

THE HONEYMOON TRAIL

By H. Dean Garrett

(click on pictures to make larger)

The trail was over four hundred miles through the desert, winding through steep canyons, crossing barren plateaus, and passing by rivers and pools of undrinkable water. At one point, it crossed the Colorado River near the mouth of the Grand Canyon.



Surprisingly, this route took on the unlikely nickname of the Honeymoon Trail. For over two decades, it was the slender thread that connected the LDS settlers in northeastern Arizona with the St. George Temple. It became an enduring testimony of the faith of a people who refused to let hardship keep them from the promise of eternal marriage.

The colonization of the Little Colorado River area was among the last that Brigham Young planned. He seems to have turned to Jacob Hamblin for information about the country. Hamblin had often gone to northern Arizona to work with the Indians, though he had little opportunity to become acquainted with the Little Colorado River. He thought that an LDS community could be developed around the San Francisco Mountain area in north-central Arizona.

In the first months of 1873, Brigham Young sent Bishop Lorenzo W. Roundy to Arizona with an exploring party that included Hamblin. They explored the Little Colorado River and plateau and the San Francisco Mountains. Their report was not positive; nevertheless, in April, Brigham Young sent a substantial company headed by Horton D. Haight to settle the area. The company crossed the Colorado River at Lee's Ferry and proceeded across the plateau.

They were surprised at the barrenness of the land and the lack of water. One of the group noted, "From the first we struck the Little Colorado, up 150 miles, it is the same thing all the way, no place fit for a human being to dwell upon.... The most desert looking place that I ever saw, Amen.

Within a few months, Haight and his people made the decision to return to Salt Lake City and report the problems they had encountered. Despite their return, Brigham Young still felt that colonizing that part of Arizona was crucial.⁴ He called James S. Brown and instructed him to find strong-willed men to accompany him. Brown picked fourteen men, and they began their journey in November 1875. On December 3, they reached Moenkopi in the Little Colorado Plateau, where they established a fort at Tuba City. James S. Brown and four others then explored the Little Colorado. Brother Brown described the area about twenty-two miles above Sunset Crossing:

"We still find the water increased and Quality Improved so with the extent of land and all things considered we think we could recommend the Country for Settlement; and notwithstanding our desire to see the country here up Still the whisperings of the Spirit said return, so we started back.

James Brown returned to Salt Lake City in January 1876 to report. President Young finalized his decision to settle that area and appointed him and Lot Smith to be the leaders of the Little Colorado expedition. Over two hundred men, women, and children were called as missionaries to settle the area. Not only were they to establish settlements in the Arizona Territory, but they were also to do work among the Indians, introducing them to the gospel.

After a six-hundred-mile trip, the pioneers settled along the Little Colorado River in four communities: Sunset, Brigham City, Only, and Joseph City. Only Joseph City survives. Not long after, additional Saints homesteaded Silver Creek, a tributary of the Little Colorado, establishing such towns as Snowflake, Taylor, and Show Low. St. John and Springerville were later founded along the upper Little Colorado River.⁷ These five settlements still exist.

Although the Little Colorado Saints were among the most isolated pioneers, they were among the first to receive the blessings of the temple. In 1877, the St. George Temple was completed — the first latter-day temple built since the Saints moved west—and the Church members in northeast Arizona responded with many temple trips.

The first trip took place in 1881. Alof Larson saved enough money to buy a span of mules to take him and his fiancée to St. George. Roberta Clayton, who has researched the lives of many pioneer women in Arizona, wrote: "That fall these mules were on their way to Utah, drawing one of five wagons making the trip over Lee*s Ferry. This was the first wedding party from Arizona to go north to a Utah Temple, but so many future ones were taken across this ferry that the road was dubbed by Will C. Barnes, 'The Honeymoon Trail.'

Brother Larson, who married May Hunt at the end of the trip, was captain of the group, which also included his sister Emma Larson and Jesse N. Smith. The travelers took twenty days to reach St. George.

The round trip sometimes took as long as six weeks, yet couples embarked on the trip willingly and gladly. A review of some of the journals of travelers who used the route gives us a good idea of the challenges they faced in reaching the temple. When a couple decided to make the trip, they first procured a wagon and a team of hardy mules or horses. They either married civilly and then made the trip to St. George to have the marriage sealed, or they invited chaperones to go with them and waited until they reached the temple to be married.

If the couple was from Snowflake, they would travel through Holbrook to Joseph City, where they might spend a day or two visiting with the Saints. From Joseph City, they passed Brigham City and Sunset, continuing northward up the Little Colorado, where they would arrive at Grand Falls, a spectacular landmark. Further on, they would reach Black Falls, where they veered north and left the river.

Ironically, the biggest problem in traveling along the Little Colorado was water. The river was unpredictable — some stretches dried up in summer, yet those same stretches would at other times be a torrent of high; rushing water. When there was water in the river, it was muddy and salty. Joseph Fish, traveling along the river in July 1879, wrote:

"We found but little Grass and no water to speak of, occasionally there was a little in holes along the bed of the river but it was so salty that it could not be used. We dug near the mouth of some of the large washers that came in where we found some water that was a little better. . . . On the 30th we found enough at Grand Falls to fill a ten gallon Keg. At Black Falls we found a little but it was not fit to use as the fish had died in it and it smelt very bad, like carrion."

