

The Mormon Battalion: A Blessing from the Lord

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Imagine having to stand up for your religion in the midst of persecution from all sides. Family members and old friends shun you for not denouncing your beliefs; countless mobs torment you because of your religion; local and national authorities admit that “your cause is just” when you go to them for help, but insist that they can do nothing for you. You have been driven from city to city; first Kirtland, then Independence, and finally Nauvoo. At each home, you worked hard to make the city beautiful. At each home, you watched as mobs destroyed your work and let everything dear and familiar fall into the hands of strangers. Your beloved prophet is dead. So is his brother. Now imagine that you are an outcast, living in Winter Quarters, Nebraska, with the other Mormons who have similar memories. Yet, you have not lost hope. Brigham Young has taken over and has plans for you to cross the plains and settle in the west. He has given these orders to Elder J. C. Little: “If our Government should offer facilities for emigrating to the western coast, embrace those facilities if possible.”<sup>1</sup> Every day you pray for assistance, and every day you expect it to come. You know the Lord is on your side.

June 1846, the prayers of the Saints were answered, but not in the way they had hoped and expected. The Lord answered their prayers by taking away many of their able-bodied men.

Daniel Tyler described the general feeling among the Saints: “Assistance in emigrating with their families westward, would have been hailed with joy. Work of any kind at any price, on the route of their proposed journey, by which they could earn a

subsistence, would have been considered a God-send. But joining the army and leaving their families in such a condition was repugnant to their feelings. Such a thing had never been thought of, much less asked for, by the Saints.”<sup>2</sup> Although the call for five hundred Mormon men to help in the war against Mexico at first seemed to be an extra burden, it turned out to be the Lord's way of blessing his people.

When Brigham Young heard of the call for men, he said: “If we want the privilege of going where we can worship God according to the dictates of our consciences, we must raise the Battalion.”<sup>3</sup> He also declared: “This thing is from above for our good.”<sup>4</sup> The Mormon Battalion became a blessing in many ways.

Forming the Battalion proved the loyalty of the Mormons to their country. No one can doubt the loyalty of a people who give up five hundred of their best men when they themselves are in dire need of help and protection. Brigham Young stated: “Let every one distinctly understand that the Mormon Battalion was organized from our camp to allay the prejudices of the people, prove our loyalty to the government of the United States, and for the present and temporal salvation of Israel; that this act left near five hundred teams destitute of drivers and provisions for the winter, and nearly as many families without protection and help.”<sup>5</sup>

The Battalion also served to provide money for the Saints. Each soldier was given money for clothes, but decided to send it back to his family and march in what he had. They also sent back all the pay they received that could be spared. This was a welcome blessing to the Saints and to the Mormon Church, who stood in great need of assistance. All the arms and camp equipment were to become the property of the Battalion, as well, when they were discharged in California.

Before the Battalion left, they received instruction and promises from apostles of the Lord. Sergeant William Hyde recalls: "President B. Young, H. C. Kimball, P. P. Pratt, W. Richards, John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff met in private council with the commissioned and non-commissioned officers, on the bank of the Missouri river, and there gave us their last charge and blessing, with a firm promise that, on condition of faithfulness on our part, our lives should be spared, our expedition should result in great good and our names should be held in honorable remembrance to all generations."<sup>6</sup>

Their lives were spared. More than five hundred volunteers enlisted in the Mormon Battalion; less than 25 were killed.<sup>7</sup>

Their expedition resulted in great good. As before mentioned, they received money to send back to the church and proved their loyalty to the U.S. They also served their country by being ready and willing to fight and cutting a trail to California.

Their names have been held in honorable remembrance to all generations. Five generations later, this essay contest is one of the small ways of honoring them.

Brigham Young prophesied of other blessings they would receive while in the Battalion. Each one was literally fulfilled. Among other things, he promised they would never be required to shed human blood, but would only fight wild beasts, and "that there would not be as many bullets whistle around [their] ears as did around Dr. Willard Richards' in Carthage jail."<sup>8</sup>

December 11, the Mormon Battalion engaged in battle. However, as President Young had promised, they shed no human blood and fought only wild beasts. This battle was against wild bulls. Less than a week later, on December 17, it looked like the Battalion would have to fight again, but this time it wasn't against animals. The alarm

was made and the orders given; the army stood at attention, ready to begin. They waited and waited, but the enemy never attacked, never even drew near. They were not required to shed human blood that night, nor any other night. William Hawk later testified, “The President promised this Battalion, that inasmuch as they would go forth and do right there should not be a ball shot at them; and I can say for one, that I realize the truth of that saying; I have experienced it—I have seen those words fulfilled and that promise verified to the very letter, when placed in the midst of my enemies with nothing but these little mallets to defend myself with, (the speaker here exhibited his fists) and they were well armed with bows and arrows, knives and rifles, but they burnt the priming, the powder flashing in the pan, and not a gun aimed at me went off, and their arrows broke.”<sup>9</sup>

President Young also promised that “not one of those that had enlisted would fall by the nation's foe.”<sup>10</sup> That did not mean no one would die, just that no one would be killed by “the nation's foe.” Sickness was the main cause of death for the few who did die. For example, the first death in the Battalion was Samuel Boley. He became dangerously ill, and, though Dr. William L. McIntyre nursed and doctored him, he died July 23, 1846.<sup>11</sup> Other deaths in the Battalion were blamed on Dr. George B. Sanderson, an army physician who had prejudices against the Mormons.

