



## Winter Quarters, Nebraska, 1846-1848

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## WINTER QUARTERS, NEBRASKA, 1846-1848

### ASPECTS OF CAMP LIFE

BY E. WIDTSOE SHUMWAY

THE Mormons, impoverished and weary after their journey from Nauvoo, Illinois, faced further hardships upon their arrival at Council Bluffs in the summer of 1846. Their decision to establish Winter Quarters and to remain in the vicinity until the next spring created practical problems—problems of daily existence that were multiplied by the destitute condition of the Saints.

At times the 3,483 inhabitants of the newly created town of Winter Quarters were desperately short of food.<sup>1</sup> By sharing with one another what they had, none died outright from starvation. Thomas L. Kane observed the situation at first hand:

If but a part of a group was supplied with provision the only result was that the whole went on half or quarter ration, according to the sufficiency that there was among them: and this so ungrudgingly and contentedly, that till some crisis of trial to their strength, they were themselves

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<sup>1</sup>Hosea Stout, "Diary of Hosea Stout," Ms. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University), III, 38. This number was reported on December 24, 1846.

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unaware that their health was sinking, and their vital forces impaired.<sup>2</sup>

The postulate, "share and share alike," seemed to be a universal characteristic of the Saints. There were a number of poor people, widows, and families whose fathers had left with the Mormon Battalion. These were diligently cared for. At a High Council meeting President Young moved that each able-bodied man be taxed every tenth day, which was to be used in getting wood and doing other necessary tasks for the poor.<sup>3</sup> He also instructed the bishops to have houses constructed immediately for all the widows, and that these sisters were to stop paying out what money they had for buildings.<sup>4</sup> During the winter several large feasts were held by the bishops for those who were poor and had been unable to attend any of the other parties of the city.

These pioneers suffered not so much from the lack of food as from the absence of a diversified diet. Corn bread and pork were the principal foods to be found in the wooden and pewter bowls.<sup>5</sup> Helen Mar Kimball tells of the situation:

Many of the brethren have gone down into Missouri to work, or to trade for provisions, which consisted mostly of corn and bacon; the latter, with corn meal cakes, was our main subsistence during the winter. Vegetables, and many of the necessaries of life were not obtainable. Indian meal cake and puddings we considered very nice when used as rarities, as we were accustomed to doing in the East; but when we had little or no change, they became somewhat nauseous, particularly to the sick and delicate.<sup>6</sup>

Corn flour, corn grits, hominy, and whole kernels of boiled wheat were alternated, to make one meal seem different from another. There was an abundant supply of milk and its by-products.<sup>7</sup> Vegetables were absent from most tables

<sup>2</sup>Thomas L. Kane, *The Mormons, a Discourse Delivered before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: King and Baird Publishers, 1850), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Jenson (compiler), "Winter Quarters," "Nebraska Settlements" (Salt Lake City: Historian's Office, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), November 25, 1846. This volume is found in the "Manuscript History."

<sup>4</sup>John D. Lee, *Journals of John D. Lee* (Salt Lake City: Western Printing Company, 1938), p. 29.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew Jenson (compiler), *Historical Record* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1882-1890) VIII, 892-93.

<sup>6</sup>Jenson, "Winter Quarters," November 12, 1846.

<sup>7</sup>H. H. Bancroft, *History of Utah* (San Francisco: Bancroft & Co., 1890), p. 250.

for a whole year,<sup>8</sup> and herein lay the cause of one of the scourging sicknesses that swept the camp. Even when fresh vegetables were obtainable, it was a considerable problem to transport them for 150 miles from Missouri at the slow pace of the oxcart. Thus, staples, such as corn and wheat, that could be preserved and stored over a period of time, were the principal items purchased.

All methods of procuring food were employed. Hunting for wild game and fishing in the river were supplemented by scavenging the hillsides for nuts and berries.

