



Developments along the Overland Trail from the Missouri River to Fort Laramie, before 1854 (Part 2)

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Article Summary: Before it became known as the Mormon Trail, the route on the north bank of the Platte River was regularly used by early trappers, traders, and emigrants.

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DEVELOPMENTS ALONG THE
OVERLAND TRAIL FROM THE
MISSOURI RIVER TO FORT LARAMIE,
BEFORE 1854*

BY ROBERT W. RICHMOND

II

The Mormon Trail

THE route on the north bank of the Platte River has been known primarily as the "Mormon Trail," but the disciples of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young were certainly not alone in the use of this road. Before the years 1846-47 when the Mormons began their mass movement westward through Nebraska this trail had seen use by trappers, traders and some emigrants. Robert Stuart and his party traveling to the east from Astoria blazed the trail in the spring of 1813.¹

The Whitman-Spalding party which was bound for Oregon in 1836 also followed what was to become the "Mormon Trail." There was no heavy traffic during the next decade, but John C. Fremont and an exploring party covered the same ground from west to east in the early fall of 1842.

*This is the second of two articles.

¹ Oden Gilmore, "A Map Study of Nebraska Trails," *Nebraska History*, XXI (Jan-Mar 1940), 24.

Fremont and his men forded the Loup Fork near its mouth and had no easy time of it.² Crossing the Loup was a matter of concern for many a succeeding traveler.

In April, 1847 the Mormons at "Winter Quarters" (present Florence, Nebraska) dispatched a pioneer group to the Elkhorn River. This body of pioneers, numbering one hundred forty-eight, left the Elkhorn on April 16 and moved on to the valley of the Great Salt Lake.³

In June, 1846 the Mormons had built bridges over the Papillion and the Elkhorn,⁴ but there is no mention made of a bridge over the Elkhorn when these pioneers crossed it. Both Howard Egan and Appleton M. Harmon reported the use of a raft in crossing the river. The raft was used to ferry wagons while the animals forded.⁵

The journal kept by William Clayton provides us with an accurate and clear picture of this Mormon migration and the meager facilities and accommodations which these people found. Clayton, Orson Pratt, Willard Richards and Appleton Harmon combined their talents and efforts to produce a written guide which could be effectively used by following emigrants. Pratt invented an odometer for which Harmon made the gears and this mechanism provided a means for measuring distance across the plains.⁶ The work of these men was to prove invaluable to those who followed.

Clayton recorded the existence of a rude bridge over Shell Creek, west of the Elkhorn.⁷ This is the first mention by the Mormon group of any trail aid.

In the valley of the Loup Fork, 134 miles from Winter Quarters, was a Pawnee mission station which had been

² John C. Fremont, *Narrative of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842 and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-44* (New York, 1846), p. 52.

³ Bernard DeVoto, *The Year of Decision, 1846* (Boston, 1943), pp. 441-442.

⁴ Clyde B. Aitchison, "The Mormon Settlements in the Missouri Valley," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, X, 2nd series (1907), 12.

⁵ Maj. Howard Egan, *Pioneering in the West, 1846-1878*, Ed. by William M. Egan (Richmond, Utah, 1917), p. 28; Maybelle H. Anderson, *Appleton Milo Harmon Goes West* (Berkeley, California, 1946), p. 15.

⁶ DeVoto, *op. cit.*, pp. 443-444.

⁷ William Clayton, *Journal . . .* (Salt Lake City, 1921), p. 84.

abandoned in the fall of 1846. There were several log houses and some improved, fenced land. The Mormons took advantage of the livestock feed which was available at this place.⁸ One fourth mile below the mission stood a government station which was also deserted. It had been maintained by a Mormon named Case who lived as a government farmer, but who had been released because of his religious affiliation. The farm was not operated after November, 1846, and in following months it had been burned by the Sioux.⁹ These sites provided these early emigrants with the most substantial shelter and help they would find between the Missouri and Fort Laramie.

