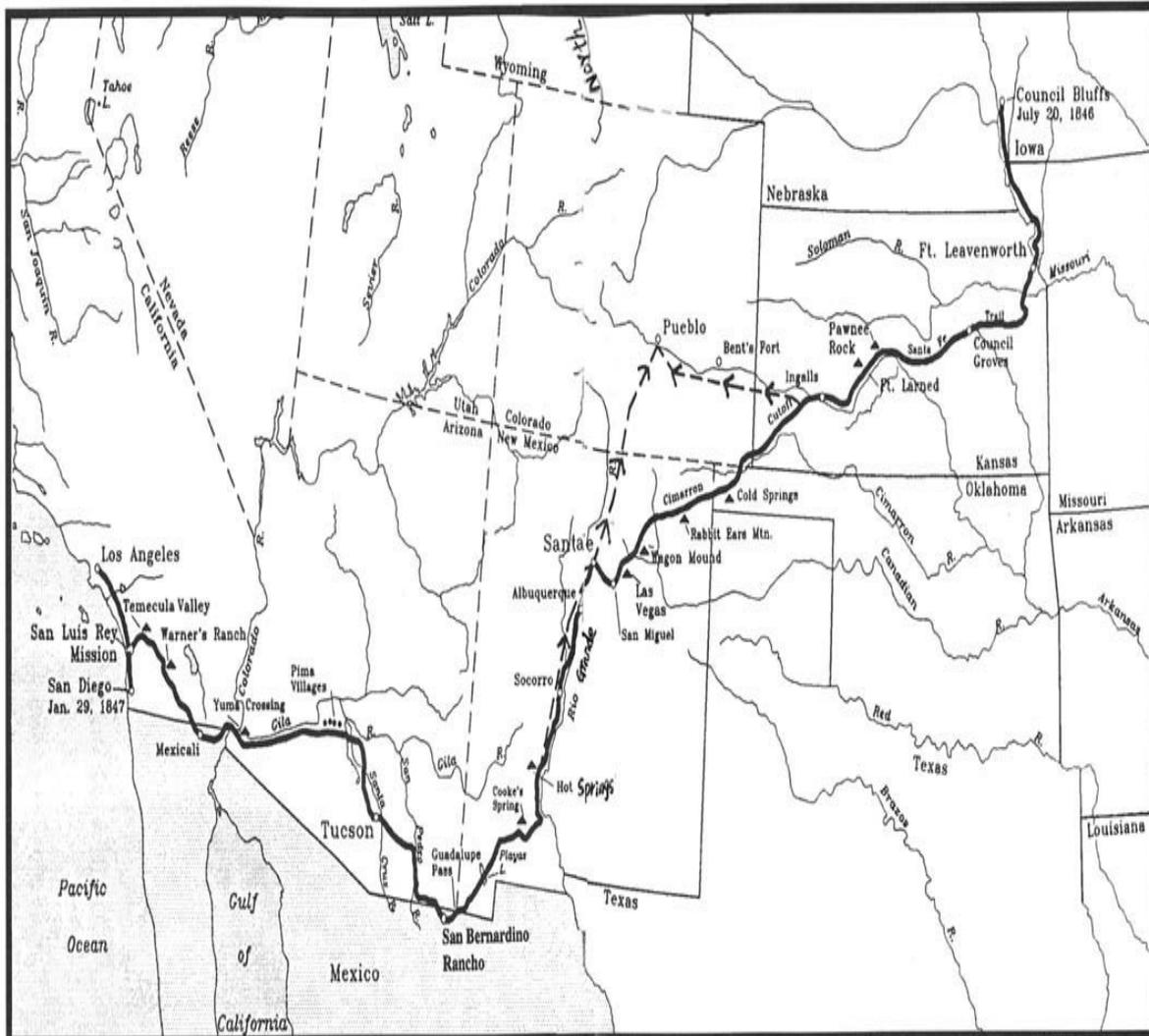


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Map 1

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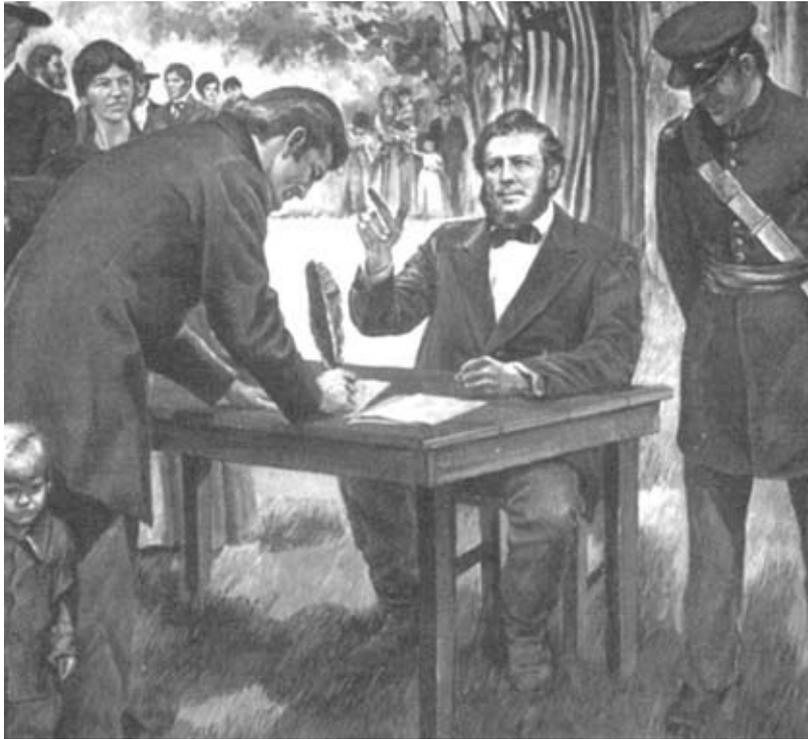
1846-1847
 Mormon Battalion Route
 Council Bluffs, Iowa to San Diego, California

- Mormon Battalion
- - - Sick Detachments
- - - States not in existence
- ▲ Camp Site



The Mormon Battalion

U.S. ARMY OF THE WEST 1846-1848



Brigham Young enrolling volunteers in the Mormon Battalion as Colonel James Allen watches, Council Bluffs, Iowa. Painting by Dale Kilbourn, © Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; used by permission.

The Mormon Battalion

U.S. Army of the West
1846-1848

Norma Baldwin Ricketts

Foreword by
David L. Bigler

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Foreword

David L. Bigler

When Philip St. George Cooke of the First Dragoons took command of the Mormon Battalion at Santa Fe in October, 1846, he was deeply disappointed at the "extraordinary assignment" he had been given. The thirty-seven-year-old professional soldier had hoped to win glory and advancement at the seat of conflict in the war with Mexico. Instead he had been handed the most remarkable body of volunteers ever to report at Fort Leavenworth for duty in the U.S. Army.

It hardly took eighteen years of service on the American frontier for the six-foot-four officer to see that some of the men assigned to his command were "too old," others "too young," and that the whole outfit was "embarrassed by many women." Cooke also thought his untrained soldiers often showed "great heedlessness and ignorance, and some obstinacy." It was certainly true that these men usually marched to a different drummer than the one to which he was accustomed.

The newly promoted lieutenant colonel would change his mind by the time his Mormon footmen, trimmed to an efficient body of 335, had reached California, completing one of the longest marches in the annals of military history. Of all the apocryphal stories about the battalion, the one that rings most true is that Cooke bared his head in tribute to his former comrades when in 1858 he rode into Great Salt Lake City at the head of the Second Dragoons, a unit in Albert Sidney Johnston's Utah Expedition.

By then, it would have been difficult to find many noteworthy events in western history during the important period of 1846 to 1848 in which members of this company, so unique in the annals of American military history, did not somehow take part. They made possible the 1847 Mormon move to Utah, occupied California for the United States, took part in the 1848 discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill, opened the Mormon-Carson Emigrant Trail over the Sierra Nevada, and drove the first wagons over the Spanish Trail and Hensley's Salt Lake Cutoff of the California Trail.

These and other exploits have been more or less recognized over the years. Not so well known or understood, however, has been the larger role the Mormon Battalion performed in American and western history. Too often historians have seemed to adopt the limited outlook of Daniel Tyler as reflected in his highly partisan and outdated account, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War, 1846-47*, first published in 1881.

