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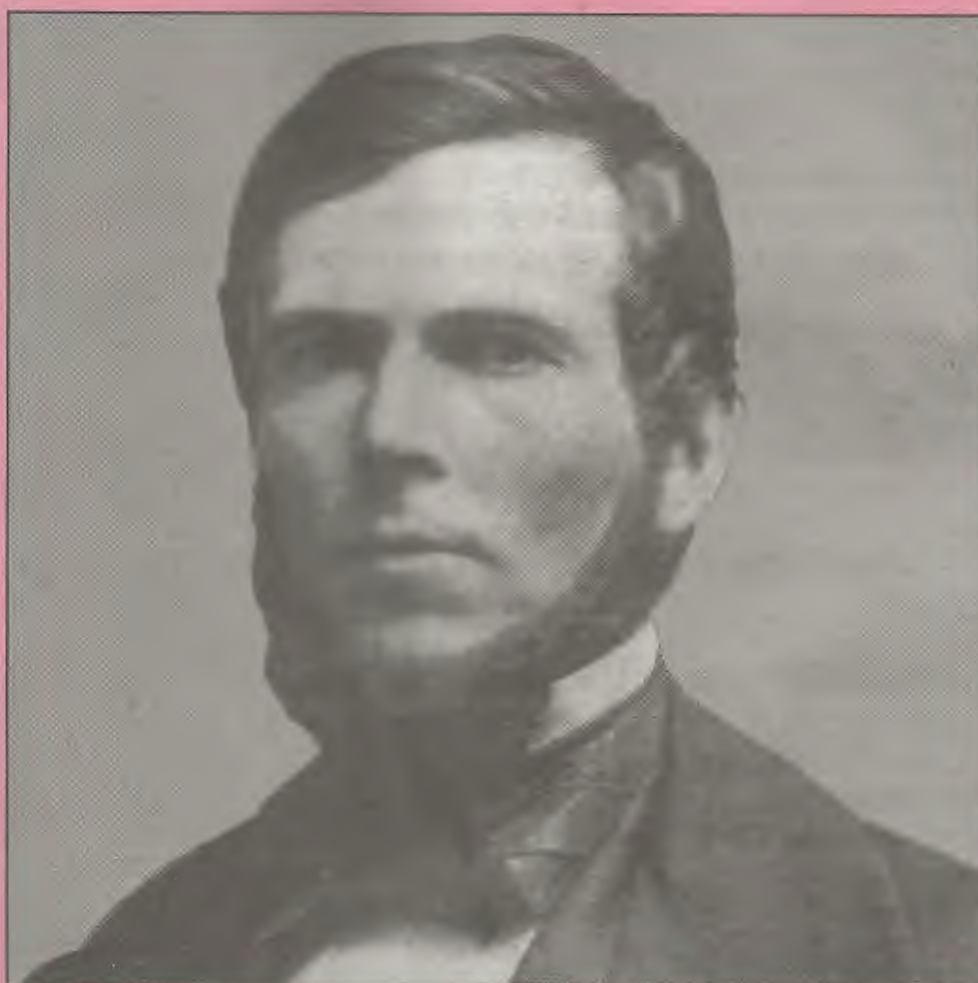
The Long March of the Mormon Battalion

By John D. Robinson

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John Bidwell
Reluctant Indian Fighter, 1852-1856

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The Long March of the Mormon Battalion, 1846-1847

