

**“How hard, to starve and wear us out,
Upon this sandy desert route!**

“The Desert Route” by Levi W. Hancock, Company E

A History of the Mormon Battalion

By Darryl Montgomery



The Mormon Battalion was the only religious "unit" in American military history, serving from July 1846 to July 1847 during the Mexican War. It was a division of General Stephen Kearny's U.S. Army of the West. The battalion was a volunteer unit of over 500 soldiers, nearly all LDS men with regular army officers, under the command of Lt. Col. Philip St. George Cooke. The battalion made a grueling march from Council Bluffs, Iowa to San Diego, California, the longest march in U.S. military history.

Having been described as “the ram in the thicket” (a reference to the Lord providing Abraham a suitable offering, rather than his son Isaac), the Mormon Battalion's influence and significance in the development of the West cannot be overstated.

Upon enlistment, the members of the Battalion provided funds from their salaries and allowances to assist the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint's exodus west. These funds came at a most critical time for the church and provided a vital element to the successful emigration of the saints to the Great Salt Lake Valley.

The Battalion's march and service was instrumental in helping secure new lands in several Western states, and was especially influential in the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, which includes most of southern Arizona. Veterans of the battalion played significant roles in America's westward expansion in California, Utah, Arizona and other parts of the West.

The Mormon Battalion also opened a southern wagon route to California. Prior to the march, East-West travel across the southern territories of New Mexico, Arizona and California was not suitable for wagon traffic. At its completion, Col. Cooke declared “we have discovered and made of road of great value to our country”.

“Cooke's Wagon Road” would have an immediate impact on the history of the West. Within three years, estimates of as many as 60,000 people would travel the new route during the California gold rush. The Butterfield Overland Stage Company and first trans-continent mail service used the trail. During the Civil War, control of the road was a main focus of both sides of the conflict here in the West, with the Union army taking control of the entire route by 1864. This allowed the California regiments move into New Mexico and Texas by way of the road. Today, the Union Pacific Railroad and Interstate 8 parallels the trail blazed by the Mormon Battalion.

The Battalion left Council Bluffs on July 16, 1846. Included in their numbers, were several wives and children of Battalion members, a practice which was not uncommon at the time. Upon reaching Santa Fe, many family members stayed behind, as well as soldiers who were too ill to continue. The march proceeded south, following the Rio Grande River. Near present-day Rincon, NM, the Battalion turned west. By December 1, 1846, they entered present-day Arizona. The Presidio at Tucson was occupied on December 16. The march entered present-day Yuma County on December 30 and reached the Colorado River on January 9. The crossing of the river commenced on the 10th and continued all night and until late the next morning. The Mormon Battalion's march concluded at the old mission in San Diego, January 29, 1847, having journeyed a total distance of over 1,800 miles.

After reaching San Diego, the Battalion was assigned various duties during the peaceful occupation of Alta California. They lent their pioneering skills to the fledgling communities of San Diego and Los Angeles. They constructed roads, built structures and improved facilities. In July, the Battalion's one-year enlistment was up. 81 members re-enlisted. However, most of the men made their way back to Iowa or Utah to join their families and conclude their trek west. A handful of Battalion members were instrumental in the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill, ushering in the California gold rush. Several communities throughout the West would be founded by veterans of the Mormon Battalion, including Mesa, AZ, San Bernardino, CA, and both Ogden and Provo, UT.



The route of the Mormon Battalion through Yuma County, near Wellton, AZ

The Mormon Battalion in Present-Day Yuma County

By Darryl Montgomery

The Mormon Battalion had already marched over 1,500 miles when they reached eastern border of Yuma County, Arizona. It could be argued that the hardest part of their journey was still ahead of them.

Historians can place the Battalion's overnight camps with surety when present-day landmarks exist, such as Tucson, the wells at Maricopa, or the old mission in San Diego. After departing from the many villages of the Pima Indians in central Arizona, the Battalion would not see another man-made structure until Warner's Ranch in California. The geographic placement of other campsites is open to interpretation, based on military records and personal journals. Although the Battalion marched along the Gila River for the most part, where they camped on this East-West axis, especially in Yuma County, has not been concisely determined. However, of the eleven camps they made while traveling through Yuma County, two sites are generally agreed upon by most historians; the Antelope Hill site and the Colorado River crossing site.

