

The Mormon Battalion

The story of the Mormon Battalion, its formation and its difficult journey west is not widely known. However, the battalion's march through New Mexico, Arizona, and California was an integral part of the history of America's "Manifest Destiny."

Joseph Smith had founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in western New York State during the late 1820's. Searching for someplace to practice their religion free of persecution, Smith and his followers moved westward and established the city of Nauvoo, Illinois. Near here, Smith was murdered in 1844. Members of his church, now in the thousands, realized that they would have to move farther west, beyond the boundaries of the United States, to practice their religion. Stranded on the frontier of a young nation, their future looked bleak.

Due to stereotypes and misunderstandings, the government of the United States considered the Mormons a hostile force. With tensions rising between the United States and Mexico over claims to Texas and the Southwest, President Polk eyed the Mormons, who called themselves "Saints," as a threat to the continued westward expansion of the nation. He was read to intercept them should they attempt to cross the Rocky Mountains.

The Mormon leadership, notably Brigham Young, sent letters to Stephen A. Douglas and other members of Congress to persuade the government that there was no plan on the Mormons' part to ally with other nations against the United States. Simultaneously, the Mormon leadership began to lay plans to obtain government patronage while journeying west. Eventually, the decision was made by the United States to invade California. In 1846 Polk issued an order that a battalion of men be drawn from the Mormon emigrants in Iowa, a move calculated not only to allay fears of Mormon secession, but also to bolster the pathetic state of General Stephen Watts Kearney's Army of the West.

This was welcome news for the Mormons. The Saints could emigrate west, out of the United States, with financing generated from the battalion of men, literally at the expense of the U.S. government. Brigham Young said, "The enlistment of the Mormon Battalion in the service of the United States, though looked upon by many with astonishment and some with fear, has proved a great blessing to this community. It was indeed the temporal salvation of our camp."

While not the first white people to travel the route, the battalion, en route to a rendezvous with General Kearney in San Diego, was the first group to bring wagons west across the deserts, and it is given credit for forging the first east-to-west road through the region. The route traveled – overlapping the one traveled by Father Kino and Juan Bautista de Anza from Tubac, Arizona, to California – became a route for thousands of pioneers, treasure seekers and others who would follow the lure of California and gold. Further, the battalion proved the importance of this lower, warmer route, which could be traveled year-round. The road, through a region annexed by the United States with the Gadsden Purchase in 1853, would eventually become part of the John Butterfield's Southern Overland Mail Route.



Mormon troops set out on their journey from Council Bluffs, Iowa, at the end of July 1846, under the leadership of army Captain James Allen, who was soon promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. Though most left their wives and children behind, some women and children did accompany the battalion. They arrived at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, on August 1, 1846, where they were outfitted for their trek to Santa Fe. Battalion members drew their arms and provisions, as well as a clothing allowance of forty-two dollars, at the fort. Since a military uniform was not mandatory, many of the soldiers sent their clothing allowances to their families in the encampments in Iowa.

The march from Fort Leavenworth was delayed by the sudden illness of Colonel Allen. Captain Jefferson Hunt was instructed to begin the march to Santa Fe, but he soon received word that Colonel Allen was dead. Allen's death caused confusion regarding who should lead the battalion to Santa Fe. Lieutenant A.J. Smith arrived from Fort Leavenworth claiming the lead, and he was chosen the commanding officer by a vote of battalion officers. The leadership transition proved difficult for many of the enlisted men, who were not consulted about the decision.

Smith and his accompanying surgeon, a Dr. Sanderson, have been described in journals as the "heaviest burdens" of the battalion. Under Smith's dictatorial leadership and with Sanderson's antiquated prescriptions, the soldiers suffered from excessive heat, lack of sufficient food, improper medical treatment, and forced long-distance marches.

The first division of the Mormon Battalion approached Santa Fe on October 9, 1846. At Santa Fe, Smith was relieved of his command by Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke. Cooke, aware of the rugged trail between Santa Fe and California and also aware that one sick detachment had already been sent from the Arkansas River to Fort Pueblo in Colorado, ordered the remaining women and children to accompany the sick of the battalion to Pueblo for the winter. Three detachments consisting of 273 people eventually were sent to Pueblo for the winter of 1846-47.

The remaining soldiers, with four wives of officers, left Santa Fe for California on October 19, 1846. They journeyed down their Rio Grande del Norte and eventually crossed the Continental Divide on November 28, 1846. While moving up the San Pedro

River in present day Arizona, their column was attacked by a herd of wild cattle. In the ensuing fight, a number of bulls were killed and two men were wounded. Following the "Battle of the Bulls," the battalion continued their march toward Tucson, where they anticipated a possible battle with the Mexican soldiers garrisoned there. At Tucson, the Mexican defenders temporarily abandoned their positions and no conflict ensued.

On December 21, 1846, the battalion encamped on the Gila River. After following the Gila westward, they crossed the Colorado River into California on January 9, 1847. By January 9, 1847, they were camped at the Mission of San Diego, about five miles from General Kearney's quarters. That evening Colonel Cook rode to Kearny's encampment and reported the battalion's condition.

During the remainder of their enlistment, some members of the battalion were assigned to garrison duty at either San Diego, San Luis Rey, or Ciudad de Los Angeles. Other soldiers were assigned to accompany General Kearny back to Fort Leavenworth. All soldiers, whether en route to the Salt Lake Valley via Pueblo or still in Los Angeles, were mustered out of the United States Army on July 16, 1847. Eighty-one men chose to reenlist and serve an additional eight months of military duty under Captain Daniel C. Davis in Company A of the Mormon Volunteers. Most of the soldiers migrated to the Salt Lake Valley and were reunited with their pioneering families.

The men of the Mormon Battalion were honored for their willingness to fight for the United States as loyal American citizens. Their march of almost 1,500 miles from Council Bluffs to California is one of the longest military marches in history. According to Colonel Cooke: "History may be searched in vain for an equal march of infantry. Half of it has been through a wilderness where nothing but savages and wild beasts are found, or deserts where, for lack of water, there is no living creature."

The battalion contributed to the early development of California by building Fort Moore in Los Angeles, building a courthouse in San Diego, and making bricks and building houses in Southern California.

Following their discharge, many men helped build flourmills and sawmills in northern California. Some of them were among the first to find gold at Sutter's Mill. Men from Captain Davis' Company A were responsible for opening the first wagon road over the southern route from California to Utah in 1848.

In spite of their long trek, historic accomplishments and near brushes with hostility, the Mormons never engaged in battle. They never fired a hostile shot.

Historic sites associated with the battalion include the Mormon Battalion Memorial Visitor's Center in San Diego, Fort Moore Pioneer Memorial in Los Angeles, and the Mormon Battalion Monument in Memory Grove, Salt Lake City, Utah. Monuments relating to the battalion are also located in New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado, and trail markers have been placed on segments of the battalion route.



SOURCE: Territorial News