A short distance beyond this point flowed the Loup which was crossed by means of rafts, a portable leather boat, and fording.¹⁰

On May 8, 1847, Clayton planted a cedar post in the ground with the inscription "From Winter Quarters, 295 Miles, May 8, '47. Camp all well. Wm. Clayton." A similar sign was erected the next day—three hundred miles from the starting point. At the 316 mile mark Richards posted a letter in a split stick of wood for the next company to pick up. Thus began the first "post office" of the trail. On May 16 the party added another guide post—356¾ miles.¹¹ The sign of May 21 is a good example of the road marking efforts of these people:

From Winter Quarters 409 miles. From junction of North and South forks, 93¾ miles. From Cedar Bluffs, south side of the river, 36½ miles. Ash Hollow, south side the river, 8 miles. Camp of Pioneers May 21, 1847. According to Fremont, this place is 132 miles from Laramie. N.B. the bluffs opposite are named Castle Bluffs.

Emigrants in later years were to find—or create—more and better aids to travel. The best evidence of these changes and improvements which took place prior to 1854 can be

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-141.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 166-167.

found in the contemporary journals of the westward movement.

Papillion Creek was the first stream to which the emigrants had to give any major consideration. In April, 1850 one emigrant wrote that he crossed the stream on a bridge built by the Mormons.¹³ Perhaps this was the bridge built four years before. Another record of approximately the same time indicated the crossing of a creek (unnamed, but perhaps the Papillion) on a "tolerable bridge."¹⁴ However, Leander Loomis, on May 6, 1850, makes no mention of a bridge.¹⁵ Since there were some minor variations in the route followed, this group may have crossed the creek at a different place.

A year later on May 28 an emigrant wrote in his journal that a bridge had been washed out and he gave some description of the replacement of it:

Today the water of the Pappea [Papillion] began to fall and a commencement was made to build a new bridge. One of the string pieces was drawn to the site at close of day. . . . Went to work early with others and completed the bridge by ½ past 10 A.M. though we were obliged to chop down a large hackberry and split it into two pieces for stringers.¹⁶

They feared that the next high water would eliminate this structure, too. On June 1 of the following year another diarist reported crossing the Papillion on a bridge of poles. This time it was noted that a band of Pawnee Indians was on hand to collect tolls.¹⁷ Finally, in 1853, there seems to have been a ferry across the Papillion, for William Sloan, after ferrying the Platte, wrote: "This and the ferries at Elk Horn and Papillion were owned by William Martin a saloon man

¹³ Fancher Stimson, "Overland Journey to California by Platte River Route and South Pass in 1850," *Annals of Iowa*, XIII, 3rd Series (October, 1922), 408.

¹⁴ Andrew Child, *Overland Route to California* (Los Angeles, 1946), p. 9.

¹⁵ Leander Loomis, *A Journal of the Birmingham Emigrating Company*, Ed. by E. M. Ledyard (Salt Lake City, 1928), p. 8.

¹⁶ John S. Zeiber, "Diary . . .," *Transactions of the 48th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1920), pp. 309-310.

¹⁷ John McAllister, "Diary . . .," *Transactions of the 50th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1922), p. 474.

at Council Bluff.¹⁸ Thus, it is apparent that facilities for crossing the creek had made some advance in less than a decade.

As has been mentioned, there was in 1846 a bridge over the Elkhorn River, but the later contemporary writers when mentioning the river spoke of ferrying it. On April 23, 1850, Fancher Stimson wrote of "a good ferry" across the river, while Loomis and Steele each quote rates—the former \$2.00 per wagon and the latter \$2.25 per team and wagon.¹⁹ A few weeks later, in June, the ferry was non-existent as a result of the work of Indians and the river was crossed by means of a raft built by the emigrants.²⁰

John S. Zeiber reached the Elkhorn on May 30, 1851. He found the river at flood stage and a large number of emigrants waiting to cross. The ferry had been damaged and was not available to the pioneers. He wrote:

We have heard of a ferry 8 miles above this place and some say a boat is being built only 5 miles from here. . . . A boat is nearly finished 5 miles above our camp, and I have bought it for our company after the builders have crossed in it.²¹

With this new means of ferrying in operation the party was able to proceed.