December 30, 1846 – The Mormon Battalion enters present-day Yuma County, and travels past Sears Point, a place of great archeological and historical interest. Upon the rock bluffs of Sears Point, one can find hundreds of pre-historic petroglyphs (“profiles of men, beasts and reptiles”), as well as the “autographs” of early explorers and mountain men. The Battalion most likely camped 0.5 miles west of Sears Point. (32.9335N, 113.3533W WGS84 Datum)



“I encountered a very difficult hill, in fact two of them, soon after marching; besides being a cut-off of four or five miles, the bluff must be crossed, or the river six times...The day was very cold, with a high west wind. The march, thirteen of fourteen miles – too far, if avoidable, considering the heavy pulls at the hills and over some of the road.” – Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“A very rugged road to day [sic], made 20 miles, but traveled until after dark.” - Samuel Rogers, Company B.

“As we traveled down the river, we found rocks covered with ancient hieroglyphics, including profiles of men, beasts and reptiles.” – Daniel Tyler, Company C.

December 31, 1846 – The Battalion encamped along the Gila River, most likely 3.5 miles due north of Dateland. (32.8601N, 113.5435W)



“I mustered and inspected the battalion this morning, commencing before sunrise...I found the road to-day pretty good; there was rain here a week of two ago, which evidently improved the ground; the path, in places, was of hard beaten clay, where mules scarcely made a track...I had now come twelve miles, and it was reported very far to get to the river ahead. I saw three spots of grass to-day, but too far from water for a convenient camp; near a point of rocky bluff, called “Painted Rock,” I saw a long pile of earth and cinders, which seemed to be thrown up by an eruption.” – Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“The Battalion was mustered at sunrise, it being customary to muster on the last day of each month. At

9 a.m. took up the line of march, traveled 10 miles, camped one mile and a half from water.” – William Hyde, Company B.

“General muster at 7 a.m. After which marched 10 miles, the ground shows signs of late rains. Camped on a slough of brackish water. The sun shines clear and the weather is fine.” - Samuel Rogers.

January 1, 1847 – The Battalion camped near Texas Hill, an easily identified “mountain...of black confused rocks”. (32.8259N, 113.6623W)



“The road passed over an extensive upland; and thus the mules were not watered until I struck the river and encamped here at 10 o’clock; the day, too, was unusually warm, although last night was exceedingly cold. The road was pretty good; some bad sand and some bad clay, but much of pebbles...I am now preparing a boat of two pontoon wagon-bodies lashed together, end to end, between two dry cottonwood logs; in this I shall put all the baggage I can risk...” - Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“Struck our tents at sunrise, traveled 12 miles, camped on the bank of the Heli [sic]. At 1:30 p.m. new years supper composed of a little bread and coffee, and a little flour gravy.” – William Hyde.

“Cool last night. Pleasant today. Marched 10 miles and camped on the bank of the river at 2 pm. Near by were some Californians fleeing from the turmoils of that country. We are preparing to send some of the baggage down the river in a boat, thereby relieving the teams.” – Samuel Rogers.

January 2, 1847 – The Battalion probably retired for the night at the north end of the Mohawk Mountains, along the banks of the Gila River. (32.7812N, 113.7903W)



“After a very cold night and a hot morning, the day fortunately turned out cloudy and cold...I separated about 2,500 pounds of provisions for Mr. Stoneman’s flotilla. The mountain close by [is] utterly bare, and composed of black confused rocks. Everything indicates volcanic action, and some of a late date.” – Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“For the last week we have traveled over a barren and desolate looking country there is hardly a blade of grass to be seen, the most of the upland country that we have traveled over for the last week in passing from one bend of the river to another is either almost entirely sand or else it is gravel covered with little stones. We pass now and then a rich little valley as we pass near the river, there is a great variety of mountain scenery [sic] which continually presents itself to the eye of the traveler as he passes through this part of the country.” – George Washington Taggart, Company B.

“On camp guard last night. Three wagon loads of provisions are to be boated down the river from this point. Marched 12 miles and camped.” – Samuel Rogers.