Shortly after the Saints' arrival in the Missouri River country, their annals and diaries began to contain hints of the scourges that were shortly to come to pass. Excerpts such as these became more regular and common: "At home. Had the sick headache."<sup>9</sup> "I was uncommonly sick today and lame in the hip, somewhat rheumatic."<sup>10</sup> The sickness made a slow start, but soon it raged and claimed victims from nearly every family. The scurvy (it was also called blackleg or canker by the Saints) and the fever (typhoid, diphtheria, or malaria) claimed victim after victim. Colonel Kane arrived in camp during this trying time and reports the conditions:

In the camp nearest us on the west, which was that of the bridging party near the Corne, . . . I found as early as the 31st of July, that 37 percent of its inhabitants were down with the fever, and a sort of strange scorbutic disease, frequently fatal, which they named the Black Canker. The camps to the East of us which were all on the eastern side of the Missouri, were yet worse fated.<sup>11</sup>

The scurvy or blackleg was caused by the lack of vegetables and fruit in the diet, which often consisted solely of salt meat for long periods of time. The disease would commence with dark streaks and pains in the ends of the fingers and toes, which increased and spread until the limbs were inflamed and became almost black, causing intense agony.<sup>12</sup>

A young boy, George Bean, who had been gone for some time, returned to Winter Quarters to find his family in a pitiable state as a result of the blackleg:

<sup>8</sup>Jenson, *Historical Record*, VIII, 101.

<sup>9</sup>Stout, *op. cit.*, III, 7.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, III, 60.

<sup>11</sup>Kane, *op. cit.*, 48.

<sup>12</sup>Jenson, "Winter Quarters," March 14, 1847.

I found my folks in a very unsatisfactory condition. Father was off in Missouri one hundred miles away seeking for bread and other provisions. Mother was sick, Casper had gone with the Mormon Battallion (sic), his wife and child were sick, my brother James A., and sister Mary Elizabeth, aged ten years, were sick in bed, and my youngest sister had died two months before, aged seven years. . . . Nancy, the eldest, was the only one well enough to wait upon them. To make matters worse, they had nothing whatever for sick people to eat or for medicine. Dozens of neighbors had died with scurvy and blackleg because of no vegetables or decent food, and the sight of my loved ones being in this condition with nothing but corn, pounded in a mortar, for food, and no one strong enough to pound it, was pitiful. I was strong and fat and had some little cash left, so I swung the pestle in the mortar to good advantage for immediate needs and next day went on horseback to Sarpee Trading Post, ten miles away, where I got some white flour, dried fruit, sugar, tea, rice, etc., things that the half starved people could use. Father had been obliged to sell his sheep, though most of them were lost during sickness—no one to care for them. He also sold the mare, last of our horses, also the feather beds, plows, etc., for food, medicine, etc.<sup>13</sup>

As long as the Mormons were at Winter Quarters the scurvy was never completely overcome, but it was arrested considerably by potatoes brought from Missouri.

The chills and fever, spoken of so frequently in the journals and death lists, was the greatest single cause of death and suffering experienced by the pioneers. The swampy, miasmatic conditions of the Missouri bottom land undoubtedly contributed to this sickness. The Indians, who had inhabited the "Bottoms" the year previously (1845), had lost one-ninth of their number in two months from the fever.<sup>14</sup> The Mormons were likewise scourged severely. Undoubtedly long continued want and hardship had reduced their physical systems to a low state, a fact which helps to explain the high rate of mortality.

The chills and fever seemed to take the heaviest toll during the late summer and autumn months. The victims would be prostrated for weeks at a time, enduring alternately a burning fever and a cold, clammy sweat. When

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<sup>13</sup>F. D. B. Horne, ed., *Autobiography of George W. Bean* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing Company, 1945), pp. 30-31.

<sup>14</sup>Kane, *op. cit.*, 51.

the fever had subsided, the victims were often plagued with sores and various infections.<sup>15</sup>

Colonel Kane graphically portrays a distressing scene:

In some of these [the various camps] the fever prevailed to such an extent that hardly any escaped it. They let their cows go unmilked. They wanted for voices to raise the psalm on Sundays. The few who were able to keep their feet, went about among the tents and wagons with food and water, like nurses through the wards of an infirmary. Here at one time the digging got behind hand; burials were slow and you might see women sitting in the open tents keeping the flies off their dead children, some time after decomposition had set in.<sup>16</sup>

Dropsey, dysentery, colic, etc., added their occasional victim to the hillside cemetery. One man, Hosea Stout, who had lost a wife and child on the same day, wrote in his diary: "There is only four of us left and whose turn will be next God only knows."<sup>17</sup> Stillman Pond witnessed the death of his four children in a month's time and shortly thereafter his wife joined them, leaving him alone.<sup>18</sup> It was not uncommon for a family to lose more than one member to these diseases.

