solomon Sublette, who read Ware's book before publication. The cutoff previously had been named for Caleb Greenwood, who guided the California-bound Stevens-Townsend-Murphy party across it in 1844. It separated from what became known as the Salt Lake road west of South Pass, near the crossing of the Little Sandy, and struck across country to reach the Bear River Valley near present Cokeville, Wyoming.