

# AMERICA'S FORGOTTEN WAR

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## LDS RAIDERS KEPT ARMY AT BAY IN 1857-58.

By Lee Davidson

John Eldredge's smile shows he loves this. Technically, he is leading a jeep caravan into the wilds of western Wyoming, but it is more like the expedition has traveled back in time, to when Utah changed forever as the territory became the stage for what could be called America's first civil war.

Eldredge tells stories at a bleak spot called the "Camp of Death," where a race for survival began for U.S. soldiers harassed by the Mormon militia during the so-called "Utah War" of 1857-58. A flock of buzzards is perched just down the trail, almost as if, by chance, age-old events might repeat to their benefit. The wind seems to carry echoes of suffering ghost soldiers.

It's absolutely fascinating—and almost nobody knows about it," historian Eldredge says about the Utah War and the sites where most hostilities occurred in an area of Wyoming that was then still part of Utah territory.

A state appointed group of historians is working to publicize that often-forgotten military encounter as the war's sesquicentennial approaches next year, and the group used a caravan to "battle" sites this past week to help. It is a story worth telling. The Utah War showed how the American nation would deal with perceived rebellion and how an invaded people would react, foreshadowing events of the real Civil War that would follow just four years later.

What is now western Wyoming would turn into a battlefield—and Mormons would convert canyons of northeastern Utah into armed fortresses—because of disputes in the 1850's between Brigham Young and federal officials sent to govern the territory of Utah.

Many of those officials told the press of the day and President James Buchanan that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints refused to subject themselves to federal judges' rulings and federal law, and that the Mormons would follow only Brigham Young.

Mormons in turn said the judges were immoral scoundrels who overstepped their bounds. Utah's delegate to Congress, John Bernhisel, suggested sending a commission to investigate charges. Instead, Buchanan sent a new territorial governor to replace Young—along with a huge contingent of the U.S. Army to ensure his installation and to put down any "rebellion."

Young was not notified officially of the ordered change. When a Mormon messenger brought word that a large army was headed to Utah, Young worried that old persecutions

were being renewed—and that the Army was coming to kill and scatter church leaders. The written words of Buchanan and Young still echo loudly 150 years later.

*“Their (Mormon) hostility to the lawful government of the country has at length become so violent that no officer bearing a commission from the Chief Magistrate of the Union can enter the territory or remain there with safety.... I accordingly ordered a detachment of the army to march for the City of Salt Lake—as a posse for the enforcement of the laws.”*

**--President James Buchanan’s proclamation, Deseret News, June 16, 1858**

*‘We are invaded by a hostile force who are evidently assailing us to accomplish our overthrow and destruction... Our opponents have availed themselves of prejudice existing against us because of our religious faith to accomplish our destruction.... (I order) that all forced in said Territory hold themselves in readiness to march, at a moment’s notice, to repel any and all such invasion.’*

**--Territorial Gov. Brigham Young’s proclamation, 1857**

The first commander named for the U.S. Army expedition was Gen. William Harney. His biographer would later write that he “had fully determined on arriving at Salt Lake City, to capture Brigham Young and the twelve apostles and execute them in summary fashion.” But Harney would never go to Utah, for he was soon sent instead to quell unrest in Kansas.

He was replaced by Col. Albert Sidney Johnston, who was far away in Texas. So Johnston’s Army of 2,500—a third of the nation’s entire Army at the time—would be crossing the Plains without him for most of the trip. The march also started late in the season, wagons were scattered in long trains. Officers didn’t expect much opposition from Mormons to such a powerful force. All of those were mistakes.

*“Should a collision take place between the good people of Utah and the detachment sent thither, the news of such an event would produce the most intense excitement throughout this vast confederacy, and the tide of public sentiment would set against us with tremendous force.”*

**--Utah congressional delegate, John Bernhisel, warning Brigham Young to avoid a shooting war.**

Young, indeed, sought to avoid the shooting that Bernhisel warned would solidify public opinion against Mormons, but he also wanted to keep the Army away—and buy time for negotiations. So he sent militia to harass and slow the Army.

Porter Rockwell, a famous gunslinger, was the first to attempt to strike a blow for the Mormons. He and some militia attempted to stampede and steal a herd of Army mules near South Pass at Pacific Springs.

“He got away with them at first, “historian William P. MacKinnon, who is writing a two volume history on the war, told the modern day caravan. But an alert Army bugler blew

‘stable call.’ To the mules, that meant food. So the Army mules not only returned, but some of the mules with Rockwell went, too. So he lost some of his own mounts.” MacKinnon said. “His buddies kidded him about it for months.”