By John W. Robinson

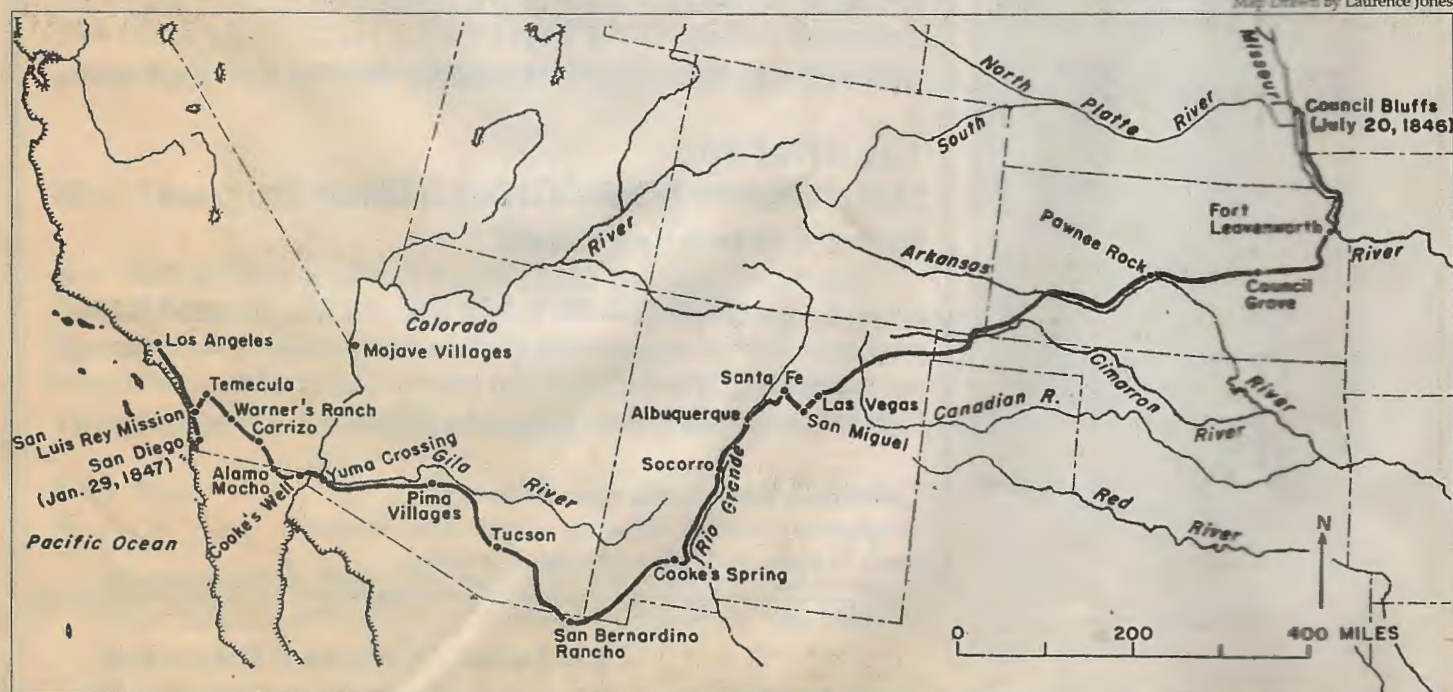
Three weeks after Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny's "Army of the West" reached San Diego (see DTQ #35), a second American military contingent completed its long march to California via the southern overland route. Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke and his Mormon Battalion reached San Diego on January 29, 1847--too late to engage in battle. California was already conquered. Although missing the fight, the difficult trek of the volunteer battalion was nevertheless a noteworthy accomplishment. The doughty young Mormons who had signed up for a year's service with the army built a rudimentary wagon road from New Mexico to California that would later be followed by thousands of emigrants and gold seekers.

The recruitment of the Mormon Battalion was au-

thorized by President James K. Polk shortly after war broke out between the United States and Mexico. The great westward migration of the Latter-Day Saints was just underway. Polk's motives were two-fold: To enlist a contingent of young Mormon men to augment Kearny's Army of the West in the occupation of New Mexico and California; and to promote harmony between Mormons and Gentiles "with a view to conciliate them, attach them to our country, and prevent them from taking part against us."¹ Kearny was ordered to recruit Mormons up to one-fourth of his command.

On July 18, 1846, at Council Bluffs on the banks of the Missouri River, five companies of Mormon men, ranging in age from 14 to 68, were sworn in for a year's service in the United States Army. The original company rosters listed 496 volunteers, who were accom-

Map Drawn by Laurence Jones



The Long March of the Mormon Battalion - Council Bluffs, Iowa to San Diego, California

panied by 33 wives and 44 children. The Mormons were somewhat reluctant to enlist at first, until urged to do so by Brigham Young, church leader. Captain James Allen of the 1st U.S. Dragoons was made commanding officer of what soon became known as the Mormon Battalion and ordered to train the volunteers in the rudiments of military discipline—a task he found difficult to accomplish. The Mormons considered themselves on a “mission” for their church, paying first allegiance to church leaders and second to the army.²

