

## Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel, 1847–1868

### Company:

Charles A. **Harper** Company (1855)

### Narrative:

Captain Charles Harper rightly called his overland emigrant company "a mixed multitude from many nations"; it included French, English, Welsh, and Italians. Some came from Jersey, an island 15 miles off the coast of Normandy, France. Leaving their homeland they traveled to Liverpool, England, via Dublin, Ireland, then sailed for America on the *Chimborazo*. After 5 weeks, the ship docked at Philadelphia, and the travelers boarded rail cars bound for Pittsburgh. Down the Ohio and up the Mississippi by steamboat they went to St. Louis. Here they camped at the Gravery, 3 miles from town. Next, they spent 12 days on a steamboat, puffing up the Missouri to Atchison, Kansas Territory. Another part of Harper's company left England on the *S. Curling*. (called the *Samuel Curling*. in Latter-day Saint literature). Some of these travelers were Perpetual Emigration Fund (PEF) passengers; others paid their own fares. Arriving at New York City, they transferred to Philadelphia by steamer and then continued by rail to Pittsburgh and by steamboat (*the Amazon*) . down the Ohio and up the Mississippi to St. Louis. Finally, up the Missouri they went on the *Ben Bolt*. One family took the *Sarana*. from St. Louis to Atchison. An Italian family traveled from Piedmont by coach, railway, and steamer to reach Liverpool, crossed the Atlantic on the *Juventa*, and then traveled by rail to Pittsburgh and by steamboat to Atchison. All of these emigrants joined Harper's company at Mormon Grove.

Of Mormon Grove (just outside Atchison) one traveler said that it "presents a beautiful appearance with its pretty grove, its regular streets lined on each side by Tents in regular order & the creeks on each side in the valleys below." Here, the several nationalities camped in separate locations and elected their captain. Their train consisted of independent emigrants and PEF passengers: 238 of the latter and 67 of the former. The independent group started with 14 wagons, 136 oxen, 15 cows, 1 horse, and 1 mule. The PEF component had 25 wagons, 304 oxen, and 15 cows.

The train left Mormon Grove on July 25. At Grasshopper Creek the company paused to repair an axletree; at the Big Blue River, though a ferryboat was available, Captain Harper tried to save money by fording the stream. The water was deep and the riverbank steep. The men had to "rough lock" the wagon wheels and tug on restraining ropes to keep the vehicles from plunging into the water. Harper was the first to drive his wagon into the stream, but the current was too strong. Animals and wagon were swept away. Harper leaped to safety, but it was only with help from men on the riverbank that the rig was saved. Another wagon capsized, threatening the lives of its occupants and spilling freight and 22 sacks of precious flour into the Big Blue. The travelers salvaged what they could. Then a Frenchman attempted to swim the river but nearly drowned. Again, only teamwork saved him. With only part of the company safely across, the river rose, splitting the train in two. Captain Harper waited eight days (until General William S. Harney and 700 soldiers from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, arrived and wanted to use the ferry). Only then, to avoid further delay, did Harper swap a wagon for the ferryman's services to finish the crossing. General Harney and his men quickly followed and hastily moved west. Also in the vicinity was Milo Andrus' emigrant train. At the Little Blue, the Harper company paused to wash, cook, and collect bushels of wild plums and grapes.

The travelers were astonished at the nearby great herds of buffalo. These later caused stampedes among the emigrants' cattle. On August 21, two wagons overturned on a rough road. On August 23, the train camped on the Platte River, six miles from Fort Kearny. Three days later a party of Sioux Indians passed and four of them came to the Harper camp to trade. Because the United States was at war with this tribe, the emigrants took up their weapons "of all descriptions" and stayed close to Andrus' company. On September 3 the Harper train forded the South Platte; that night it rained hard, making the road very muddy. By then the oxen were weakening. After passing safely down the steep hill at Ash Hollow, the party received word from General Harney that only the day before he had attacked a Sioux village just two miles away. Reportedly, soldiers had killed 300 Indians, taken 100 prisoners and a herd of ponies, and then burned the lodges (later casualty estimates place the number of Indian dead at about 100). Harper's company "could see the smoke of fire in this village" from its camp. For three days soldiers guarded the emigrants. Then three of the troopers went with them all

the way to Salt Lake.

The train stopped at Cedar Creek and near Chimney Rock, where a thunderstorm blew down tents. Near Scotts Bluff the company passed abandoned trading posts. The weather was cold and it hailed. By September 13 the train was at Fort Laramie. The next day Indians stole 150 horses from the Laramie herd. Grass for the animals was poor and scarce, and the road was increasingly rough, but Captain Harper wrote to Brigham Young that "the company . . . [is] in good health & spirits we are in as good traveling condition as companys [sic] generally are after coming the distance we have & and no difficulties but what by our united efforts we are able to overcome." The captain asked for "fresh cattle . . . to expedite the journey at the last end." Before reaching Deer Creek ". . . the party twice forded the North Platte." At Deer Creek they met friendly Crow Indians. On September 24 the train crossed the North Platte for the last time and traded with Indians. Harper's company camped at Willow Creek and repaired a wagon that had "run backwards down a long & steep hill." At Greasewood Creek the emigrants met eastward bound missionaries. Near Independence Rock, some Sioux tried to force tribute from the train-stationing a man in the road seated upon a buffalo robe-but the train pushed on nervously and on high alert. The Indians "continued following along side all day loading their guns and making many war demonstrations." Later, relief wagons came from Salt Lake. For ten days the company camped along the Sweetwater so the cattle could graze and regain strength. Some men used a tent to catch "a great number of fish." On October 2, two women caused alarm by wandering away from camp, but they returned before dark. The same day three young men went back along the trail to secure ox shoes and nails from the Allred train. When they started forward again, one of them was not feeling well and went for water. The other two continued on but got lost because Harper had taken a cutoff. At length, the wanderers found a merchant train and learned that they were now ahead of Harper. Leaving his companion with the merchants, one man finally found Harper only to learn that the third man had not yet returned. It had been snowing and was bitterly cold, and the missing man had no coat or food. A search party set out and finally found him. He too had found the merchant train but was "more dead than alive." Lame oxen were shod, and the train crossed Devil's Backbone, "a very dangerous road for the wagons. The road being covered at one point with large pieces of rock projecting from the earth." The party passed nine dead oxen.

At both Little and Big Sandy there was no grass; many oxen failed. At Green River there was good grass, but more cattle failed at Black's Fork. The train was at the Muddy River on October 16, Fort Bridger on the 18th, and Bear River the 21st. However, before reaching the Bear, the train had contended with steep, stony hills (including Quaking Aspen Ridge, the highest point on the Mormon Trail), and some grades required double-teaming. On October 21 Allred's party passed Harper. Harper crossed the Bear, reached the Weber, and on the 26th camped at Big Canyon Grove. The emigrants danced and sang, listened to speeches, presented a memorial of thanks to Captain Harper, and voted him a frame and plate glass to be paid for by voluntary contributions. The company The company crossed Big Mountain on October 27 and arrived in Salt Lake on the 29th, the last family train of the season.