

William Bailey Maxwell

Private, Company D

In July of 1846, on the banks of the Missouri River, Brigham Young received a request from the federal government to recruit five hundred men to enlist in the United States Army of the West. William Bailey Maxwell and wife, Lucretia Charlotte Bracken, knew that volunteering would require that he would have to leave his wife and two young sons behind with very little in the way of food and other provisions. It was decided that Lucretia would remain with her family and cross the plains in the spring without him and that William would join the ranks of the Mormon Battalion.

William was assigned as a private in Company 'D' under the command of Captain Nelson Higgins, and he left Iowa on foot with his company on July 29, 1846. On January 29 of the following year, Private Maxwell and his fellow soldiers carried out their orders when they reached the destination of San Diego. They had participated in what many historians consider the longest sustained infantry march in U.S. military history, a march of nearly 2000 miles.

In July of 1847, Private Maxwell's enlistment was up. He was mustered out of service and in August, he joined with a group of approximately 200 former soldiers to travel to the Great Salt Lake in hopes of finding their wives and families there. Approximately 100 of the group found employment at Sutter's Mill in California, where gold had recently been discovered. William, along with the remaining men, pushed on. The journey was not easy. They crossed the high Sierra Mountains "where the perpetual snow was plenty" and traversed the vast Humboldt Sink in Nevada, improving the road as they went.

William and his companions reached Salt Lake Valley on October 16, 1847. Having learned that their families had remained at Council Bluffs, William and 31 other men left Salt Lake two days later. Provisions being scarce in the Salt Lake Valley, they were asked if they would leave their provisions and get resupplied at Fort Bridger and at Laramie.

Arriving at Fort Bridger in a severe snow storm, they learned the supply of flour they had planned to purchase had been bought by emigrants going to California and Oregon. The situation was the same when they reached Laramie on November 10. They bought one pound of crackers for twenty-five cents. "The party lost nine mules in a genuine snow storm near Scotts Bluff. William Maxwell shot a buffalo so tough our scientific man decided him to be one of the Buffalo left by Noah from the Ark in an early day."

At the Loup Fork River in Nebraska, the cold became so extreme that the river began to freeze over. They had to wait nearly a week for the floating ice to get solid and thick enough to cross. Here, they ate the last of their food which consisted mainly of boiled rawhide saddlebags they had brought from California.

William Maxwell's happy reunion with Lucretia and his sons took place on December 18 on the banks of the Missouri River. His 4,000 mile round trip journey had taken him over 17 months to complete. The Maxwell's completed their trek westward to the Great Salt Lake Valley in the fall of 1853.