

Dr. George Sanderson Surgeon, Mormon Battalion Staff

On August 1, 1846, the first official order Colonel James Allen gave at Fort Leavenworth was the appointment of Dr. George B. Sanderson, M.D. as Surgeon in the U.S. Army. He was to serve with the general staff of the Mormon Battalion during their march to California during the War with Mexico.

Dr. Sanderson's treatment of the sick usually included a concoction of calomel and arsenic. Calomel, or mercury chloride, was a medicine used chiefly to deal with constipation, a condition that many doctors of the day thought was a leading cause of abdominal, or stomach disorders.

In a letter that arrived some time after Dr. Sanderson began his treatments, Brigham Young, president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, counseled the members of the battalion, "If you are sick, live by faith, and let the surgeon's medicine alone if you want to live, using only such herbs and mild food as are at your disposal. If you give heed to this counsel, you will prosper; but if not, we cannot be responsible for the consequences."

Lieutenant A.J. Smith had seen malingerers; slackers and misfits use the sick list as a means of shirking duty in his previous military assignments. So it was without spite that he required sick men to receive medical treatment through proper authority, meaning the good doctor's prescription. This conflict of directives created great animosity between the troops and Dr. Sanderson. Whether deserved or not, he earned the nickname "Dr. Death" among the enlisted men and inspired the following poem by Sergeant William Hyde:

*Our Doc, the wicked swearing fellow
With Calomel thought to make us mellow
The boys his poison spurned to take
Which made him act his father, snake!
He swore that damned his soul should be
Or else a change of things he'd see
To which our feelings did assent
To have him damned were all content*

*Because the sick had not obeyed
He raved, and like a donkey brayed
My mind on him I'd like to free
But as I'm placed I'll let him be
Time will show his heart is rotten
And sure his name will be forgotten.*

Other than being mentioned in the various journals of Mormon Battalion members, Dr. Sanderson was almost forgotten. However, in 2003, his personal journal written during the march was discovered. Although it is clear that he and the enlisted men had a rocky start, it is apparent within his journal that he held great affection for these valiant soldiers as they made their way to San Diego.