President Brigham Young had counseled the men: “If you are sick, live by faith, and let 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.”<sup>12</sup> In many cases, it was difficult to follow Brigham Young's instructions. Dr. Sanderson insisted on giving them medicines and often went as far as to force it down their throats. He threatened to cut anyone's throat who gave assistance without his orders. Christopher

Layton, one of my ancestors, wrote: "It would be difficult to find American citizens from any other community who would have submitted to the tyranny and abuse that the Battalion did from. . . Sanderson. Nor would we have done so on any consideration other than as servants to our God and patriots to our country."<sup>13</sup> Those who did find ways to follow the prophet's counsel did prosper. Daniel Tyler wrote of one such instant: "Henry G. Boyle was taken violently sick, through drinking too much water on his arrival when he was very warm and thirsty. It being his turn to go on guard, he had no alternative but to go (on guard duty) or report himself on sick list. He chose the latter, and Sanderson, the doctor, gave him the usual dose—calomel—which, however, he did not swallow, but consigned it to the flames. The writer and another Elder or two were called upon to anoint him with oil and lay hands upon him, and before night he was well."<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the course of the Mormon Battalion's journey, many prayers were given and many prayers were answered. As Sanford Porter lay dying, he called upon the Lord in prayer, summoning all his faith and asking that, if there was any more work for him to do, his life might be spared. Instantly, his pain left, and his health was as good as ever.<sup>15</sup>

Another answer to prayers came when a detachment of fifty-five men, under command of Lieutenant W. W. Willis, were left without a decent team. Lieutenant Willis wrote: "What to do for a team we did not know. This was a dark time, and many were the earnest petitions that went up to our God and Father for Divine aid. The next morning we found with our oxen a pair of splendid young steers, which was really cheering to us. We looked upon it as one of the providences of our Father in heaven. Thus provided for, we pursued our march."<sup>16</sup>

An additional example of prayers being answered came at a time when Colonel Cooke decided to travel in the direction where they were more likely to find food, than to go on to California. This sent a gloom across the whole camp; the Battalion had wanted to go to California ever since they left Nauvoo. Brothers David Pettegrew and Levi W. Hancock went from tent to tent and told the men: "Pray to the Lord to change the Colonel's mind." More than three hundred prayers ascended to heaven that night, all for the same purpose. The next morning, they began marching, but had not gone far before Colonel Cooke ordered a halt and, with firmness, said: "This is not my course. I was ordered to California; and I will go there or die in the attempt!" Brother Pettegrew spoke for all when he cried: "God bless the Colonel!"<sup>17</sup>

Christopher Layton wrote of many times when the Lord blessed them in small, simple ways. When they were able to get fresh oxen and mules and better wagons, he wrote: "The hand of the Lord was thus manifested to us, for without something of the kind, we must have been left without conveyance in the desert."<sup>18</sup> When they were in need of food, they slaughtered an ox that had given out and rationed his remaining flesh, though he was a mere skeleton. Along with the ox, they had California quail and a couple of goats. Christopher Layton said, "we regarded all these luxuries as gifts from our Heavenly Father."<sup>19</sup>

Through all the hardships, inconveniences, and trials, the Mormon Battalion never failed to recognize the hand of the Lord in the details. "The Colonel expressed great surprise at seeing us singing merry songs and playing the fiddle when we were so worn out and hungry, but we were thankful to our Heavenly Father and rejoiced that our journey was nearly finished and the night air was full of the songs of the Saints."<sup>20</sup>



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## The Mormon Battalion

"History may be searched in vain for an equal march of infantry. Half of it has been through a wilderness where nothing but savages and wild beasts are found, or deserts where, for lack of water, there is no living creature." Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke said when he was praising the march of the Mormon Battalion (Black).

When United States president James K. Polk declared war on Mexico he sent Captain James Allen to ask the Mormons for five hundred volunteers. Never before in history had any religious group been asked to supply a company of men. The request was unique for this reason. But even more astonishing to some of the "Mormons" was the situation in which the offer was made. The Mormons were on their way westward, after being pushed from their beautiful Nauvoo by vigilantes. They had repeatedly asked for protection and redress from local and federal governments, without success.