Twelve months later Thomas Turnbull reported crossing this stream by ferry, but one owned by the Pawnees.²² Another writer was more complete in his record of the Indian enterprise:

. . . we had to cross . . . the Elkhorn. Here we had our only dispute with the Indians. A band of Pawnees had constructed of rushes a floating pontoon or bridge that would hold up a wagon and team. They demanded for each team and wagon five dollars. This our people felt was exorbitant and they offered to pay one dollar instead which in turn was refused. Our men got out their rifles

¹⁸ William K. Sloan, "Autobiography," *Annals of Wyoming*, IV (July, 1926), 243.

¹⁹ Stimson, *op. cit.*, p. 408; Loomis, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9; John Steele, *Across the Plains in 1850*, Ed. by Joseph Schafer (Chicago, 1920), p. 36.

²⁰ Henry J. Coke, *A Ride Over the Rocky Mountains to Oregon and California* (London, 1852), pp. 113-114.

²¹ Zeiber, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

²² F. L. Paxson, Ed., *T. Turnbull's Travels from the U.S. Across the Plains to California* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1914), p. 311.

and told the Indians that it meant a fight unless the lower offer was accepted. After a lot of loud talk matters quieted down and the Indians agreed upon the dollar and we came our way.²³

E. W. Conyers, who also passed this way in May, mentioned a ferry boat but did not stipulate who operated it.²⁴ Evidently he did not have the difficulty that the other traveler did. Ten days after this the Reverend John McAllister wrote about "Wheeling & Clark's ferry" which was "a good boat worked by a suspended rope." McAllister did not specify that this was the Elkhorn, but it is logical to assume so.²⁵

In March, 1853, there was a ferry in operation at the Elkhorn, for Longworth noted the use of it. He also quoted the rate as \$3.00 per wagon,²⁶ which was higher than any previously mentioned price. Perhaps the enterprise had changed hands once again. Another emigrant who arrived at the Elkhorn in May also told of the \$3.00 wagon rate and \$1.00 per head for livestock. This journal spoke of the high water which delayed the crossing for two days.²⁷ The diary of Velina Williams mentioned an Elkhorn ferry, too. It also elicited emigrant speculation: "The ferrymen live in tents and remain, as I suppose, only while the emigration lasts."²⁸ Indeed, this was probably an accurate idea because travel was practically non-existent in the winter. There were other references to an Elkhorn ferry in the summer of 1853 and William Sloan gave the name of the owner of the enterprise.²⁹

²³ Clarence B. Bagley, "Crossing the Plains," *The Washington Historical Quarterly*, XIII (July, 1922), 169.

²⁴ E. W. Conyers, "Diary . . . A Pioneer of 1852," *Transactions of the 33rd Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1905), p. 433.

²⁵ McAllister, *op. cit.*, p. 474. McAllister places the stream between the Papillion and Shell Creek and there is no other stream worthy of an established ferry.

²⁶ Basil N. Longworth, *Diary of . . .* (Portland, 1938), p. 16.

²⁷ Henry Allyn, "Journal . . .," *Transactions of the 49th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1921), pp. 388-389.

²⁸ Velina Williams, "Diary of a Trip Across the Plains in 1853," *Transactions of the 47th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1919), p. 192.

²⁹ "Letters of S. H. Taylor to the Watertown (Wisconsin) Chronicle," *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, XXII (June, 1921), 129; Sloan, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

The third major water obstacle to overland transportation on this trail was the Loup Fork of the Platte. Fremont forded the Loup as did the Mormons five years later.³⁰ In 1850 Andrew Child noted that there was a ford on the Loup, but it was unsafe, thus necessitating the use of ferries.³¹ Since he indicated no established ferry service, it must be assumed that wagons or hastily built rafts served the purpose. Stimson, who ferried the Loup in late April of 1850 gave the following account:

