

The Four Cornerstones of the True Mission of the Mormon Battalion

By D. Guy Dickson

In 1846, the United States had a struggling President in the White House, (that might be redundant). President Polk had already resigned himself to a single term. He wanted to do something wonderful for which to be remembered. He and Congress looked out over this wonderful land, extending to the Pacific Ocean, with great envy. They weren't alone. England, France, and Spain all coveted this land. If necessary they would fight a war with Mexico using the term "Manifest Destiny" to justify their design. They would rely on detente to try and keep England at bay, to the north. Surely, it would have been a disaster to have been at war with enemies to the north and south, simultaneously.

The U.S. needed volunteer soldiers. Col. James Allen was sent to Iowa, where thousands of Mormons were outside U.S. territory on the plains, trying to survive. We can not begin to know how those Saints felt. Surely they felt frustration, fear, and anger. Three, four, five times most of them had been driven from their homes, and they lost everything. Mobs had killed the prophets Joseph and Hyrum, and had driven the Saints from their sacred Temples. Now, these people sat out on the plains fighting for their very survival.

This government that watched all of this happen without lifting a finger in defense of these loyal citizens, now wanted 500 of their most able bodied men. That would be about 25% of their available men. These men were asked to leave their families there on the plains to struggle for their own survival.

Most of the members probably didn't know that President Young had previously sent Brother Jesse Little to Washington, to plead with the President for support, for money to save the lives of these wonderful people. It was a backhanded bit of assistance offered by President Polk, engendered by Brother Little's threat of going to Great Britain for help if our own country would refuse to assist us. This threat was too great for a country consumed in "Manifest Destiny." The money was made available, but with strings. It would cost the church 500 men. Brigham Young would explain this to the Saints as a "God send." An infusion of capital that would allow him to feed his people. 500 of those people would be moved west at government expense, and the church would be allowed the use of Indian land for the winter. Brigham Young would be able to demonstrate loyalty to the country that he and his people loved, while President Polk avoided facing an additional potential enemy in the west.

We can't begin to imagine what was in their hearts as they began to wave goodbye to their families. In their hearts they believed that they would never see each other again. Brigham Young, perhaps caught up in the moment, perhaps wanting to give comfort to the families, perhaps seeing in vision the great legacy for these people, promised the men that "if they lived their religion (lived the commandments)... if they respected and followed the directions of their leaders... if they held sacred the property of the people that they would travel among in the West... if they always payed for what they received... that not one of them would fall at the hands of an enemy in battle." This must have

sounded strange to the Dragoon Officers who led the Battalion, knowing that they were being taken to General Kearny to join to fortify his troops on the trek to California. But off they went, indeed many of them never did see their families again.

We need to fast forward now with the time we have remaining to Pueblo Santa Fe, now Santa Fe, New Mexico. The key to understanding the legacy of the Mormon Battalion, is understanding the **four cornerstones of the true mission of the Mormon Battalion**. We must also understand, that this legacy was scripted by the Lord. Only the Lord would have scripted such an aggressive plot line filled with human accomplishment and the fulfillment of prophecy.

The **first cornerstone of the true mission of the Mormon Battalion**: *They were road builders*. In Santa Fe they picked up General Kearny's 25 wagons. On hearing that John C. Fremont and Commodore Stockton were moving down the State of California declaring martial law, and that for the most part, the *Californios* were essentially surrendering, not interested in fighting a war, this was too much for General Kearny. He had orders from the President that he was to be in charge of the mission, and to become Governor of California. Off he went to California, leaving these 25 wagons and the Mormon Battalion to the command of Colonel Phillip Saint-George Cooke. Cooke was to bring these wagons, opening a wagon road to California. There was no road at all between Santa Fe and the Gila River and they had to build the road as they went along, 20 men per wagon, pulling the wagons along. They hated those wagons. There was a lot of desert and very little water. There was much sickness, and for much of the trek the only food they had to eat was the flesh of dead mules, as the mules would die from starvation, dehydration and exhaustion.

When they arrived in California, having accomplished their mission by opening that wagon road, the Battalion had dark deep set eyes. They were gaunt, emaciated, walking corpses. Most had lost 25, 30, even 40 pounds on the trek, but they had accomplished their mission, and earned their legacy, if for no other reason, for opening that wagon road. Mail was later brought in by that road.... the Butterfield Stage Lines used that road.... the Southern Pacific Railroad would use that road.... it would be a major immigration route during the gold rush of 1849, bringing people to California, bringing people together.