(Kimball)

Captain Allen arrived in the Mormon camp some time around the sixteenth of July. It took only three days for the five hundred and forty-three men to be found. Brigham Young promised his followers: "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. These are my feelings, in brief,

respecting the company of men known as the Mormon 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 had in honorable remembrance, for ever and ever." Along with the Battalion went between fifteen or sixteen families including fifty to fifty-five children. Also thirty-two women signed on as privates and laundresses. (Larson)

In return for enlisting each volunteer received a clothing allowance, bedding, and rations from the United States Army. In addition they each received an enlistment fee. Because the government would be providing for their needs most of the volunteers turned their money over to families or to Brigham Young. This was an answer to the Prophet's prayer for assistance for some of his followers who were too poor to equip themselves for the journey west. (Sangres)

On August first the group crossed the Missouri river across from Fort Leavenworth. When they reached Fort Leavenworth Captain Allen died and was replaced by Lieutenant Andrew Jackson Smith. The group stayed at the fort until August thirteenth. Then they headed for Santa Fe. Smith forced the men to march really fast and with hardly any breaks. When the march reached Dodge City, Kansas he sent the sick, the women, and the children to Ft. Pueblo in what is now Colorado. There was much complaining and many hard feelings about Smith's decision to continue only with the healthy men, but he probably saved many innocent lives by doing so. (Kimball & Sangres)

In November the three hundred and forty remaining men cut the first wagon tracks across the wilderness from Deming to San Diego (Sangres). On August twenty-

seventh they reached Council Grove. When the group came through a box canyon they were forced to cut the canyon walls in order for their wagons to fit through. On January twenty-ninth, eighteen forty-seven they reached the end of their journey, at Mission San Diego. They were discharged on the sixteenth of July that same year. (Kimball)

Throughout the entire march from Iowa to California the Battalion only fought one battle. It has been come to be known as the Battle of the Bulls. The battle took place at Tucson. A herd of wild bulls stampeded the Battalion. The bulls were wild Spanish stock that had become fierce in order to survive. In the end ten to fifteen bulls were killed (accounts vary as to the exact number), two mules were gored to death, and three men were wounded. They may have had a welcome change from their boring army diet that night, with fresh beef available. (Sangres)

Part of the reason for the recognition given to the Mormon Battalion s is because of all of the paths and trails they built while crossing the continent. After their term of service some of the men left for Salt Lake and they built a new wagon road over the Sierra Nevada. They called it the Mormon-Carson Emigrant trail. While crossing the mountains they came across the cabin of the Donner party. They buried the remains of the members and burned down the cabin. These same who desperately wanted to see their families and had no way to reach them once again created a new trail. This time the trail ran from Los Angeles to the Salt Lake Valley. The particular trail they built has been paved and now the highway from Los Angeles to Salt Lake covers almost the exact same area. (Black)

Some men decided to stay in California until they had made more money to return home. These men are remembered for their efforts to help build many of the important communities in California. The men who stayed behind also built sawmills and other buildings for individual people that needed help. Some members of the Mormon Battalion were the ones who built Sutter's mill and discovered gold in the stream.(Black)

There were many individual people who were a part of the Mormon Battalion. One was Nathaniel V. Jones. He enlisted with the Battalion in Council Bluffs Iowa and later became a sergeant of one of the companies. On May eighth Jones was ordered, along with twenty others, to escort some Indians up into the mountains. Then on May tenth an order was filed that three men from each battalion company was to serve as an escort to General Kearney to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Jones was once again chosen to leave the Battalion. He left with the others on May thirteenth, from Los Angeles, and met up with Kearney on the twenty-seventh in Monterey, California. At this point Jones was separated from the Battalion for the rest of his enlistment. There were many other men who had families and lives of their own that will not individually be known.(Marriott Library)

The Mormon Battalion has inspired many people. It reminds us that we should serve our country in time of need. The Mormon Battalion served their nation even though the government had refused aid to them in the past. The government had denied funds, supplies, and justice, after the Mormons were kicked forcefully out of

Missouri. Yet Brigham Young extended the call to his followers to join the military and the men answered it swiftly.

Personally I have found inspiration from reading and hearing about the Mormon Battalion. I have had several surgeries on my toes and the very thought of marching all that way gives me real sympathy pains. The men in that Battalion were brave and selfless. We can learn a lot about how to treat others from those men. When the Prophet of their Church called them they willingly risked their lives to serve the rest of the people in this country. The families they left behind traveled on through severe conditions without their fathers and husbands to help them. There was no way for them to know if they would see each other again. But they had faith in the counsel and promises of Brigham Young. I know that I have the same opportunity today, to heed the counsel of a prophet, President Hinckley. He hasn't asked me to leave my family or go on a forced march, but I can answer his call to live the standards of the Church with the same degree of faith and commitment that those families of the Mormon Battalion showed.

What did the most of the nation do? They mocked them until they were long dead. We need to make up for those detractors of the past and remember the men who went before, setting an example of service, hard work, and obedience.

Brigham Young prophesied that the future world would not ever forget the deeds of the Mormon Battalion. In school the Battalion only gets a paragraph or two in a history text book but it is there. Whenever people look at a map of old trails they see several trails with Mormon names included in them. Also when someone thinks about

the gold rush to California and the first ones who started the whole mad dash out there they will think of the Mormon Battalion or they will wonder who it really was that found the gold and then when they find out they will hear about the exploits of a group of courageous men. The men in the Mormon Battalion might not have been amazing gunfighters that could shoot anything, because the only thing they ever shot at was bulls, but they were some of the great trailblazers who made westward expansion easier and safer. The trails and roads that they built were used by thousands of other pioneers in years to come. Brigham Young's prophesy has come true so far. Let's not disappoint him and forget the trail blazers of before.