The Mormon Battalion reached Fort Leavenworth on August 1, and twelve days later set out on one of the longest infantry marches in American history. They arrived in Santa Fe, New Mexico on October 9, minus Captain Allen who had died enroute. General Kearny, impatient to reach California, had departed Santa Fe with his Army of the West several weeks earlier. Upon learning of Captain Allen’s death, Kearny sent a deeply disappointed Captain Philip St. George Cooke back to Santa Fe to take command of the Mormon Battalion. The 37 year-old Cooke, promoted to the brevet rank of Lieutenant Colonel for the task, was an imposing



Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke commanded the Mormon Battalion from Santa Fe to San Diego. From *Harper's Weekly*, June 12, 1858.

officer, 6'4" tall, and a strict disciplinarian. At first he was disdainful of his new charges. He complained that “The battalion was never drilled, and, though obedient, have little discipline. They exhibit great heedlessness and ignorance and some obstinacy.” He noted that some were “too old”, others “too young”, and the women and children were “a serious encumbrance.”³ (many of the older men, and most of the wives and children turned back before the battalion left New

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Mexico.) Cooke would change his mind during the long trek, as mutual respect between the lieutenant colonel and his Mormon charges grew into a bond.

The Battalion marched out of Santa Fe on October 19, 1846, bound for San Diego. The marchers were accompanied by twenty-five government wagons, twelve private family wagons, and a train of pack mules. Mountain men Pauline Weaver and Stephen Foster were hired as guides, later joined by two other former trappers, Antoine Leroux and Jean Baptiste Charbonneau. During most of the long journey the guides would each day go out ahead of the column to scout the route and locate water sources.⁴

They followed the well-worn Chihuahua-Santa Fe Trail down the Rio Grande Valley for four weeks, then turned southwest, away from the river, through arid, mostly uncharted territory. Charged with building a wagon road as they went, they turned away from Kearny's difficult trail west over the continental divide and headed south into Mexico. Work crews went ahead each day to improve the route so it would be passable for wagons. Antoine Leroux, probably the best of Cooke's guides, located Guadalupe Pass, which proved negotiable for the wagons. After a rest day at San Bernardino Rancho, just south of what would soon become the international border, the column turned northwest to the San Pedro River, a tributary of the Gila. The men were down to half-rations now as provisions ran low and they were unable to buy much food from Mexican villagers and ranchers.

The Battalion marched into Tucson after the Mexican garrison fled. They left Tucson on December 18 and reached the Gila River three days later. Here they camped several days with the friendly Pimas and Maricopas. During their halt at the Indian villages, Cooke was met by three messengers with letters from General Kearny and his adjutant Captain Turner telling of the Californian revolt and asking that the Battalion speed its journey west. Cooke lightened the

From John Russell Barrett's *Personal Narrative of Explorations & Incidents, 1853-1856*

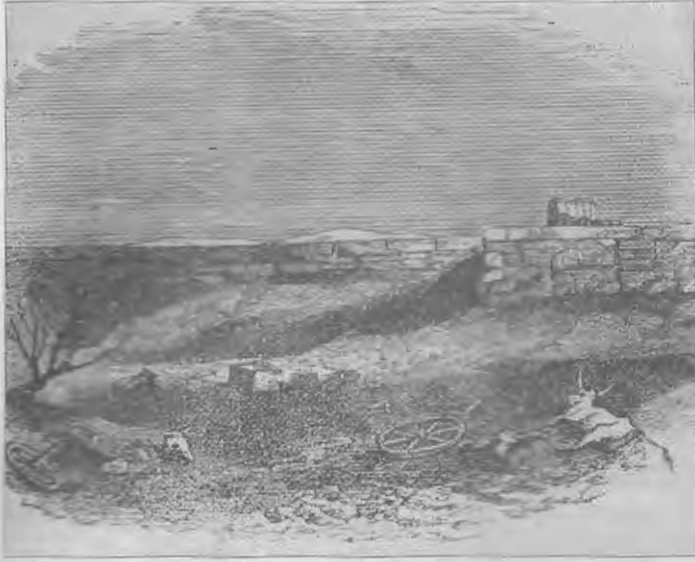


Junction of the Gila and Colorado rivers. Looking up the Gila.