However, sickness was finally checked to some degree. The addition of vegetables to the diet helped curtail the scurvy, while the coming of winter reduced the number of chill and fever cases. By the first of the year (1847) general health was restored to a fairly normal state. But about six hundred graves were left behind when the Saints abandoned Winter Quarters.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the suffering and hardships there was a lighter side to the lives of these people. Their religion was not austere to the point of crowding out and excluding the joys of living. They could make fun and frolic of their trials and often turn sharp suffering into full, round laughter against themselves. Colonel Kane records that he "heard

<sup>15</sup>Jenson, "Winter Quarters," May 6, 1847.

<sup>16</sup>Kane, *op. cit.*, 50.

<sup>17</sup>Stout, *op. cit.*, III, 3.

<sup>18</sup>Jenson, "List of the Deaths and Burials in the Camps of Israel," "Nebraska Settlements" (Salt Lake City: Historian's Office, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), 4, 5, 7. This volume is found in the "Manuscript History."

<sup>19</sup>Andrew Jenson, *Encyclopedic History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake: Deseret News Publishing Co., 1941), 957.

more jests and ‘Joe Miller’ . . . than I am likely to hear in all the remainder of my days. This, too, was at a time of serious affliction.”<sup>20</sup>

Merriment and playfulness took the form of games, dances, family gatherings, and song fests. Dancing seems to have been one of the main diversions. The Council House, after its completion, was the scene of a dedicatory dance. Straw was placed upon the floor, and the walls were draped with sheets. Lighted candles hung from wall and ceiling. The people gathered, and the dance was ready to proceed.

President Brigham Young sent for the 12 [Council of 12 Apostles] and band who were on hand to execute his will and pleasure. The band was seated in the south part of the house. Pres. B. Young, after some brief though striking instructions, took the council of 12 and seventies, placed them on the floor in a dancing attitude [said, addressing himself to the multitude] I have as much interest in this house as any man so far as building is concerned, therefore I will take the liberty of showing you how to dance before the Lord. Having thus spoken requested the multitude to uncover their heads, then bowed before the Lord, dedicated the hall to Him and asked Him to accept of their offerings this evening, after which the band struck up a lively tune and in a moment the whole house appeared to me to be filled with the melodious sounds of the inspired harps of Heaven. Pres. B. Young led and went forth in the dance of praise before the Lord.<sup>21</sup>

There was even a “dancing school” established so that the people could learn to enjoy themselves. Over four hundred pupils were enrolled under Hiram Gates.<sup>22</sup>

The band that has been spoken of was the group of musicians that had been formed to entertain the people in Nauvoo, Illinois. It was a source of great pleasure to the Saints now, for there was very little else to suggest musical and cultural refinement on the frontier.

The serious side to these people’s lives manifested itself in the form of religious activities. Without endeavoring to explain fully the religious tenets of this people, we should perhaps point out several peculiar or typical phases of their beliefs.

There was a startling practicality to the sermons of the

<sup>20</sup>Kane, *op. cit.*, 48.

<sup>21</sup>Lee, *op. cit.*, January 23, 1847.

<sup>22</sup>Jenson, “Winter Quarters,” March 14, 1848.

Mormons. Besides the usual religious subjects, one might hear a discussion of government, or a book review, or even instructions on wintering cattle. At one time Brigham Young delivered the following message:

... you Sisters, if you expect to call me Bro. Brigham I want you to be cleanly, keep your faces and hands and skin clean from head to foot, your clothes, dishes, and houses clean and nice, also your children and learn them manners, and when you mix up bread don't have a dozen flies in your tray and when you make your butter, do keep the hairs and flies on a separate dish. . . .

Now I don't want the brethren from my remarks to abuse their wives but treat them kindly, do their heavy lug- ging but don't wash their dishes as some do.<sup>23</sup>

The more hallowed side of the Mormon faith was exemplified by the sermons on the principles of the gospel and the common occurrences of spiritual manifestations. Healings, prophecies, revelations, and "speaking in tongues" are spoken of in the records of the Saints.<sup>24</sup> Meetings were often held. President Young and the other leaders used these occasions to improve the moral and spiritual fibre of the people. Future trials awaited them in a strange land, and the leaders felt that the guidance of God would be indispensable.