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## **PATHS DIVIDED; HEARTS UNITED**

### **The Story of Jonathan Harriman Holmes and Elvira Annie Cowles Holmes**

**By Kirsten Genevieve Bastow, 4<sup>th</sup> Great-Granddaughter**



Jonathan walked the dusty and lonely path of the Mormon Battalion. Elvira went west along the pioneer trail placing the yoke of a fallen ox upon her own shoulders. They were a family divided by hundreds of miles, yet hearts were united in love – love for each other and love for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is their story.

Jonathan Harriman Holmes was born March 11, 1806 to his father, Nathaniel Holmes and mother, Sarah Harriman, in Rowley, Essex, Massachusetts. Jonathan was a shoemaker by profession. He was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-



day Saints in 1832. He went to Kirtland, Ohio two years later and made his home with the Prophet Joseph Smith where he was much beloved. During this time he was also a bodyguard to the Prophet.

Jonathan remained at the Smith home until he married Marietta Carter on April 13, 1837. They had two daughters born to them - Sarah Elizabeth in 1838 and Mary Emma in 1840. Jonathan suffered the heart-wrenching loss when his wife, Marietta died on August 20, 1840 followed by Mary Emma passing away less than a month later on September 10<sup>th</sup>. Jonathan was then left to raise 2-year-old Sarah Elizabeth alone.

Elvira Annie Cowles was born November 23, 1813, in Unadilla, Oswega County, New York, to her father, Austin Cowles and mother, Phebe Wilbur. Elvira was the oldest child. Several of her siblings died in infancy and her mother died when Elvira was twelve-years-old. Elvira must have helped with the younger children. Her father remarried a year and a half later and Elvira enjoyed a good relationship with her stepmother. Elvira became a teacher at a young age. Having been raised in a religious home, Elvira became a member of the Latter-Day Saint Church on October 19, 1835 at the age of twenty-two.

Elvira was in Kirtland, Ohio in 1836 and left with the other members of the Church and moved to Nauvoo, Illinois, where she found a job at the home of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Little did she know that Joseph Smith would soon welcome an old friend into his household by the name of Jonathan Holmes.

Apparently Elvira helped care for little Sarah Elizabeth Holmes. The evenings that Sarah liked best were the ones when she and Elvira would be left at home to care

for the family while Sister Emma Smith and Eliza R. Snow would be out caring for and visiting the sick. Elvira would tell stories and they would play games.

Elvira lived with the Smiths for two years. During this time, Elvira was at the meeting when the Relief Society was organized and she became the first treasurer.

On December 1, 1842, Jonathan and Elvira were married by Joseph Smith. At the time of their wedding, Eliza R. Snow wrote this beautiful poem for Jonathan and Elvira:

### **Conjugal**

#### **To Jonathan & Elvira**

Like two streams, whose gentle forces  
Mingling, in one current blend –  
Like two waves, whose onward courses  
To the ocean's bosom tend –

Like two rays that kiss each other  
In the presence of the sun –  
Like two drops that run together  
And forever are but one,

May your mutual vows be plighted –  
May your hearts, no longer twain  
And your spirits be united  
In an everlasting chain.

Jonathan and Elvira were closely connected to the Joseph Smith family, so when Joseph and Hyrum were murdered, the loss of their friends and spiritual leaders affected them very deeply. Jonathan helped bury the body of Joseph and helped move it to a more secure resting place.

While Elvira and Jonathan were in Nauvoo, Elvira gave birth to a daughter, Lucy Elvira on October 11, 1845. They must have been anticipating the completion of the

Nauvoo Temple as both Jonathan and Elvira received their endowment there on December 23, 1845.

Soon after, along with other members of the church, they were driven from the State of Illinois by a mob. After months of hardship crossing Iowa, they arrived in Council Bluffs in July of 1846.

But Jonathan and Elvira were soon to be separated. In seeking aid to help the saints, Brigham Young instructed Jesse Little to meet with U.S. President James K. Polk. Little arrived in Washington just eight days after Congress declared war on Mexico. The president suggested that a battalion of five hundred men be raised to fight for the United States.

This was done and Jonathan became a Private in Company "D", under the command of Captain Nelson Higgins. On July 16, 1846, five companies were raised of one hundred men each. The same day they marched down the river eight miles and camped.

Jonathan and Elvira must have felt lonely at the thought of their separation and it would have been difficult for Jonathan to leave Elvira to cross the plains alone with their two small daughters as he left to march with the Battalion in the opposite direction. Without the strong faith they had, Jonathan could never have left his family wondering if he would ever see them again.

Left alone to spend the year at Winter Quarters, Elvira's and Jonathan's little daughter, Lucy Elvira, died of canker on June 1, 1847. This disease was colic, chills and high fever. Just sixteen days later on July 17, 1847, Elvira and Sarah Elizabeth left

Winter Quarters and traveled in the Captain Amos Neff Company across the Great Plains, for the Salt Lake Valley.

Elvira and her daughters came on their way to the Salt Lake Valley with the pioneers. Her team consisted of a cow and an ox. The men that were in the company with Elvira helped her yoke and unyoke the team every day.