Battalion's loads by leaving behind several wagons and many of the pack saddles. He cut across the great northern bend of the Gila and reached the river's junction with the Colorado on January 8, 1847.

"The Rio Colorado here resembles the Missouri in size and color of water," wrote Cooke. "It has immense bottoms difficult to pass; they are of rich soil."⁵ The Battalion took two days to ford the Colorado with their wagons at Yuma Crossing, several miles south of the Gila-Colorado confluence, and set on the most difficult and challenging part of the entire journey. On January 11, after the last of the wagons had been floated across the river, they headed southwestward, around the southern edge of the sand dunes, across the featureless, barren desert. Their track was marked by dead and dying mules, forcing the abandonment of more wagons. In fifteen miles they reached a well that appeared to be dry. The men dug deep into the sand, shoring up the sides with a washtub whose bottom had been removed. Finally they reached water barely sufficient to ease the thirst of men and mules. Thereafter this was known as Cooke's Well. Next day they traveled ten miles west across bleak terrain to Alamo Mocho Well, where they found four dead wolves and only a slight seepage of water. Again they had to dig to reach sufficient water for men and mules. It took eight hours to water the animals, and there was

Railroad Survey, 1853



Alamo Mocho Well (chopped cottonwood) provided only a slight seepage of water for the men of the Mormon Battalion.

no grass for them.

Two more wagons were abandoned because there weren't enough healthy mules to pull them. The Battalion now turned northwest, following Kearny's tracks, across more dreary desert. Several soldiers went ahead to locate water at the "salt lake" (Laguna Chapala) or Pozo Hondo. The salt lake was dry but they did find scarce amounts of muddy water at Pozo Hondo. The march became less orderly as the exhausted volunteers stumbled along, the column eventually stretching to fifteen miles. A few days earlier Cooke had sent Antoine Leroux and a guide named Tesson ahead to the California settlements to purchase fresh mules and cattle. On January 15 Tesson returned with thirty-three fresh mules and twelve cattle. Unfortunately the mules were wild and had to be broken before they would carry loads. Four Indian drovers were hired to handle them. The guide brought Cooke news of Kearny's defeat at San Pasqual. Cooke decided the Battalion must push on as quickly as possible.

Although his men were near exhaustion, Cooke decided not to tarry at Pozo Hondo, where the muddy water was hardly fit for human consumption. They left the waterhole in late afternoon and marched northwesterly across the desert until almost midnight. "As usual, the night was very cold," wrote Sergeant Daniel Tyler, "The contrast between an almost tropical sun in

the day time and a December cold atmosphere at night was very hurtful and weakening to both man and beast. The Indians call this region "the hot land."⁶ After only two hours rest, at 2 A.M., Cooke awakened the battalion and resumed the march under a cold, starry sky.

About eleven A.M. on January 16, Cooke and the lead wagon reached the first water of Carrizo Creek. "A clear, running stream gladdened our eyes after the anxious dependence upon muddy wells for five or six days," exclaimed Cooke, "... without water for near three days (for the animals) and encamping two nights in succession without water, the battalion made, in forty-eight hours, four marches of eighteen, eight, eleven, and nineteen miles, suffering from frost and from summer heat!"

Some of the men filled their canteens and carried water back to those straggling behind. It was near midnight before the last weary, foot-sore volunteer reached camp. Cooke ordered a one day layover to give the men a rest, mend their clothes, and clean their weapons for a battle he believed was imminent.

Next day, January 18, the Battalion headed up Carrizo Creek in a more orderly fashion, scouts ahead, men in semi-marching order, the eight remaining wagons (5 government, 3 private) in the rear. They turned up sandy Vallecitos Wash and reached Palm Spring by late morning. The few palm trees here were the first the men had seen. "The road, not quite so deep with sand, was much more broken, and obstructed with

Photo By John W. Robinson



Vallecitos Creek. Southern Emigrant Trail looking east.