This was a rope and current ferry, owned & operated by some Mormons who had made a temporary stop at the Loup Fork, & were making a "good thing" helping us gentiles to cross a bad & somewhat dangerous stream. We did not begrudge them our crossing fee.³²

Loomis' party ferried the Loup two weeks later and he wrote that they used two wagons in place of boats.³³ Too, Steele was at this point on May 18 and he reported the use of a home-made raft.³⁴ Another train reached the Loup on June 6 and found a submerged boat too damaged to repair for use. They made no attempt to ferry, but proceeded up the river several miles to a ford.³⁵

Child gave no dates in his *Guide*, so one cannot be sure of the exact time of his arrival at the Loup. However, it is easily seen that the ferry situation in 1850 could change almost overnight, for within a two month period a boat service was both established and destroyed.

There are no easily available records of a crossing of the Loup for the year 1851, but in 1852 pioneers were writing again of this part of the trail. Thomas Turnbull, who "booked passage" on a Loup ferry on May 19, 1852, gave a full account of his experience:

³⁰ For a comprehensive analysis of the route of the Trail in the Loup Valley see Olga S. Steele, "The Geography of the Mormon Trail Across Nebraska," M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1933.

³¹ Child, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³² Stimson, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

³³ Loomis, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³⁴ Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

³⁵ William Edmundson, "Diary Kept by William Edmundson, of Oskaloosa, While Crossing the Western Plains in 1850," *The Annals of Iowa*, VIII, 3rd Series (October, 1908), 519.

... we came to the ferry called Loup Fork and took our waggons over, on the evening by 2 Scows went down below and took our horses across about ½ mile deep & very swift current about 50 yds wide at some places 60 Rod, \$2.50 pr waggon & 50 cts pr piece for horses, their is a ford below about 18 miles some went to ford but our company did not go this belongs to the Pawnees but half breeds rent it & has to pay them \$1000 for the season so you can see the number of teams the (that) has to cross for about 2 or 3 months to make it pay the man for the use of it. Missouri (about 20 men kept) Loup Fork (about 8 kept) some little timber close by it & a few logs thrown up to shelter them from the wind.
...³⁶

McAllister's company made the trip by "a suspended rope" ferry on June 5. The boat was described as "Hawley's Ferry" and "good."³⁷ John Kerns also put on paper some information about a Loup ferry:

... miles brought us to the ferry. ... Here is good camping, they ask \$3.00 per wagon for ferrying and you do the ferrying, but we concluded to make for the ford 60 miles above as it is none out of our course.³⁸

From this information of 1852 it cannot be definitely determined if the same operators were in control at all these times. However, the conclusion can be drawn that there was a usable and safe ford some miles farther up the river which was not out of the way for the emigrants.

In 1853 there was a ferry in operation. Two writers indicated the use of it while another avoided it and used the ford already mentioned.³⁹

There were other streams which the pioneers had to bridge, ford, or ferry. Wood River was one of these. In 1847 the Mormons forded Wood River as did both Child and Coke in 1850.⁴⁰ By May, 1853, when Allyn came to the river a

³⁶ Paxson, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

³⁷ McAllister, *op. cit.*, p. 475.

³⁸ John T. Kerns, "Journal of Crossing the Plains to Oregon in 1852," *Transactions of the 42nd Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1914), p. 159.

³⁹ Longworth, *op. cit.*, p. 17; Thomas Flint, *The Diary of Thomas Flint, California to Maine and Return, 1851-55* (Los Angeles, 1924), p. 26. Flint gives \$100.00 as the toll paid by his group, in mid-summer. Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 194-195.

⁴⁰ Clayton, *op. cit.*, p. 112; Child, *op. cit.*, p. 11; Coke, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

bridge was standing. It was ". . . a bridge of brush made by emigrants, which in a settled country would be thought impassable." Allyn went on to give a good account of the early Nebraska bridge situation:

Many streams do not have timber enough on their margins to make bridges and where there is, they are constructed in the slightest manner possible. The farthest emigrants ahead come to a stream too high to cross. . . . Rather than to be idle, they commonly, if the timber is to be found, cut 2, 3 or 4 logs that will reach across the pile on brush as compact as possible until they are willing to venture their teams on it. It is performed with no idea of permanence.⁴¹

A bridge was still standing in mid-summer because both Mrs. Williams and Dr. Flint mentioned it.⁴² It is feasible to believe that the fall rains may have carried the flimsy structures away as Allyn's writing indicated.