When they were traveling, Elvira's cow lost one of its shoes, which disabled her for walking and traveling. She told the Captain what happened. He and the company camped by a small stream and told Elvira she would have to walk back a few miles to the company behind who had a blacksmith to get him to fix the shoe. Sarah Elizabeth cried to her mother, "Don't go, mother. The wild beasts or Indians will get you and I will be left alone." Elvira told her daughter, "No, don't cry. Ask the Lord to protect us both, and I will come back to you." When Elvira returned and the shoe was put on the cow, the cow went to her mate and put down her head to have the yoke put on.

Before they reached the Salt Lake Valley, Elvira's ox died and made it impossible for her and Sarah Elizabeth to go on. Elvira then put the yoke, belonging to the fallen ox, on her own shoulders and continued the journey with the rest of the company until the Captain made other arrangements.

After four long and difficult months the journey was over. Elvira and Sarah Elizabeth arrived with their company in the Salt Lake Valley on October 2, 1847.

During the winter of 1847-48, Elvira and Sarah Elizabeth lived in the "Old Fort". Elvira taught one of the first schools during that winter. As pay, she received wolf meat, sego and thistle roots. Receiving all of these things, she shared with the less fortunate than herself.

Jonathan and the rest of the Mormon Battalion marched for 2,000 miles from Council Bluffs to California in one of the longest military marches in history.

Jonathan was discharged on July 16, 1847. He then became a part of the Levi W. Hancock Company that traveled on the northern route of California on to Sutter's Fort. Captain Brown came and gave the company a letter from Brigham Young advising the men to remain in California and find jobs to buy seed and other much needed supplies for the Salt Lake Valley. Jonathan and about half of the company returned to Sutter's Fort. After working throughout the winter of 1847-48, half of the company left in the spring of 1848 with the Daniel Browett Company.

The remainder of the journey for Jonathan and his company was long and took them through deep snow and encounters with Indians. The rock terrain made traveling with the wagons very difficult. The men chiseled rock away in order for the wagons to get through and to continue on with their journey. Once the pathway was established, many wagons followed their trail on the way to California.

Jonathan Holmes and Samuel Thompson took over the leadership of the company after Daniel Browett and two of his companions were murdered at "Tragedy Springs." The Holmes-Thompson Company, as it was known, arrived in the Salt Lake Valley on October 6, 1848.

When Jonathan came to the Salt Lake Valley, Sarah Elizabeth didn't recognize her father. Jonathan looked more like a stranger with his long beard, long shaggy hair and worn and dirty clothes.

The excitement Elvira and Jonathan must have felt at this reunion would have been touched by sadness over the death of their baby girl at Winter Quarters.

Jonathan and Elvira eventually moved to South Farmington where they worked hard to make their home and a small farm. There they made butter and cheese to sell for other much needed items. They also raised sheep and flax and wool that they wove into material for blankets and clothes.

Three more daughters were born to Jonathan and Elvira – Marietta, Phoebe and Emma Lucinda. A fourth daughter, Josephine Octavia Ann, died at age three.

Elvira Annie Cowles Holmes died March 10, 1871 at the age of fifty-seven. In her obituary it says, "She retained the full strength of her mind to the last and continued to bear a powerful testimony to those around her to the truth of the Plan of Salvation and gently fell asleep in a sure and certain hope of a glorious resurrection." A procession of friends, nearly a half-mile in length, followed her to the grave.

Jonathan Harriman Holmes died August 18, 1880 and is buried by Elvira in the Farmington, Utah Cemetery. His obituary states that, "Brother Holmes could be numbered among the few men on earth who had not an enemy living. He was one of the most innocent, harmless, true and faithful men who have lived in our day, true to his family, his friends and his God."

After reading my great-great-great-great-grandfather's journal that he kept while he served with the Mormon Battalion, I know without a doubt that he had a determination to serve the Lord. Elvira couldn't have gone through what she did without her strong faith in God.

When I feel like my life is hard and it seems like a yoke of trials is on my back, I can use Jonathan and Elvira as my example of faith and loyalty to Heavenly Father. In

doing this, I can relate their experiences to myself which will help me down the path of my life. I have grown to love Jonathan and Elvira and am grateful for their legacy.

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WE SAINTS HAVE BEEN DRIVEN FROM CITY AND HOME, NOW,  
HUDDLED IN WAGONS AND TENTS, LEFT TO ROAM! DEAR  
TREASURES AND HOMES WERE LOST IN NAUVOO, AND NOW I  
MUST GIVE UP MY HUSBAND TOO!<sup>1</sup>

On July 20, 1846, 150 wives were crying those words as they stood and watched their husbands march away. The men were leaving to go fight in the Mexican War, and embark on the longest march in military history. Most wives stayed behind, but 32 women of whom 20 were laundresses went along for the 2000 mile journey from Council Bluffs, Iowa to San Diego, California. All of these amazingly strong women have some heartbreaking and unbelievable stories. I am in awe at the wonders these strong pioneer women worked, and the endurance they had, that got them through it all.