From that perspective, the march of the volunteers appears to go forward as a kind of heroic, self-contained epic possessing little relation to the world around it. For Latter-day Saints, the story is without question inspirational and faith promoting. But the failure to step back and see it in relation to the larger picture of American history has resulted in the undervaluing or forgetting altogether of some of the command's most notable contributions.

To focus, for example, on the battalion's Battle of the Bulls as a significant event in itself overlooks the important relationship that exists between this bovine encounter on southern Arizona's San Pedro River and President James Polk's plan to take over the region that now forms most of the American Southwest. The connection between the bull fight and Manifest Destiny lies in the answer to an obvious question: Where did the wild bulls come from in the first place?

All those belligerent bulls came from an abandoned ranch established in 1822 by one Ignacio Perez under a grant from the Mexican government to create a buffer against Apache incursions from the east. By 1846, however, the invading warriors had overrun the region and turned Perez's 73,240-acre spread and its animals into their own game preserve, where they hunted the cattle left behind as they did any other game. Easiest to bring down safely were the cows and calves, which left the bulls to grow older, wilder, and more aggressive.

As this episode illustrates, except for a little island of soldiers and their suffering families at Tucson, the northern Sonoran region had reverted to Indian control by 1846, and the Hispanic frontier had effectively retreated south of the present international border between Arizona and Mexico. The Mormon Battalion's march across the Southwest demonstrated that Mexico's claim on the region was hollow and that an expansionist president's bid for sovereignty was as good as that of anyone else except native Indians, including the Pima and Papago but not including the Apaches, who were themselves not original inhabitants.

Nor was the brief, but exciting, fight with these dangerous animals the only evidence that the land could belong to whoever had the will to occupy, govern, and defend it. The most effective means of conquest, employed by both Cooke and General Stephen W. Kearny, was not muskets

or money but the promise to protect the inhabitants from hostile Indians. Easily given, such pledges took forty years to fulfill.

More immediate dividends came from the battalion's work to open a wagon road from New Mexico to southern California, but in another often overlooked respect. The new road would demonstrate that a route west, well to the south of the Gila River's upper reaches, was not only feasible but the way of the future.

Cooke's decision to march due west from the old Spanish road that ran between the abandoned Santa Rita copper mines and Janos, Mexico, was not taken in answer to the prayers raised by spiritual leader Levi Hancock. Cooke's purpose was to find a shortcut to San Bernardino Spring, a historic site on today's Mexican border in Arizona and the destination he had in mind all along. The alternative was to go the long way around by known roads to the south, via Janos and Fronteras, where the battalion might be exposed to military garrisons at both places.

Portions of the new route, known as Cooke's Wagon Road, would become thoroughfares for emigrants on the southern trail to California, for the San Antonio-San Diego Mail Line, and for the Butterfield Overland Stage. By demonstrating the importance of the Gila River's southern tributaries as corridors of commerce and travel, the battalion influenced the decision to acquire in 1854 a block of land of almost incomparable worth. This was the some 30,000 square-mile section that now encompasses southern Arizona, including Tucson, and known as the Gadsden Purchase.

On completing its epic march, the battalion finally gave General Kearny the force he needed to back up his mandate from President Polk to occupy and govern California for the United States. Prior to the Gold Rush, the non-Indian inhabitants of California numbered fewer than 15,000. Some 335 Mormon muskets under a capable officer, like Cooke, were more than enough for Kearny to uphold his authority against rebellious Californians, hostile natives, or his reckless countrymen, Commodore Robert Stockton and John C. Frémont

These and other contributions make gratifying indeed the growing interest in recent years in the Mormon Battalion story and the large and significant role it played. For as time goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that the occupation of New Mexico and California during the Mexican War was

among the most decisive chapters in all of American history.

Yet the role of the Mormon volunteers in these events has not only been understated, but many questions about this singular company have for too long gone unanswered. Considering that Mormon annals usually number cows and chickens, it is puzzling that more has not been done simply to identify the exact number and correct names of those who enlisted in Iowa, much less tell what finally became of them.