Photo by John W. Robinson

great lumps of mescal." Cooke reported, "Altogether, it is the worst fifteen miles of road since we left the Rio Grande."⁸ The Battalion, again strung out, reached the lush meadowlands of Vallecito that afternoon, the last wagons straggling in after dark. "Here, at the Vallecito, is a wet, flat valley a mile or more in extent, where grow, besides grass, a few small willows," wrote Cooke, "The grass, which is plentiful, I fear is very poor, as the mules are straggling on the broken ground around."⁹ Here an Indian courier delivered a message to Cooke welcoming him to San Diego and informing him that Kearny's Army of the West, along with Stockton's naval and marine force, was marching on Los Angeles. The prospect of imminent battle appeared to fade, although Cooke was warned to be on the lookout for some of the Californio leaders who might try to flee to Mexico via this route.

January 19 was one of the most difficult days of the long march. They entered the narrow, rocky gorge of Box Canyon, passable to those on foot but not to the wagons. The column came to a halt as the men used crowbars, picks, and axes to hew a wagon road



View of Box Canyon today. Remains of Mormon Wagon Road can be seen above creekbed.

through the rock. Even with several hours of back-breaking work, most of the wagons had to be unloaded, disassembled, and carried through the narrowest part of the canyon. They encamped on a ridge just beyond the gorge and suffered through a cold, waterless night.

Courtesy John W. Robinson Collection



Box Canyon is a short & narrow defile on the Mormon Wagon Road. This shows one of the stages of D.F. Harrison who later used the route.

Early next morning they ascended a rocky hill, the men using ropes to help pull the wagons over the top, and entered the San Felipe Valley. They climbed up the broad, gentle valley and camped at dusk amid tall live oaks, the first they had seen in California. Grass was abundant for the animals.

January 21 was one of the most pleasant days of the long trek. They crossed the pass at the head of San Felipe Valley and were rewarded with a glorious view of Valle de San José, dotted with live oaks, with cattle grazing on the verdant expanse of grass. They descended a short distance north and camped close to Warner's Ranch--the

first houses they had seen since leaving Tucson a month earlier. Here they enjoyed a day of rest, feasting on beef and pancakes they bought from the Cupeños of Agua Caliente. Some of the men bathed in the hot springs.

Battalion member William Coray left a vivid description of Valle de San José:

Warner's Rancho is in a beautiful valley. There is a hot spring here not quite boiling but hot enough