Nancy Reeder Walker Alexander, and her family, were early converts to the church. The Walker's were active members and would attend church meetings regularly. Nancy met Horace her soon-to-be husband in Indiana. Horace was not a member of the church and did not like the Saints. He joined a group of non-Mormon tormenters when he came to Indiana. But when Horace met Nancy, he started going to church lessons and meetings. Nancy encouraged him to listen and learn. Soon they were going to church together weekly.

Horace asked Nancy's parents for permission to marry her, and on September 14, 1834 they were happily married. Horace and Nancy moved to Missouri and started there home there. But when the Saints began to grow in numbers and become more powerful even the Governor feared the Mormons. The state had the saints exiled in 1839 and Nancy, Horace and their newly born daughter were forced to leave Missouri. After many trials in finding a place to live, and not be persecuted, the word of Joseph and Hyrum's martyrdom reached the Alexander family. They began traveling westward, among the first group to trek to the valley.

For awhile Nancy and Horace's family were living in winter quarters, also known as the "Camp of Israel". The call for men to fight in the battalion soon came

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<sup>1</sup> *Five Hundred Wagons Stood Still*, excerpt from poem by Helen Paul



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from Brigham Young. Horace was enlisted in Company B. When he left his family for the battalion, Nancy had three daughters and was pregnant.

Horace received the pay of \$7.00 each month and sent all of it to help take care of his family. In January, 1847 Nancy gave birth to a son. Sick from the pain of child birth and in their cold, and damp small log cabin, Nancy developed pneumonia. Nobody was there to help Nancy, or her children, so a fifteen-year old orphan, Catherine Houston, was sent to help the Alexander's.

Too sick and too tired, Nancy, the enduring Mormon battalion wife, died on January 28, 1847, along with her new born baby boy. Before Nancy died she asked Catherine to promise to watch over her daughters and make sure they met their father in the valley. Catherine promised Nancy, and on June 30, the Alexander girls and Catherine left winter quarters and began their long, hard, trek to the Salt Lake Valley.

While Horace was away, he received word of his poor wife and son's death. Very downhearted he could not stop hoping for the safety of his little daughters. When Horace heard that his daughters were on their way to the valley he quickly rode off to meet them. He found them somewhere in Wyoming, near Sweetwater. It was there that he finally embraced his sweet daughters after a separation of two years.

Eternally grateful to Catherine for taking care of his girls, Horace accompanied them, for the rest of their journey to the Salt Lake Valley. Soon after setting up home there, Horace married Catherine, on February 15, 1849. As it turns out Catherine really did keep her promise to Nancy, and truly became a second mother to the girls. Nancy and Catherine both went through trials and truly showed me, the faith Mormon battalion wives had.

As I mentioned before, not all of the women stayed behind. Some would not even allow the idea of it, like Melissa Burton Coray Kimball. This young courageous wife said, "If he [my husband] must go, I want to go, too. Why must women always stay behind and worry about their husbands, when they could just as well march beside them?"<sup>2</sup> So this eighteen-year old wife set off with her husband, Sergeant William Coray, as a paid laundress in the Battalion.

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<sup>2</sup> Quote found in The Mormon Battalion 1846&7, by Kate B. Carter

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Melissa was an incredible woman, who had as much endurance as cross-country runners. Some Members of the battalion said that she walked on foot for most of the 2000 mile journey. When asked about walking Melissa simply said, "I didn't mind it, I walked because I wanted to; my husband had to walk, and I went along by his side." If walking 2000 miles isn't enough of a struggle, Melissa was also pregnant during a majority of the time she was walking! After they reached San Diego, William and Melissa thought their journey was over. But two days later they were ordered to the San Luis Rey mission.

In early summer, the battalion was finally discharged and the Coray's set up camp in Monterey. It was there that Melissa and William had a baby boy. Sadly, the couple's new son only lived for a few days. As soon as Melissa had recovered they left Monterey for the Salt Lake Valley. While traveling they reached Sutter's Mill and found that gold had been discovered. Naturally, a majority of the battalion stopped here to search for the precious metal. Eager to get to the valley, Melissa and William stopped here for only awhile to get the means to continue. Although two whole sacks of gold were sent to William's mother and sister so they'd be able to travel to the valley.

While the Battalion was traveling through Nevada, five men were sent ahead to find a good route and come back to inform the others. But no one heard from the scouts again. Later that week, one night at sunset, the Battalion was looking for camp and found the bodies of their five men, murdered by Indians with poisoned arrows. Melissa was horrified; this was the ugliest scene she had been through yet on her journey. They buried the poor men, and camped nearby that night. But the Battalion was worried about a raid or attack, so they fired off a small cannon hoping it would scare any Indians away. Luckily they weren't attacked that night, but the cannon they had fired, scared their horses into a stampede. All the horses ran off and some were unable to retrieve.

Finally, after a grueling journey all the way from San Diego, William and Melissa arrived in the Salt Lake Valley. At last, Melissa and William were able to make a home. It was in the valley on February 6, 1849 Melissa Coray Swan was born to her happy parents.

But tragedy did not stay away from Melissa's family for long. Beloved, Husband and Father, Sergeant William Coray died, sick from such a long difficult

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journey. Poor Melissa seemed to have gone through just too many trials of faith.