Forage for animals was hard to find. If rain or snow fell, the trail became muddy and hard-going. Henry and Eliza Parkinson Tanner, newlyweds on their way to settle in Arizona, had an adventure with strong winter winds that illustrates the challenges sand and wind also presented. They found a team of stray horses and decided that Henry would go on ahead to take the horses to their owners in a wagon train ahead of them.

"Eliza had to drive the liri team that day, tho the wind was blowing a perfect gale. Trees were uprooted and were falling all around. One fell across the trail right in front of her team. This greatly frightened the horses but she managed to control them and drove out around the tree and back into the road. When she reached camp she had to go to bed at once with a sick headache and said that was the hardest day she had spent."

After a couple left the Little Colorado, they went up to the plateau and reached Moenkopi. Though dry, it was maintained by LDS settlers. In September 1878, Jesse N. Smith described Moenkopi this way:

"We could see a patch of green near the sandstone hills from Willow Springs. We came upon a region of veritable bad lands. The Moenkopi village comprised a few missionaries to the Indians with their families. It was situated on a southern slope of a hill and they got water from a spring in a ravine, where some gardening was done. A Moqui Indian named Tuba owned the place. He was a member of the Church and with his wife had received his endowments in the temple."²

From Moenkopi, the couple would travel through some desolate country to Willow Springs. At Willow Springs, a major stopping point along the route, they could find water with some grass. Many of the rocks around the springs had the names of previous travelers carved on them. Some couples took the time to carve not only their own names, but their destination, too.

Sixteen miles up the road, they would arrive at Bitter Springs, which Joseph Fish described briefly: "We did not find enough water for our stock and what little there was very bad and not fit for use."¹³ Three or four miles on, however, was Navajo Springs, with usable water.

Then came the most difficult part of the journey. The couples had to cross the Colorado River. Church leaders had recognized the need for a passage across the river if the Saints were to colonize Arizona. They sent a party of men in 1870 to establish a fort at present-day Lee*s Ferry. By late the following year, a regular ferry was operating across the Colorado. In 1872, John D. Lee settled there. He managed the ferry service until 1874. Though he stayed for only a short time, the settlement was named after him. In 1876, the charge to cross the river was \$1 per wagon and 25~ per head of cattle.¹⁴

Just getting down to the river was quite a challenge for those heading to the St. George Temple. They had to inch down a steep, difficult hill popularly called Lee*s Backbone. Elder Wilford

Woodruff, who visited this area several times, described the Backbone:

"It was the worst hill Ridge or Mountain that I Ever attempted to Cross with a team and wagon on Earth. We had 4 Horses on a wagon of 1,500 lb weight and for two rods we Could only gain from 4 inches to 24 with all the power of the horses & two men rolling at thc hind wheels and going Down on the other side was still more Steep rocky and sandy which would make it much worse than going up on the North side."*

Once at the river, the wagon and animals were loaded into the ferry, and the boat carefully proceeded to the other side. Though the great majority of crossings were successful, the passage was difficult, and certain times of the year were more treacherous than others. Julia Ellsworth related this experience of a crossing she and her fiancé Ezra West had to make in the spring of 1886: "We had to take our wagon apart to cross on the small boat. We had a very narrow escape of being drowned, and the ferryman worked frantically to keep from going into a whirlpool where years later he was drowned." The most well-known death at Lee*s Ferry was the 1876

drowning of Lorenzo W. Roundy, the man who had led the first exploring party to northeastern Arizona.

After crossing the Colorado River, the grateful couple would continue their journey along the Vermilion Cliffs. The trip from there to House Rock took them through some extremely dry country. Fortunately, there were springs about a day's travel apart. From House Rock, they had to climb the Buckskin Mountains, then travel to Jacob's Lake. From there, they would turn north to Kanab, just across the Utah border. After resting at Kanab, they would head southwest back into Arizona. The next major stop was Pipe Springs, where they would find an oasis and a fort. Pipe Springs was a station of the Desert Telegraph, the first telegraph in Arizona.

The next morning, the travelers were on their way again, with St. George little more than a day's journey away. Once they were in St. George, most couples were loath to head back immediately after completing their temple ordinances. Many spent three to four weeks visiting friends and relatives before packing up and beginning the trip home.

Besides the difficulty of the terrain, the trips to the temple often included the danger of bandits and Indians. Silas Smith and Maria Bushman, for example, went to the temple in the fall of 1886. The roads were wet and muddy because of stormy weather, and traveling was slow, but they were finally married 10 November 1886. On the way back home, their horse became lame, and they became quite nervous when two heavily armed men followed them for a day. The next morning, when they woke up, the men were gone.

Most of the LDS settlers' relationships with the Indians were peaceful, but disturbing instances still occurred. Julia Ellsworth West recalled her and Ezra West's frightening crossing of the Colorado:

"One time when we were alone, Ezra had to go quite a way to find the horses. He left his six-shooter in the seat for my protection. Not long after he was out of sight a band of Indians, on horseback, surrounded the wagon, and poor little trembling sixteen-year-old Julia had to face all that war paint alone. They asked for something to eat and I showed them the almost empty lunch box, and after awhile they decided to leave, much to my relief, but being used to Indians I was not as frightened as I might otherwise have been."²⁰

The trips to the St. George Temple arose from the deep faith that the Saints had in the eternal nature of marriage and the sealing power of the priesthood. They understood the importance of temple marriage and were thus willing to make the long, grueling trips to St. George and back. The difficulty of getting to the temple created a memorable foundation for new marriages and set a pattern of sacrifice that did much to help the Saints settle the Arizona wilderness.

H. Dean Garrett, assistant professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

[Return to main page](#)