These road building skills would later be used to open another road across the Carson Pass in the Sierra Nevada, as they attempted to return to their families. Additionally, Battalion members would eventually be asked to lead a later trek back to California, to establish the Southern California Colony. Another route would be opened by these road building Fathers and Mothers of our nation.

The **second corner stone of the true mission of the Mormon Battalion**: In San Diego, Company B *bridged cultures and built bridges of love and understanding between people* who should have been, by all rights, enemies. When they arrived at Pueblo San Diego, they built the first brick kiln in California, and erected the first Federal Court House with those bricks. They raised the first American flag there, built a school, dug many wells and lined them with those bricks. They so improved the community that they earned the respect and love of the people. Truly, they were the first Public Affairs representatives for the church in San Diego. The people loved them. When the

Battalion was ordered north to Los Angeles, San Diego *Californios* begged the military.... “Please leave them here.” When the Army said “No”, the people pleaded.... “Please send more *Mormonitos* here to us.” Journal accounts tell us of many of them weeping as children, as the Battalion marched north to Los Angeles. Now how is that for an invading army?

The **third corner stone of the true mission of the Mormon Battalion:** *They were peace keepers* in a very volatile, difficult time in our country’s history. They were sent to keep the peace, and they did so. Shots were never fired between the Battalion and any Mexican citizen, at any time on their journey. In California, with few exceptions, the Mormon boys were not the ones out drinking and carousing at night. They were not out fighting, assaulting Mexican citizens, or molesting local women. Their mission was one of peace. They provided peace and security to the *Californio* families in the Los Angeles area and for many families that would come thereafter.

The **fourth corner stone of the mission of the Mormon Battalion:** To my mind, one of the very most important points.... “*In a temporal sense, they were the salvation of this church.*”not my words, Brigham Young’s. It was not just the \$42.50 the government paid the men, which amounted to about \$20,000, and not just the \$3.50 they would each receive as their clothing allowance, which also went to the church and their families. After they mustered out of the Army, Levi Hancock, the only General Authority to go on the trek, led the largest group (about 150 people) north, and then over the mountains, hoping to return to their families. This is when they meet Sam Brannon and are told “Go back to California.” Brigham needs you to go back and earn as much money as you can for the winter. It’s needed for the Valley. They did, they obeyed, they went back to California. They all got jobs, many worked for John Sutter in the Sacramento area. A group of them were sent to what is now Caloma, on the American River, where they built the saw mill. Well, you know that story, gold was discovered by their foreman. I’m told, I have not seen it with my own eyes, that in their foreman’s own journal he acknowledge that it was the Mormon boys that told him that there was gold in the river. When he finally went down to check, he did find a nugget and James Marshall is the one credited with the first gold discovery.

Thirteen of the mustered out Mormon Battalion members married girls from the *Ship Brooklyn* that had come with Sam Brannon. They would establish the community known as Mormon Bar, where the second and larger discovery of gold was made by their community. The men filled their pouches and bags with this gold dust and nuggets. This gold would be used in building early Salt Lake City, and something even more important. This gold provided for the establishment of financial security here in the valley, as Brigham Young was now able to counter sign the Kirtland Safety Society notes.....the ones that had become worthless in 1837, when so many banks and institutions across this country had gone under. Reissuing them and using the gold dust from their treasury to back 80% of the value of these notes, establishing financial security here, thus fulfilling another of the prophecies of Joseph Smith, “ that one day those notes would be worth their weight in gold.”

The Battalion, very anxious now to get back to their families, went through the Carson Pass and opened that wagon route. Of course, most of their families had not reached the valley. The men had to continue back to Winter Quarters to find them. And many of them were unable to find their

family members. As you know, one in ten died at Winter Quarters, and after this long journey those men were unable to reunite with their loved ones. For those that were living, most of you have heard the story of the little boy who, upon meeting a stranger that was his father, asked, “Who is this ragged man?” Perhaps this is more meaningful to those of us who haven’t always had the chance to be with our children.

Through sacrifice and suffering the Mormon Battalion earned their legacy as “Builders of This Nation.”

In the words of Brigham Young... Because of their sacrifices they would never be forgotten.... That men and nations would rise up and praise them for what they had done.... That they would be held “in honorable remembrance for ever and ever, to the last generation.”

God bless you for coming here tonight in partial fulfillment of that prophecy. A fulfillment that is still in its infancy. God bless you who have been touched by the Spirit of Elijah, unto the turning of the hearts and minds of those around us of our times, connecting them with these Fathers and Mothers, and Fathers and Mothers like them, who were the builders of this great nation. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.