

Army of the West of 160 years ago honored in Yuma

By Chuck Wullenjohn and Bill Heidner

A military unit that played a key role in settling the American West was honored early this month when a one-ton bronze statue was unveiled on a bluff overlooking the blue Colorado River.

The nine-foot statue portrays a bigger than life 2nd Lt. Philemon Merrill, a key member of the U.S. Army of the West in 1846.

The ceremony took place on the 160th anniversary of the Army of the West's crossing of the Colorado River at Yuma.

Adjutant of the Mormon Battalion, Merrill participated in the unit's arduous and famous overland 1900-mile march from Council Bluffs, Iowa, to San Diego, Calif., which entailed a crossing of the Colorado River near today's Yuma on January 9th and 10th, 1846. The statue was erected to honor that crossing and the contributions this military organization made to the westward expansion of the nation.

The frontier Army goes to work

The Army of the West was one of four components of the overall Army engaged in the Mexican War of 1845-1848, with the initial designated task of securing Santa Fe, N.M. This order was later amended to include marching to and occupying California. Commanded by General Stephen

Watts Kearny, the Army of the West consisted of five dragoon companies, two companies of artillery, two of infantry, and nine companies of Missouri volunteer cavalry, amounting to a total of about 1800 Soldiers.

One other unit was also formed that added to the mix. President James Polk authorized the creation of a military organization recruited mostly from displaced Mormon settlers encamped at Council Bluffs following their persecution and subsequent ejection from Nauvoo, Ill. The unit was designated the Mormon Battalion and exists in the history of the Army as the only unit to be specifically comprised based on religious belief and named for that religion.

A new battalion forms

The Mormon Battalion consisted of five companies of mostly Mormon men. The men enlisted as a religious duty rather than as a call to arms, and their service was linked to the promise that if they enlisted to support and help fund a Mormon trek across the plains to a new home, the church in turn would support their families.

Unlike other volunteer units, the Mormon Battalion's leadership was superseded by regular Army officers. While the battalion's first officers were appointed by church leader Brigham Young, regular army officers from Kearney's 1st Regiment of Dragoons were assigned command and staff responsibilities. Following the untimely death (due to illness) of



Several cannon rounds were fired in the course of the ceremony by Charles Cresap, clothed in the authentic garb of a Mexican-American War Soldier.

the first commander, Lt. Col. Phillip Saint George Cooke commanded the battalion during its march to California and for most of its service there. 2nd Lt. Merrill, memorialized in the Yuma statue, was one of the Mormon Battalion's own complement of officers.

War in the Southwest

The invasion and occupation of the Southwest were key strategic objectives of the war against Mexico. This conquest of territory was inextricably linked to the nation's concept of "manifest destiny." The goal was to maintain a politically unified land mass stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. In essence, California became the prize and the desert southwest was the means to get there.

The pioneering route that Kearney's Dragoons took and the somewhat altered wagon route taken by the Mormon Battalion were central to opening up the west for subsequent settlement. General Kearney departed Santa Fe and moved southwest, eventually encountering the Gila River and following it westward to its confluence with the Colorado River above Yuma. He then traveled to California.

Based on a glowing, and incorrect, situation report that Kearney received from scout Kit Carson regarding the political and military situation in California, he reduced his troop strength and left the cumbersome wagons behind in order to increase the speed of the march. The

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The YPG color guard presented the national colors at the event, which attracted an audience of several hundred people. Col. John Bullington, Yuma Proving Ground, commander, presented them with coins after the ceremony. (Photos by Chuck Wullenjohn)



2nd Lt. Philemon Merrill, adjutant of the Mormon Battalion, is honored in a nine-foot, one-ton bronze statue overlooking the Colorado River in the new Yuma Wetlands Park.

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slow supply train was ordered to link-up with the Mormon Battalion and follow his trail.

California residents bitterly opposed and nearly fought off Kearny's troops, but the Army of the West ultimately prevailed. By the time the battalion reached California, the battle for the state was over. The Mormon Battalion settled in to occupation duties.

The battalion's primary and lasting contribution was the founding and successful navigation of a southern route to the west capable of sustaining wagon traffic. Their route established the vital link between the Santa Fe Trail and an all-weather southern route to California. During the California gold rush of 1849 and in the years afterward, this southern route was critical for the movement of settlers.

One historian wrote, "The march symbolizes the very essence of the Mormon drama as a frontier epic, and proves more than anything else the men's loyalty, stamina, and sacrifice. No matter the dramatic events, the delays en route, or the personal experiences that transpired, the story always returns to the epic march."

This pioneering route, which brought the Mormon Battalion and subsequent migrations along the Gila River to the Colorado River crossing in Yuma, is also the main event affecting the history of Yuma.

The United States won the war with Mexico in 1848, fulfilling the manifest destiny dream. The geographic location that would become Yuma became strategically important as a known reference point delineating the border between the United States and Mexico border according to the treaty ending the war. The subsequent addition of territory as a result of the Gadsden Purchase of 1854, again used the confluence of the Gila and Colorado Rivers as a known point. Historians designate the commander's after action report of the march of the Mor-

mon Battalion as a driving force in the government's decision to make the Gadsden Purchase a reality.

Yuma prospers

Four years after the initial crossing, the Army established a permanent presence on the Colorado River that became known as Fort Yuma. The purpose of the fort was to protect the strategically vital river crossing. Boat traffic up and down the river would follow and Yuma developed into a major transshipment point for supplies in the ensuing years, while still maintaining a vital overland link via the Yuma Crossing.

The civilian settlement across from the fort on the Arizona side of the river was originally named Colorado City (1854-1858). This settlement was re-named Arizona City (1858-1873) and officially became Yuma, Arizona Territory, in 1873. During the Civil War, the strategic fort was occupied by California volunteers who later marched all the way to Texas to blunt a Confederate threat to the southwest. In 1864, supply operations moved to the Arizona side of the river with the establishment of the U.S. Army Quartermaster Depot.

The unit remembered

Yuma boasts a rich history and the passage of the Mormon Battalion was a significant chapter, which led to the effort to mount the statue where the battalion once trod. The Army of the West Mormon Battalion Foundation worked for 10 years to make this happen.

Gary Smith, secretary of the non-profit foundation, says the statue unveiling marks the end of a long journey. "I've always been fascinated with the pioneers who crossed the plains — who paved the way for the rest of us. We're all the beneficiaries of their service, especially those of us in Yuma."

For Smith, a personal angle also exists. His wife's great grandfather,



The Army of the West, though small in number compared to other major U.S. armies involved in the conflict, won control of a huge area of land, including today's Arizona.

William Bailey Maxwell, was one of the battalion's Soldiers.

The brave men of the Mormon Battalion," commented Yuma Mayor Larry Nelson, "essentially carved the roads which today are Interstate 8 and Interstate 10 in Arizona."

Construction funding for the huge statue, along with all future mainte-

nance, is being provided through private donations. The City of Yuma's contribution was to provide an appropriate location. As Yuma's sole active Army installation today, U.S. Army Yuma Proving Ground carries on the tradition established by America's pioneering Soldiers of so many years ago.