*“Gen. (Daniel) Wells (commander of the Mormon militia), looking at me as straight as possible, asked if I could take a few men and turn back the trains that were on the road or burn them. I replied I thought I could do just what he told me to.”*

**--Lot Smith, Mormon militia (Nauvoo Legion)**

Eldredge, who is writing a guide to the trail of Johnston’s Army, looks over the sage desert not far from the intersection of today’s I-80 and U.S. 30 near Granger, Wyo. He says the war would first become hot here—literally and figuratively.

Lot Smith encountered an Army supply train here on Oct. 2, 1857. Amid his threats, the train promised to return east to avoid being burned. But as soon as Smith’s militia was out of sight, the supply train turned west again to try to join the infantry and find protection.

After that, Smith decided to burn wagon trains whenever he had the chance—and burned 50 wagons in two detachments on Oct. 3. The next day he burned another unprotected train, after Smith and the wagon master had a short, classic conversation.

*“(I asked) him to get all of his men and their private property as quickly as possible out of the wagons for I meant to put a little fire to them. He exclaimed, ‘For God’s sake, don’t burn the trains.’ I said it was for his sake that I meant to burn them.”*

**--Capt. Lot Smith, Mormon militia**

Eldredge says that while Mormons would claim to fire no shots at the Army during the war (although the Army said otherwise), one of Smith’s men did fire a shot by accident just after that wagon burning that was a doozy. Smith recalled how it hit three of his own men.

He wrote, “The heavy ball passed through Orson P. Arnold’s thigh, braking the bone in a fearful manner, struck Philo Dibble in the side of the head, and went through Samuel Bateman’s hat just missing his head and pulling his hair.”

Hard-headed Dibble would suffer no damage and would participate in many more raids and help spy on Army movements from the top of Bridge Butte and other hills. More interesting to travelers today, he etched his name into rock along the Mormon trail near a Mormon express station that serves as a testament to his survival.

Advanced portions of the Army established what was to be called Camp Winfield—in honor of the U. S. Army’s longtime commanding general, Winfield Scott—on the Ham’s Fork River near the border of today’s Sweetwater and Lincoln counties. “It was an oasis in the desert,” Eldredge says, amid modern-day grass that is so lush that a moose walks nearby as if to underscore the comment.

But Mormon cavalry could watch the Army from hills surrounding the spot, and was continuing raids on livestock and burning forage—usually just out of rifle range for frustrated U. S. soldiers, who at that time had no cavalry with them.

Eldredge tells the modern caravan that Col. Edmund Alexander, the ranking Army officer there, heard that the Mormons were fortifying Echo Canyon in front of him. And amid mounting losses from Mormon raids, he decided to try to make an end run around the Mormons by following Ham's Fork toward Bear Lake, hoping to try to approach Salt Lake City and Mormon settlements from the north and gain possible victories against more lightly defended areas.

It was a bad idea that astounded Johnston later because it was a longer route to Utah with no advantages. Mormon militia burned forage in front of the Army and continued to steal livestock from the rear. In fact, Eldredge says, Mormons would end up stealing 800 of the 1,400 head of cattle with the Army there.

As the Army moved north, Lot Smith and 40 Mormon militia were almost ambushed and killed. They ran into Army Capt. Randolph B. Marcy with his 100 men. As Marcy's men loaded guns and formed a battle line, Smith exchanged salutations with Marcy.

Eldredge said Marcy asked Smith's business. Smith replied, "Watching you, Sir." Marcy apologized for the conflict that seemed imminent and said officers did not want to come to blows with Mormons. Smith said the Buchanan administration did, and its actions were like holding a "knife to cut his throat."

Smith's militia then tried to escape. Eldredge said the Army reported firing about 40 shots, but managed only to hit the hat of one Mormon and to shoot two horses. He said Mormon riders slid to the sides of their horses to shield themselves from Army shots.

Alexander's march up Ham's Fork was a slow-moving disaster. Then, when he caught and imprisoned Mormons who claimed (with wild exaggeration) that the Mormons had 25,000 troops in the mountains ahead. Alexander decided to return to Camp Winfield.

He had wasted a month, livestock were dangerously weakened, and five soldiers had died, including two who, Mormons said, were shot for being deserters.

Johnston finally arrived and met with troops at the confluence of the Ham's Fork and Black's Fork Rivers. With few provisions remaining and in an area without protection and little forage, he decided in November, 1857, to move as quickly as possible to Fort Bridger, or to Fort Supply nearby, for the winter.