January 3, 1847 – The Battalion perhaps made their camp in the broad basin of Mohawk Wash, near Avenue 44E. (32.7252N, 113.9016W)



“I ordered an early march; Weaver stating it fourteen miles to the next point of the river...No news from Mr. Stoneman...I marched over unusually good clay bottom ground about eleven miles, when we crossed a sandy point, and I saw the guides...on a great bluff of impalpable sand. I rode up, and found that the trail led there; that it continued the same four or five miles on the high ground...We found here the petrefaction [sic] of a bone, which Dr. Sanderson pronounces much larger than the corresponding bone of an elephant.” – Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“Marched 12 miles.” – William Hyde.

“Again marched 12 miles and camped.” – Samuel Rogers.

January 4, 1847 – The Battalion camped at the foot of Antelope Hill, described by the journalists as a high mountain. In 2004, as part of the Eagle project of Trevor Skousen, Boy Scout Troop 98 constructed a monument at this location. This site was later improved upon by the youth of the Yuma Arizona Stake during their 2005 Youth Conference. (32.7119N, 114.0122W)



“The camp is at the foot of a volcanic peak of rocks some 500 feet high. The adjutant ascended it before sundown, and believed he could see the river for twenty miles...” – Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“Traveled 8 miles. Roads still bad.” – William Hyde.

“Traveled 7 miles camped at the base of a high mountain. Some of the men climbed to the top of it and rolled down big rocks which descended with tremendous noise.” – Samuel Rogers.

January 5, 1847 – The Battalion camped on the banks of the Gila River after its course turned to the west again. This site has been ravaged numerous times by the periodic flooding of the Gila. However, one can find an old Arizona Mesquite tree, still thriving here. The tree is perhaps over 300 years old, based on its circumference. The site is near the junction of Avenue 26E and County 10th Street, three miles west of Wellton. (32.6768N, 114.1968W)



“After marching about 12 miles, I encamped at a poor place for grass...This bottom is called rich ground, and I believe in could easily be irrigated.” – Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“Commodore Stoneman came to camp and informed us that boating down the river as no go. We had in the boats six days rations of pork and flour. Should we fail to get the provisions the loss will be a very serious one.” – Robert Whitworth, Company C.

“Traveled down the river 12 miles. Our rations were again reduced to 9 ounces of flour and 8 ounces of pork per day. We learn that they failed to boat the provisions

down the river because of the low stage of water, so they were left behind. This cuts down the rations of flour for Co B [to] 7 days.” – Samuel Rogers.

January 6, 1847 – Camp was made at the foot of the Gila Mountains, most likely north of Mohawk-Wellton Irrigation pumping station. (32.7154N, 114.3283W)



“A mile or two brought us back to the dragoon trail; there was much heavy road. After passing some sand-hills, the road descended to a river beach, then for three or four miles, we passed a constant succession of dry beds of mountain torrents – first of sand, then all of stone...The weather is like the finest of October weather in Missouri.”
– Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“The Col. cared not for our suffering, as he has plenty. There was only seven days half rations and we were more than 15 days from settlements.” – William Coray, Company B.

“We left two men and a mule to recover a part of the flour. Marched 15 miles and camped. Walter Davis shot a Pelican.” – Samuel Rogers.

January 7, 1847 – After making the road through “Devil’s Point”, the Battalion camped along the Gila River, upstream from the historic McPhaul Bridge. Traveling the back roads from Dome Valley provides for a unique opportunity to see the typical terrain that challenged the Battalion during this stretch of the journey. (32.7154N, 114.4148W)



“I found, after passing many of the stony ridge-points and clay-gullies, that the work was very badly done, and caused the last party to work back to the wagons...a road was cut through a dense growth of willow, cottonwood, & c., round the last point, and we again ascended to the usual open bottom...It was very cold this forenoon; the march was about seven miles.” – Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“We advanced only seven miles, owing to the pioneers having to work the road over rocky points of ridges and gullies. When we camped our mules had to swim the river to obtain feed, and then it only consisted of flag-grass and willow.” – Daniel Tyler.

“Traveled 8 miles. I had charge of the guard. The road was very bad. Points of the mountain made down to the river, and made it very bad to get along.” – William Hyde.

“Traveled over points of mountain and across bottoms for 14 miles. The mules and oxen were swum across the river to where there was some brush for them to browse upon.” – Samuel Rogers.