Courtesy John W. Robinson Collection

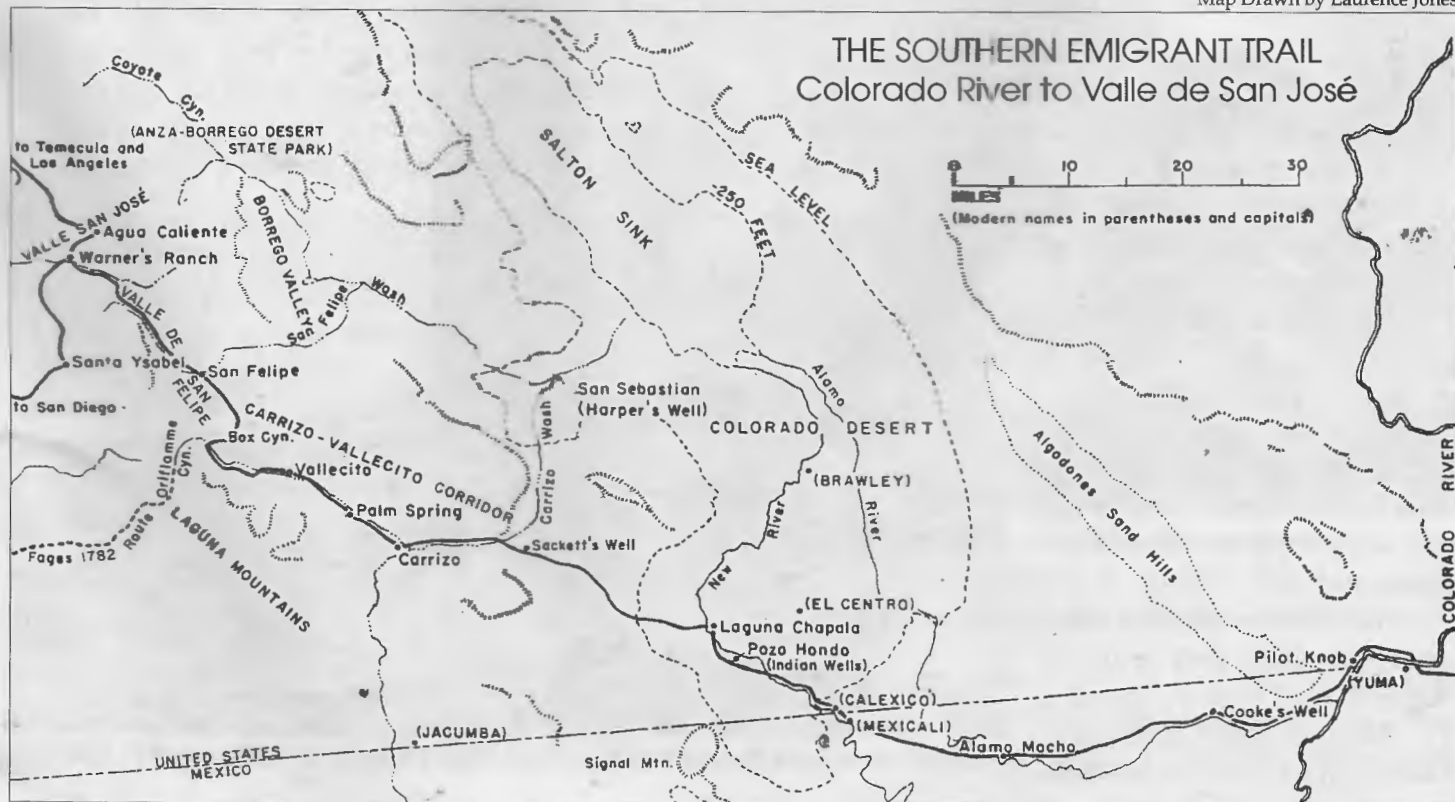


The Mormon Battalion enjoyed a day of rest near Warner's Ranch.

for suds. Mr. Warner pretends to own nearly 15 leagues, equal to 40 miles square, a pretty good farm. It lies between the mountains and the climate is very different from that on the coast . . . Winter wheat can be sown here any time from September to March and comes to maturity, producing from 30 to 50 bushels to the acre. Mr. Warner had cattle brought up by the Indians and killed here. We saw a performance that beat anything entirely. The Indians on horseback throwing the lassoes and catching cattle by the head and legs and throwing them and holding them down by having the reata wound round and round the segehead of the saddle, their skill beat anything I ever saw. They throw with so much certainty. Well, the beef tasted good as we were nearly starved.

Cooke decided to march the Battalion to Los Angeles instead of San Diego when he learned that Kearny and Stockton were enroute to the former. The refreshed Battalion departed Warner's Ranch on January 23 and headed northwest on what was then known as the Los Angeles-Sonora Road, through oak-canopied valleys north of Mount Palomar. Two days of

Map Drawn by Laurence Jones



marching, most of the way under drenching rain, got the thoroughly soaked Battalion to the Indian village of Temecula. Here Cooke received a message from Kearny informing him that hostilities had ended and ordering the Battalion to San Diego.

They reached San Luis Rey Mission around noon on January 27. Turning south on the road to San Diego, they surmounted a slight rise and caught sight of the Pacific Ocean just as the sun was setting. Cooke waxed eloquently at the soul-stirring sight:

~*~

Courtesy John W. Robinson Collection



The Mormon Battalion paused at San Luis Rey Mission on January 27, 1847

The sun was sinking . . . So placid was the sea that it shone a vast space of seemingly transparent light, which, by contrast, gave to the clear sky a dusky shade. What a strange spectacle was that! The earth more aerially clear and bright than the cloudless heavens.¹¹

Most of the men had never seen the ocean; the view of the "great Pacific Sea" stirred their emotions.