In this landmark work, historian Norma Baldwin Ricketts has now given the story of the Mormon Battalion the comprehensive treatment it deserves. To this subject she brings a heartfelt interest sustained over many years and exceptional gifts as a researcher and writer, which make her uniquely qualified to write this book.

Not only has the author placed the battalion in the larger context it merits, she has also provided a valuable source of new information about the company and its members. For the first time, her work presents an accurate roster, lists dependents, and identifies who went where by name and number over the three-year period 1846 to 1848 and beyond.

Especially noteworthy are the author's treatment of a subject too long ignored, the women of the Mormon Battalion, and her success in throwing new light on the role of battalion members or veterans in the early history of California. In the process, she has demonstrated that she is a foremost authority on this important subject and has made a significant contribution to Mormon, western, and American history.

Preface

For many years the historic journey of the Mormon Battalion has been, for me, a story waiting to be told. My interest began in the early 1960s while living in California. The gold rush era was fascinating. I became aware of Mormons in California very early, some as long as two years before Brigham Young and the pioneer company arrived in Salt Lake Valley in July 1847. As I studied the books written on the battalion up to that time, I found accounts incomplete, leaving many questions unanswered. The battalion was five hundred straight-backed soldiers marching in unison with muskets on their shoulders from Fort Leavenworth to San Diego, a group of nameless faces serving a year in the United States Army of the West.

Who were these soldiers, how did they endure months of constant hunger and thirst, inadequate clothing and no shoes? Why did nearly one third never reach California? Seventy-nine men reenlisted for an additional six months, another untold story. Mormon folklore contains numerous stories about the pioneers walking across the plains, the handcart companies that were pushed and pulled along the trail, and the trials of the early settlers in Salt Lake Valley. Yet, few stories could be found that told of the courage, hardships, faith, and perseverance of the battalion soldiers.

This dearth has been corrected recently to a great extent by several excellent publications of individual journals, whose editors have provided readers not only with an understanding of a particular journal, but with invaluable footnotes as well. Two examples are David L. Bigler's *The Gold Discovery Journal of Azariah Smith* and Will Bagley's *Frontiersman: Abner Blackburn's Narrative*. However, areas of the battalion experience still remained unknown. As an example, the movement of the men after discharge was lacking. For me, the cycle was incomplete ending the story in California. The men must return to their families and church. Only then would the saga of the Mormon Battalion be finished. The existing overview beginning with enlistment and ending with discharge simply was not enough.

My original intention was to extract individual stories and weave them together to bring the Mormon Battalion into the twentieth century, to read, to enjoy, and to learn of their challenges and accomplishments. I wanted to show these men as real people with real problems day after day, who somehow managed to fulfill their commitment under very difficult circumstances. The resulting battalion stories could then take their place among Mormon folklore and be told over and over.

One of the unique characteristics of the battalion is the large number of daily journals. A careful study of these pioneer writings reveals much more than a recitation of miles traveled, weather conditions, and campsites. Tucked into each journal is a story here and there and then another, stories that run the gamut of emotions, stories telling too much and yet not enough. These unforgettable stories provide glimpses into the soldiers' lives and connect us to the men who wrote them.

Unexpectedly, early research provided two additional avenues to be considered. First, the battalion became a giant jigsaw puzzle. A sentence in one journal provided a better, more complete understanding of facts in other journals. Comparing several journals on a specific day revealed an incredible amount of information. Because of the men's honest, realistic style of recording events, pieces of information from journal to journal fit perfectly. Once these pieces were put together, as the face of the puzzle grew, it seemed the resulting information should not be lost again. I began an elaborate system of cross filing names and events in order to preserve the data. The corroboration the diaries gave each other was fascinating and consistent. One only has to compare the same date in available diaries to confirm a fact and to obtain a more complete picture of what was happening.

For example, when Company B was stationed in San Diego, four men recorded the same incident, all incomplete. The first said a sailor named Beckworth was baptized in the ocean. The second told the name of the sailor's ship. The third diarist wrote only the name and company of the man performing the baptism, while a fourth thought this was the first Mormon convert in California.

This is the resulting entry for April 18, 1847, using these four diaries. The words are theirs, only the arrangement is mine: "A sailor named Beckworth from the ship *Congress* was baptized in the ocean, probably the first Mormon convert in California. He was baptized by William Garner of Company B."