But yet she still went on.

Melissa married William H. Kimball two years later. William was the oldest son of Heber C. Kimball. Several years before Melissa died she made a trip to California and visited all the places where she had traveled so long ago on her incredible journey. This unyielding battalion wife died on September 21, 1903.

Only four extraordinary women made the entire journey with the men of the Mormon Battalion: Susan Davis, Lydia Hunter, Phoebe Brown, and last but certainly not least, Melissa Coray, the youngest wife in the Battalion.<sup>3</sup>

I cannot even comprehend all of the suffering and hardships the men, and women alike, went through in the Mormon Battalion. While reading these memories I hope you realize how amazing they are, and how overwhelmingly hard it must have been to do what they did. To the pioneers and the miraculous Mormon Battalion I will be eternally grateful. I know now that I wouldn't be in this church that I love, if it weren't for these faithful people.

This July I will be leaving on my very own pioneer experience-stake wide Trek. I know Trek is not a 2000 mile journey, and I will not have to go through anything too dramatic. But hopefully through Trek, I can become closer to the pioneers that I've read about, and I know my testimony will grow through my upcoming summer adventure.

As I leave you with the stories of these soldiers of faith, and my essay comes to an end, the chorus of the Mormon battalion wives echoes once more...

**WE OBEY THE PROPHET FOR THE GOSPEL WE LOVE, WE MUST  
SACRIFICE FOR OUR SAVIOR ABOVE. I TURN TO MY STILLED  
WAGON WITH BROKEN HEART, DEAR LORD, BLESS US ALL, AS WE  
NOW MUST PART.<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> List from *The Mormon Battalion 1846&7* By Kate B. Carter

<sup>4</sup> *Five Hundred Wagons Stood Still*, excerpt from poem by Helen Paul

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## All for the Faith

By: Adam Harmon

The date was May 13, 1846. President James K. Polk announced to the United States that war with Mexico had commenced on the pretense that Mexican troops had fired on U.S. troops on disputed soil<sup>1</sup>. It would take a week for this news to journey to Nauvoo, Illinois where 19 year old Oliver Norton Harmon (my great-great grandfather) was living. His father had died three years earlier which forced grandpa to stay with his widowed mother and fatherless brother Levi, according to his journals. He had been unable to leave with the rest of the Mormon community when it left but he would soon get his chance to join them. (Harmon)

Mormon Prophet Brigham Young had been pleading with the government for help (despite the fact that the government had betrayed them) by way of Jesse C. Little. He did not expect success, but, surprisingly it was successful. The government, in desperate need for troops, would grant the Mormons their request, as long as they gave 500 men for the army. Young accepted and the government (in return) gave the Mormon troops an added bonus of \$3.50 besides their normal \$16 monthly pay. So, Young prepared to give the men to the army, knowing that many might not come back. (Ricketts 375)

The call across the country for troops was heard by Oliver Norton. He (being a man who had traveled very little) said to his mother that he was going to see the country and on June 11 crossed the Mississippi and joined the rest of the Mormons at Council

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<sup>1</sup> However, Hyrum Ulysses Simpson Grant writes in his *Personal Memoirs* that during this time, he (being a Second Lieutenant at the time) and other troops under General Zachary Taylor were ordered by the government to encroach on Mexican territory to bring on a general engagement.

Bluff, Iowa. He did not know but he was about to join up in the greatest infantry march in history<sup>2</sup>. (Harmon)

This unit was to be designated to the Army of the West, commanded by Colonel Stephen W. Kearny. Captain James Allen was given the distinct honor of forming and leading the 'Mormon Battalion.' He arrived on June 26 and on July 1<sup>st</sup> asked for 500 men to join the army. Oliver waited till it was July 16<sup>th</sup> before he joined them in Company E, Mormon Battalion, Iowa Volunteers<sup>3</sup>. Before they left, Brigham Young told them to remain true to their religion and that if they did this, they would not have to fire on anyone. (*OnlineUtah*)

On July 20, 1846, the battalion began its march from Council Bluff. The troops were unarmed and wore only their home spun clothing. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, they arrived at Fort Leavenworth and were outfitted with muskets and uniforms. My grandfather probably felt a surge of pride when he put on the uniform. But, tragedy struck when Colonel Allen suddenly died from a grievous illness and command devolved to Lt. Colonel Philip St. George Cooke. (*OnlineUtah*)

They set out again and soon were almost out of rations and were exposed to extreme heat that is trademark of the plains during summertime. By the time they reached Santa Fe on October 9, 273 people had to drop out of the march due to sunstroke. While at Santa Fe, the men who stayed with the march drew more rations, which was a pleasant change. My grandfather, I am proud to say, was among them that went on. (*OnlineUtah*)

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<sup>2</sup> It might be considered as strange that my great-great grandfather joined at all. He had been a personal friend to Joseph Smith, who often visited him and his mother. On the Prophet's last visit he said, "Mother Harmon, I am going like a lamb to the slaughter." On the day the prophet was killed, Grandfather had visited his oldest sister Emily, who worked for the jailer's wife at Carthage Jail. He was returning home when he heard the shots that took his friend's life. So, he might have thought the government was responsible for not stopping the persecution the saints received, which resulted in the Prophet's murder.