The Mormon Battalion ended its long trek when it reached San Diego on January 29, 1847. Cooke met with Kearny, who had just reached

San Diego from Los Angeles and was awaiting ship to Monterey, and reported that a wagon road "of great value to our country" had been opened from New Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. (Cooke could not have known that a year later gold would be discovered in the Mother Lode country, and thousands of gold-seekers and emigrants would use his wagon road to reach California.) The next day Lieutenant Colonel Cooke issued the following order:

ORDER NUMBER 1

Headquarters, Mormon Battalion
Mission San Diego, January 30, 1847

The lieutenant-colonel commanding congratulates the battalion on their safe arrival on the shore of the Pacific ocean, and the conclusion of the march of over two thousand miles. History may be searched in vain for an equal march of infantry. Nine-tenths of it has been through a wilderness where nothing but savages and wild beasts are found, or deserts where, for want of water, there is no living creature. There, with almost hopeless labor, we have dug deep wells which the future traveler will enjoy. Without a guide who had traversed them, we have ventured into trackless prairies where water was not found for several marches. With crowbar and pick and ax in hand we have worked our way over mountains which seemed to defy aught save the wild goat, and hewed a passage through a chasm of liv-

Courtesy John W. Robinson Collection



The Mormon Battalion reached San Diego on January 27, 1847.

ing rock more narrow than our wagons . . . Thus, marching half naked and half fed, and living upon wild animals, we have discovered and made a road of great value to our country.¹²

The men cheered when they were read the message. **John Riser** of the Battalion wrote in his notebook:

From the commencement of this march until we arrived in California . . . commenced a succession of hardships and privations by long marches without water and scanty food which only the most robust could endure. Had it not been for the cool headedness and sagacity of our stern commander, . . . we must have all perished before reaching our destination. There is no doubt in my mind but that Colonel Cooke was one of the ablest officers then in the Army. . . he appreciated our services to the cause that he was engaged in and which he expressed to the battalion.¹³

Four of the thirty-three wives who started the trip with their husbands walked all the way to California. (The twenty-nine who turned back, along with the forty-four children, spent the winter in Pueblo, Colorado before joining the trek to Salt Lake.) When Melissa Coray, one of the wives who made the long journey, was interviewed many years later, she recalled: "I didn't mind it. I walked because I wanted to. My husband had to walk and I went along by his side."¹⁴

The men of the Mormon Battalion completed their year of service on garrison duty in San Diego, San Luis Rey, and Los Angeles. Honorable discharges were given to 317 of them by the army at Fort Moore, Los Angeles on July 16, 1847, the anniversary of their enlistment at Council Bluffs. Seventy-

nine of the men reenlisted for six months of additional service and were assigned to garrison duty in San Diego. They were known as the Mormon Volunteers and were given their honorable discharge on March 14, 1848. Each discharged Mormon received \$31.50 in severance pay, but no transportation allowance to rejoin their families as initially promised by the army.

Most of the men purchased animals and supplies with their severance pay and quickly returned to their families, who were just completing their epic overland journey to the Salt Lake Valley. The majority of these returnees traveled north to San Francisco or Sutter's Fort, then followed the central overland trail east to Salt Lake. The lure of gold, which had been just discovered on the American River by James Marshall, was too much for some of the returning Mormons to resist. About two dozen of them, led by Henry Bigler, participated in the California Gold Rush.

Thirty-five of the discharged Mormon Battalion veterans, led by **Henry G. Boyle**, pioneered the more