Despite a few breaches of conduct, a general high level of morality and gentility was encouraged and established. One trait that seemed to be ingrained in these people was that of prayer. Sermons and discussions seldom omit reference to it. Morning and night, and often between times this institution appeared to be religiously performed.

Every day closed as every day began, with an invocation of the Divine favor; without which, indeed, no Mormon seemed to dare to lay down to rest. With the first shining of the stars, laughter and loud talk hushed, the neighbor went his way, you heard the last hymn sung, and then the thousand-voiced murmur of prayer was heard, like babbling water falling down the hills.<sup>25</sup>

An effort was made to provide education for the people. The "Journal History" reports on December 31, 1846: "Several schools for children have been started in camp within

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<sup>23</sup>Lee, *op. cit.*, February 16, 1847.

<sup>24</sup>Jenson, "Winter Quarters," March 17 and 29, 1847.

<sup>25</sup>Kane, *op. cit.*, 47.

the last ten days."<sup>26</sup> There was also a Seventies school established for the older men. Philosophy, languages, and other scholastic studies were investigated along with gospel subjects.<sup>27</sup> Thus, intellectual pursuits were not wholly neglected by the pioneers.

Undoubtedly, no treatise on Mormon life would be complete without some mention of polygamy, considered by most persons the outstanding peculiarity of that people. It is noticeable that little is recorded in the journals and records of the Saints at Winter Quarters regarding the practice. This dearth of information is probably due to at least two factors: (1) polygamy was not practiced widely, and was mostly confined to the leading brethren; and, (2) the practice was still kept fairly secretive. Nevertheless, enough information can be gleaned from their records to establish that polygamy did exist at this time and that a prolific progeny was developing. The following is recorded in the "Manuscript History" under the date of Tuesday, February 9, 1847:

The same evening Horace K. Whitney makes mention of Heber C. Kimball calling his wives together who had infants, for the purpose of blessing them . . . There were seven in number [children]. The names of these mothers were Sarah Peek, Clarissa Cutler, Emily Cutler, Sarah Ann Whitney, and Lucy Walker.<sup>28</sup>

Later it is recorded that Heber C. Kimball called his private family together to the number of thirty-six and blessed them.<sup>29</sup> Brigham Young, as well as some of the other leading brethren also had more than one wife, but little is said concerning these marriages.

In addition to internal problems, the Indians were a source of difficulty and concern. Omahas, Sioux, and Iowas by the hundreds scavenged the countryside in pursuit of game and enemies. A war might have been easily provoked if the Saints had been a little less disposed to friendship. But President Young went to great lengths to instruct the people in the just and proper treatment of the red man. He

<sup>26</sup>"Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Office), December 31, 1846.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, January 23, 1848.

<sup>28</sup>Jenson, "Winter Quarters," February 9, 1847.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, March 21, 1847.

no doubt formulated his Indian policy here which he so successfully effected later in Utah: "It is cheaper to feed the Indians than to fight them."<sup>30</sup>

Great efforts were made to cultivate a spirit of friendship with the Omahas—the tribe nearest to Winter Quarters. Reduced in numbers by the ravages of the smallpox and the warlike Sioux, the Omahas were now a wretched remnant of a once powerful tribe. Their band was made up of little more than a hundred families, and these were so poor and ill-fed that they resembled a tribe of consumptives.<sup>31</sup> Buffalo and other game had resorted to other ranges, and the trifling annuities from the United States left the Omahas in a pitiful state. They had planted some corn in awkward Indian fashion but through fear of ambush dared not venture out to harvest it. Thus, they were reduced to spoilation of their neighbors: the prairie field mice and the Mormons. The field mice provided small underground cellars filled with the nutritious little beans of the wood pea vine, which the Indian would search out and rob for the sake of his stomach.<sup>32</sup>

Inasmuch as it was cheaper to help the Indians feed themselves than to allow them to live off Mormon cattle, the Saints proceeded to provide help and direction for their hapless neighbors. Eight or ten men were appointed by President Young to go and raise a crop for the Omahas. This was done not only for the purpose of aiding the Indians but also to keep them away from the town, where thieving had occupied most of their time.<sup>33</sup> Arrangements were also made to help them gather their crop of maize, to assist them in building houses, to enclose their fields, and to teach them husbandry. Some blacksmithing was done for them also. All this was done to insure friendship between the two peoples and to make payment to the Indians for the use of their lands.