January 8, 1847 – The Battalion most likely camped within the present-day city limits of Yuma, northeast of Black Hill. Although the confluence of the Colorado and Gila Rivers is some 4 miles east of the city today, in 1847 the mouth of the Gila was just below the Yuma Mesa. (32.7182N, 114.6141W)



“Mouth of the Gila. I got the mules over safely and early; they had icicles on them. There were still some hills of the “Devil’s Point” to pass; then we had a very good road. The march was about sixteen miles. The country around the two rivers is a picture of desolation; nothing like vegetation beyond the bottoms of the rivers; black mountains with wild-looking peaks and stony hills and plains fill the view.” – Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“We traveled over a rich alluvial bottom, where we found wild hemp growing, and reached the mouth of the Gila River.” – Daniel Tyler.

“Traveled 15 miles. Camped near the junction of the Gila and Colorado rivers, the whole distance from the point where we left the Rio Grande del Norte to the mouth of the Gila is 686 miles, according to my judgment of an unmeasured road. We have found no timber to speak of, a little cottonwood on the Gila, though there is plenty of brush such as is common on the plains of Sonora.” – Samuel Rogers.

January 9, 1847 – The Battalion prepared to cross the Colorado River, near Algodones, MX. In 1992, as part of the Eagle Project of B. C. Smith, Boy Scout Troop 97 constructed and dedicated a monument to the Battalion at the site. (32.7125N, 114.7201W)



“Marched very early. The wagons were six hours reaching the crossing; the road was very bad for sand and soft clay – perhaps half of it; the pioneers did much work, and straightened the trail much. The Rio Colorado here resembles the Missouri in size and color of the water. It has immense bottoms difficult to pass; they are of rich soil. I believe it to be the most useless of rivers to man; so barren, so desolate and difficult, that it has never been explored; running through volcanic mountains and sand deserts, at places through chasms of vertical rock perhaps five thousand feet deep.” – Col P. St. George Cooke.

“A march of ten miles over a bottom, which in places was heavy sand and in others miry clay, brought us to the crossing of the Colorado River.” – Daniel Tyler.

“It is one year this day I was in the temple of Nauvoo. I little thought of being here at this time I am certain.” – William Coray.

January 10, 1847 – Colorado River crossing near Algodones, MX



“The weather is said to be colder than known in many years. The wind blows again, and slow work is made at crossing...and will continue at it, if necessary, all night.”
– Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“Men were detailed to gather muskeet [mesquite] to take along for the mules. This is a kind of bud that grows on small trees or bushes which resemble the Locust tree. Some of the messes ground some buds to mix with their flour in order to enlarge their rations...The river at this place, as near as we could judge, is about one mile wide.” – William Hyde.

“On reaching the Colorado River, a day was spent in fixing up some more zinc wagon boxes, with a view to having to ferry the river. The boats were made ready and loaded, and run aground, then it was discovered that by wading, the boats could be got across, then the teams were hitched up and the river forded before night, thus saving several days in ferrying.” – William B. Pace.

“Ferrying across the river in the pontoon wagon-boxes was commenced...and continued all night and until late the next morning.” – Daniel Tyler

“Remained in camp, some of the Companies took their provisions and baggage across this p.m. The river here is about half a mile wide, with rich bottoms along its banks.” – Samuel Rogers.

January 11, 1847 – Colorado River crossing near Algodones, MX. The Battalion leaves Yuma County, continuing west into the Sonoran Desert.



“With my mind full of anxiety, I force myself to the task of recording the deeds of the day. I am in camp at the “well,” fifteen miles from the river; I made a firm resolve that here the battalion should come to-day; and, for these reasons, I had not rations or time, under the probable state of affairs in California, to spend another day beyond the river. The battalion were crossing, I believe, all night...The river had an inch of ice in calm places, and quite a number of mules fell and were drowned.” – Col. P. St. George Cooke.

“After the baggage was all over, the loose animals were driven across. One hundred and thirty of our poor sheep were still alive, though, like ourselves, almost famished.”
– Daniel Tyler.

“The remainder of the Battalion crossed the river. One wagon was left on an island and some mules got so chilled in the water that they drowned. Some of the men waded the river. Prosecuted our journey west for 15 miles, but left 4 wagons on the way.” – Samuel Rogers.

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We welcome any comments on this article. We are especially interested in excerpts from the journals of Battalion members as they made their way from Santa Fe to San Diego. Contact Darryl at nefi@aol.com.