Elm Creek, Looking Glass Creek, Shell Creek, Prairie Creek and Beaver River all had bridges of sorts at one time or another. These were constructed in much the same way as those already discussed. Elm Creek which was usually dry was bridged in June, 1850, because of flood waters.⁴³ A brush bridge was standing in May, 1853, but it is doubtful that it was the same structure.⁴⁴

A bridge was built over Looking Glass Creek in May, 1850 and on June 7 of the same year another party had to repair it before it could be used.⁴⁵

On May 24, 1850, the group with which Jerome Dutton was traveling built another bridge—this time over the Beaver River. The water was high and they built a "brush suspension bridge." They used the debris in the middle of the stream as a pier and "felled some willows onto it." A brush floor provided the finishing touches and they then

⁴¹ Allyn, *op. cit.*, p. 392.

⁴² Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 197; Flint, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁴³ Child, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Allyn, *op. cit.*, p. 394.

⁴⁵ Jerome Dutton, "Across the Plains in 1850," *Annals of Iowa*, IX, 3rd Series (July-October, 1910), p. 457; Edmundson, *op. cit.*, p. 519.

took their wagons across.⁴⁶ This span was also unsafe for loaded wagons by the next month.⁴⁷

Shell Creek was usually bridged. Clayton wrote of a crude one in 1847, while Edmundson, Zeiber, and McAllister all made references to bridges in 1850, 1851, and 1852 respectively.⁴⁸

Williams used a narrow bridge over Skull Creek in May, 1853, and Dr. Flint found a similar structure over Prairie Creek in the same year.⁴⁹

The final stream on this part of the overland route was the North Platte which was crossed close by Fort Laramie. There was ferry service at this point.⁵⁰

There were no trading posts or forts on the north side of the Platte in the earlier days of the trail, but by 1853 there was evidence of such establishments. On June 14 of that year Allyn wrote of a temporary station on a Spring Creek in the Scott's Bluffs region:

A traders tent is established on this creek, for buying up cattle of the drovers, such as are about to fail, and to trade with the Indians.⁵¹

The writer made no mention of any availability of supplies or stores at this place, so it may have had no great value to the emigrants.

On July 11 of the same year Dr. Flint arrived at a trading post and blacksmith shop which he described as "run by a French Canadian." This place was a short distance "below" Scott's Bluffs, where \$6.00 was the price for shoeing an ox. It also cost \$1.00 for a pair of shoes and four cents for each nail used.⁵²

Two days later Flint passed "a halfbreed and Sioux trading post" where lame stock was picked up or purchased cheaply, kept and fed, and then resold. He noted that cattle

⁴⁶ Dutton, *op. cit.*, p. 457.

⁴⁷ Edmundson, *op. cit.*, p. 519.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 519; Zeiber, *op. cit.*, p. 313; Mc-Allister, *op. cit.*, p. 475.

⁴⁹ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 193; Flint, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the Fort Laramie ferry service see earlier article.

⁵¹ Allyn, *op. cit.*, p. 400; Flint, *op. cit.*, p. 33, makes a reference to a similar post on July 13, 1853.

⁵² Flint, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

prices ranged from four to ten dollars and that one dollar was the cost of a sheep.⁵³ This sounds very much like the place which Allyn had described a month before.

One day out of Fort Laramie Flint again mentioned a trading establishment which was well populated by Indians "wearing their summer suits, a breech cloth."⁵⁴ He gave no further details about this stopping place, so again the existence of a stock of emigrant supplies is not known.

Dr. Flint's notes on the post and smithy which he visited are the first substantial available descriptions of any real trading post on this trail prior to 1854.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁴ Flint, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