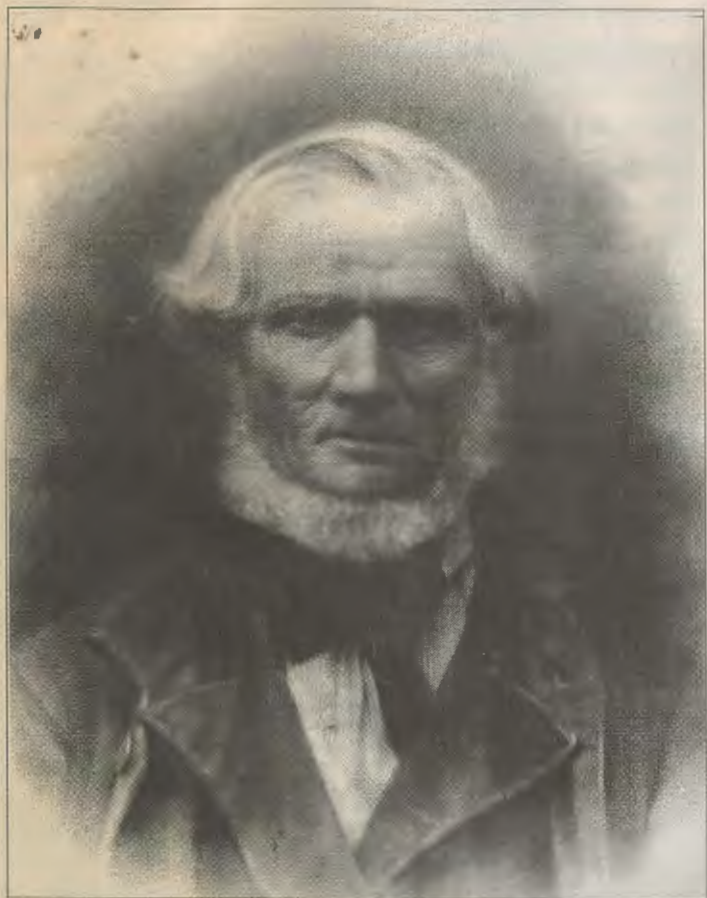


Taken at the 50th anniversary celebration of the discovery of gold on January 24, 1898. L-R; Henry Bigler, William J. Johnston, Azariah Smith and James S. Brown. All were members of the Mormon Battalion.

direct southern route to the Salt Lake Valley, what later became known as the Salt Lake-Los Angeles Trail. They left Chino Ranch on March 21, 1848 and followed the

Old Spanish Trail over Cajon Pass as far as Antelope Spring (near present-day Cedar City, Utah). Here they left the Old Spanish Trail and proceeded north, reaching Salt Lake on June 5, 1848. With this party was the first wagon to ever travel from Los Angeles to Salt Lake. Captain Jefferson Hunt, formerly of the Mormon Battalion's Company A, led several parties of emigrants and gold seekers over this Salt Lake-Los Angeles Trail in the years 1849 to 1851.

For years afterwards, most of the Mormon Battal-



A member of the Mormon Battalion, Captain Jefferson Hunt later led several parties of emigrants and gold seekers over the Salt Lake-Los Angeles Trail from 1849 to 1851.

ion veterans remained a close-knit fraternity. "Traveling together, experiencing everything in common, bonded the men together in a way that lasted for the rest of their lives," writes Mormon Battalion historian Norma Baldwin Ricketts.¹⁵

Their greatest contribution was undoubtedly the

building of the wagon road that became the Southern Emigrant Trail to California, followed by thousands of emigrants and gold seekers in the years 1849 through 1855. Today, we can follow in their footsteps by reading the journals and reminiscences written by many of the Mormon Battalion veterans.

About the Author:

John W. Robinson is currently working on *Gateways to Southern California*, a book covering the horse trails, wagon roads, railroads and highways into the southern half of the state. This article is based upon his research. John serves as a historical advisor for the *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly*.

End Notes

1. Allen Nevins (ed.), *Polk: The Diary of a President, 1845-1849* (New York: Longman's, Green & Co., 1929), p. 109.
2. Norma Baldwin Ricketts, *The Mormon Battalion: The U.S. Army of the West, 1846-1848* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), pp. 6-7.
3. "Cooke's Journal of the March of the Mormon Battalion, 1846-1847," in Ralph P. Bieber (ed.), *Exploring Southwestern Trails, 1846-1854* (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1938), pp. 65, 69. An excellent biography of Cooke is Otis E. Young, *The West of Philip St. George Cooke, 1809-1895* (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1955).
4. Ricketts, p. 71. See also Harlan Hague, *The Road to California: The Search for a Southern Overland Route, 1540-1848* (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clarke Co., 1978), pp. 241-290.
5. Cooke's Journal, p. 200.
6. Sgt. Daniel Tyler, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (Chicago: Rio Grande Press, 1964 reprint of 1881 edition), p. 244.
7. Cooke's Journal, pp. 215-216.
8. Ibid., p. 218.
9. Ibid., p. 219.
10. Ricketts, p. 115. For a history of Warner's Ranch, see Joseph J. Hill, *The History of Warner's Ranch and Its Environs* (Los Angeles: privately-printed, 1927); and Lorrin L. Morrison, *Warner: The Man and The Ranch* (Los Angeles: Lorrin L. Morrison, 1962).
11. Cooke's Journal, p. 236.
12. Ibid., pp. 238-240.
13. Ricketts, p. 121.
14. Ibid., p. 274.
15. Ibid., p. 269.