The Omahas reciprocated by granting privileges to the Mormons. The whites had been given written permission to

<sup>30</sup>B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), III, 15.

<sup>31</sup>Thomas L. Kane, *Latter Day Saints Millennial Star* (Latter-day Saints Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah), XIII, 165.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, XIII, 165.

<sup>33</sup>Stout, *op. cit.*, 91.

remain on the lands for two or more years and to use all the wood and timber they might require. Furthermore, the Indians agreed "that we will not molest or take from them (the Mormons) their cattle, horses, sheep, or any other property."<sup>34</sup>

But it was soon evident that the thieving propensities of the more adventuresome Omahas were not to be deterred by a mere scrap of paper. The fat cattle in the rush bottoms were too great a temptation. All precautions were taken to prevent such depredations, but, at times, two or three oxen a day disappeared or were killed by the marauding Indians.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, Brigham Young was of a tolerant nature in this regard. He felt that it was wrong to indulge in feelings of hostility and bloodshed towards the Indians for killing cattle, for to them the deer, the buffalo, or the fruit tree were all free for the taking. It was their mode of living to kill and eat. He added: "If the Omahas persist in robbing and stealing, after being warned not to do so, whip them."<sup>36</sup> This policy was somewhat more lenient than the usual rule of killing the "worthless red skin" for much less offense.

Further regulations to curb the Indians were adopted. The Saints, individually, were not to give them anything to eat or to be sociable with them. With this rule the Indians' interpreter and teacher readily agreed. The people were also advised not to sell their dogs, for the Indians were buying them to get them out of camp so that they could more easily pilfer.<sup>37</sup> The stockade work which had languished was stimulated, and the pioneers were encouraged to build their homes within the specified blocks. A guard of ten men was appointed to watch for and check any stealing of livestock. The group was to be mounted, and for their services they received one dollar per day.<sup>38</sup>

The nearest thing to an Indian war occurred, not between the Mormons and the red men, but between the Indians themselves. This event was one of several that made the Saints wary in their dealings with surrounding tribes. The Omaha were camped just north of Winter Quarters.

<sup>34</sup>Roberts, *op. cit.*, III, 146.

<sup>35</sup>Jenson, "Winter Quarters," October 15, 1846.

<sup>36</sup>"Journal History," March 26, 1847.

<sup>37</sup>Stout, *op. cit.*, III, 9.

<sup>38</sup>Jenson, "Winter Quarters," May 27, 1847.

On the night of December 8, 1846, a band of Iowas crossed the Missouri and swept through the sleeping Omaha village, firing into the lodges as they went. No estimate is given of the number killed, but one description tells of the lodges being in "a gore of blood."<sup>39</sup> Only four days later, an Omaha hunting party, which left just the day before the Iowan massacre, was wiped out, with the exception of one man, by the Sioux. Estimates of how many were killed range from fifty to seventy-eight.<sup>40</sup> According to the account given by one of the Mormons, the Sioux had cut off the noses of the dead as a token of spite and contempt toward the Omahas and then had silently stolen away in the darkness.<sup>41</sup>

These and other harrowing experiences kept the Saints continually in anxiety over the possibility of Indian attacks. But to their relief none came, and they were spared a misfortune that was terribly common among the settlers of the West.

Thus, the Mormons lived and died at Winter Quarters. The spring of 1847 was soon to arrive and the great exodus was to continue. The memories they were to take with them of this period in their lives were to be many and varied. The bitter had been experienced along with the sweet and altogether their experiences made up a story of human endeavor and pioneer valor.

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<sup>39</sup>Stout, *op. cit.*, III, 30-32.

<sup>40</sup>Jenson, "Winter Quarters," December 12, 1846.

<sup>41</sup>Appleton M. Harmon, "Diary of Appleton M. Harmon," Ms. (Provo, Utah: copied by Brigham Young University, 1940), p. 10.