

THE AMERICAN WEST

By

Roger B. Blakeley

The stories of the American West have been told and retold and now have become fiction and western lore, recounting the struggles of the early rugged individuals who blazed the trails that became our great nation. One of the most memorable groups of individuals that opened the west for the succeeding groups of pioneers was the U.S. Army of the West Mormon Battalion (1846-1847).

One of the least studied wars in the creation of the United States is the Mexican-American War. On May 13, 1846 the United States of America declared war on Mexico.

The United States had a basic strategy to hold and conquer isolated provinces of northern Mexico and to end the war quickly. They wanted to have very few casualties and limit the cost of the war and to provide a free and safe nation.

The United States developed a three-pronged attack strategy that would be used to conquer Mexico. The “old rough and ready” under the direction of General Zachary Taylor defeated and held Chihuahua and northeast Mexico. The “Army of the West” under General Stephen W. Kearney was to occupy Santa Fe and then march to subjugate California, and General Winfield Scott was to drive south and capture Mexico City. General Winfield was successful and forced an end to the war. Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848.

Just before the start of the Mexican-American War, the Latter Day Saints had been driven from their homes and were gathering to leave the United States to avoid any more persecutions from militias and the mobs. President Polk instructed the Secretary of War William L. March to authorize Colonel Stephen W. Kearney (later General Kearney), to enlist a battalion of 500 Mormons to fight the War.

The Mormons had many reasons to be reluctant to enlist in this War. They had received no protection from the government while their property and lives had been taken in Missouri and Illinois. Living in temporary housing – tents and wagons – preparations for the long trek to the Salt Lake valley were in progress. They were a destitute people. The trek to Salt Lake would take them across uncharted territory and through hostile Indian areas. The people who survived equated this journey to the children of Israel wondering in the desert, being sanctified by their God.

Brigham Young, the Prophet of the Church, told them, “Brethren, you will be blessed, if you will live for those blessings, which you have been taught to live for. The Mormon Battalion will be held in honorable remembrance to the latest generation; and I will prophesy that the children of those who have been in the Army, in defense of their

country, will grow up and bless their fathers for what they did at that time. And men and nations will rise up and bless the men who went in that Battalion...As the Lord lives, if you will but live up to your privileges, you will never be forgotten, without end, but you will be held in honorable remembrance, forever and ever.” (1)

The Battalion left and started their march leaving families in destitute situations giving all their pay and any clothing allowance to their families before they undertook the march. The wages that they earned for being in the service of their country provided food and transportation for the trip to Salt Lake. These 500 men and women marched 2000 miles to secure the southwestern United States.

The march took them through Yuma, Arizona where they faced a huge sandstorm that pelted them with rocks and sand on men and women, which had very little clothing left and only blankets to protect them from the elements. As they crossed the Gila River journal reports recorded that icicles hung from the bellies of the mules as they walked out of the river. Yuma was a place where they found Honey Mesquite beans which they ground into flour and made sweetbread. Yuma was the last water before they crossed the vast dunes of the desert.

For this reason, the U.S. Army of the West Mormon Battalion organization was formed to keep the memory of these brave souls alive and to tell the history of the taming of the west. The Mormon Battalion's efforts in building roads led to the westward expansion from the 49ers to the people escaping the dust bowl. Today, the spirit of the battalion lives on as we travel down Interstate 8 corridor.

You can help us by participating in the monument program at the Yuma West Wetlands Park where a statute will be erected to commemorate their journey through Yuma. Please visit us at www.usarmyofthewest.org and make your tax deductible contributions for small statutes, commemorative medallions, and be a part of history. We are the generation that will bring about the fulfillment of Prophecy.

(1) Carl v. Larson and Shirley Maynes. Woman of the Mormon Battalion.