<sup>3</sup> His name is 29<sup>th</sup> on the privates section of the company's roster.

They now marched for California, but the journey was no less grueling. While marching along the Pedro River in modern day Arizona, a herd of wild bulls attacked. Thus commenced the 'Battle of Bulls', of which my grandfather was part. I do not know if he shot any of the beasts but it is possible. The men's rations ran out very soon afterwards and they then faced a very seriously possible battle with the Tucson Mexican garrison<sup>4</sup>. They soon had to resort to cooking rawhide to stay alive. They had to journey over vast deserts and over steep mountains. While in the desert, many men fainted with heat exhaustion, and then at night would drag themselves to camp. The Battalion even spent Christmas of 1846 on the desert without food or water. (Harmon)

On the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> of January<sup>5</sup>, 1847, they crossed the Colorado River into California, having finally reached their destination<sup>6</sup>. But, it would not be until the 29<sup>th</sup> of January before they could finally set up camp and rest from their 2,000 mile march at the Mission of San Diego. But, their story had only begun. It must have come as a complete shock to grandfather when he saw a story in the newspaper commemorating their journey<sup>7</sup>.

*(OnlineUtah)*

The Battalion was split into several groups and served garrison duty at San Diego, San Luis Ray and Ciudad de Los Angeles. Grandfather was garrisoned at Los Angeles. When the time came to discharge the Mormon Battalion on July 16, 1847, all but eighty-one men left. Grandfather was one of them who stayed on. He would serve another eight

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<sup>4</sup> This battle never happened though. The Mexican commander decided that to fight the enemy was foolish and abandoned Tucson.

<sup>5</sup> Great-Great Grandfather put it as the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January.

<sup>6</sup> California had not yet been made a state for it was still in Mexican territory. However it had revolted from Mexico and was at known as the 'Bear Flag Republic.' As a matter of fact, General Kearney while leading an attack force into this area had been driven out of the area by *Californios*. King, 263.

<sup>7</sup> When Colonel Cooke arrived at San Diego, he told Kearney of the Battalions exploits and their condition. He then wrote orders commemorating their journey. These soon were joined by newspapers that spread the story across the country.

months before being discharged again. This time he accepted and left the army. He then took work on at Sutter's Mill, where gold was first discovered in California. (Harmon)

Oliver found this experience to be invaluable. In 1857, Johnson's Army tried to invade Utah and Oliver joined 1,250 men in successfully holding the larger army at bay until Young gave them permission to enter. This is where he first met his future father in law, Charles Rodeback, who was put with the army as one of those who would torch the forts the Mormons made if Johnson got that close. (Harmon)

He then would get married to Sarah Jane Rodeback on October 18, 1859, who bore him 10 children, of whom only six lived to raise families. Then, he worked on the Pacific Railroad through Echo Canyon from 1862-69. He received a Franklin stove in pay. That was a mighty fine luxury back then. (Harmon)

He sent his team of horses to Missouri where it brought back his sister Emily, and several immigrants. Then he received (to his pleasant surprise) a commission from the Governor Charles Durkee to the rank of Captain of Company C, Infantry, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Nauvoo, Legion Summit Military District, Utah territory. (Harmon)

Then, he served in the Red Cloud War<sup>8</sup>. Though he does not write about having fought in any major battles, he must have been in skirmishes or such for Chief Red Cloud attacked any unit he could get within gun range of. But, this war experience is not told in detail by my grandfather. (Harmon)

Then he moved to Clifton, Idaho in 1872 and was called as the first Superintendent of Sunday School. He moved back to Weber River, then back to the

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<sup>8</sup> In the book *History and Development of the Milo Ward* (written by a committee including his son Lorenzo B. who is my great grandfather), it places his Indian War experience as the Black Hawk War. But that is impossible for the fact that it was fought in 1832, and he was only six at the time and it also places the war in 1866. This was after his commission; proving this belief impossible because it put it at over 34 years after it actually happened.



Snake River Valley and settled at the little place at the boundaries of Milo's First Ward<sup>9</sup>. Oliver Norton Harmon started a farm there in 1893. He was then made Patriarch of Brigham Stake which he held until he died on July 12, 1901. He passed on the farm to his son Lorenzo Barnes Harmon, who passed it on when he died to my grandfather, Elton, who is at this moment still alive and kicking.

Though Oliver Norton Harmon did a lot of things, from discovering gold at Sutter's Mill to becoming Captain in the Nauvoo Legion, he is most remembered by the Harmon family as a man who served his country, religion and God to his utmost ability. Though he is now buried in a grave which is now just another grave to most people, he was a grand soldier and loved his country with all his heart. But most importantly he gave me a legacy I can be and am proud of. He is now one of my heroes because of his faith, and devotion to his country. As it might be said, he did it all for the faith.

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<sup>9</sup> Milo was a small area which had its own post office, grocery store and a church house. However, it never made the status of town or even village, and its grocery store kind of died out and the post office does not exist anymore. But it has a nice church house still in which my sister had her wedding reception.

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