It was only a march of just over 35 miles. But it would take two weeks in the winter of 1857. Blizzards hit the Army near Church Butte. That was the march that would be called the "Camp of Death," as worn-down animals died in droves and soldiers raced in sub-zero temperatures to Fort Bridger.

*“Animals lying along the road every rod, almost, and daily and hourly dying as they are driven along the road. Snow about 7 inches deep. Fort Bridger is our hope. If we once get there we shall be safe with our stores. Hundreds of animals die every 24 hours... Cattle have died so rapidly that they have to send back oxen to draw one train at a time.”*

**--Capt. Jesse Gove, U.S. Army**

*“The thermometer fell last night to sixteen degrees below zero.... The animals are still dying rapidly. They are seen fallen in such attitudes as could only result from the last possible of remaining strength to resist the effects of starvation and cold.”*

**--Capt. John W. Phelps, U.S. Army**

*“The army under my command took the last possible step forward at Bridger, in the condition of the animals then alive.”*

**--Capt. Albert Sidney Johnston, U. S. Army**

When the Army arrived at Forts Bridger and Supply, they found the Mormons had burned them. The protected valleys around Bridger (which the Army renamed Camp Scott) would allow the troops to survive the winter, barely, in part by finding stores of a few vegetables that Mormons had left when they had hurriedly retreated.

Today, some of the burned-down ends of the wooden pickets that had surrounded Fort Supply are still in place and visible near present-day Robertson, Wyo. Visitors to Fort Bridger can also see excavations of the original site, revealing old foundations and some stores of goods left behind there.

Visitors today can also find the remains of “Eckelsville” on Black’s Fork south of Fort Bridger. That is where the new territorial officials sent by Buchanan lived for the winter and were officially sworn into office as they arrived in the Utah Territory. It was named in honor of new Chief Justice Delana Eccles.

Eccles convened a grand jury there, composed of Army teamsters, and indicted Brigham Young for treason.

Young likely found out about that indictment quickly. Eldredge says that Young claimed that he had such good intelligence on Eckelsville, mainly from Mormon spies watching from surrounding hills, that Eccles could not “go to the willows” without him knowing about it.

Meanwhile, Mormons would keep watch on Camp Scott, and any signs of advancement from nearby buttes and from other points overlooking the road to Salt Lake City, as they did near the Needles rock formation near the modern Utah-Wyoming.

In Echo Canyon, Eldredge said Mormons hoped to ambush the Army, if necessary, at a point where it narrows, about a mile east of the current rest stop and welcome center on I-80. He points to well-concealed but still visible circular rock nests atop the cliffs. On the other side of the canyon, Mormons dug rifle pits, now long vanished. Had the Army

advanced, Mormons could have poured in fire from well-concealed fortifications on both sides of the canyon near its narrows.

Across the canyon floor, Eldredge said, Mormons dug several trenches—about 12 feet wide and eight feet deep—which would slow any Army advance while Mormons fired from canyon walls. They also built dams to flood some narrow points. Similar fortifications were built in East Canyon, just upstream from where East Canyon Creek enters modern East Canyon Reservoir. These are most easily seen today above Mormon Flats in Little Emigration Canyon.

Mormon militia were scattered from Salt Lake City to Cache Cave near the top of Echo Canyon to fight if the Army advanced, with spies stationed from there to Camp Scott.

The Mormons manning such fortifications did not have an easy winter. A captured Army teamster later wrote that among Mormon troops, “Remnants of old bed quilts and blankets served as overcoats.” Many had no shoes and no tents.

However miserable the winter was for the Army and the Mormon militia, it bought time for cooler heads to prevail and negotiate peace. The era’s press and opposition politicians began to berate the Buchanan administration for the war’s cost and poor execution. One cartoon showed Young hiding behind polygamous wives—which it called his “breastworks”—scattering the Army into a frenzy with well-placed shots.

Buchanan started looking for a way out of the mess. Col. Thomas Kane, who had been a longtime unofficial ambassador for Mormons in Washington, was authorized by Buchanan to come West to try to negotiate peace. Buchanan also later sent two other emissaries.

Buchanan eventually offered “amnesty” to Mormons. In exchange, the Army would be allowed to establish a permanent fort nearby: Camp Floyd in Cedar Valley.

Johnston wasn’t happy. As he marched troops through Salt Lake City the next June, he told Maj. Fitz-John Porter that he “would give up his plantation for a chance to bombard the city for 15 minutes.”

The “war” would forever change Utah. The influx of non-Mormons it brought would never again allow the territory to be a Mormons-only enclave. It also changed the U.S. military. At least 98 men who would become future Civil War generals—50 confederates and 48 for the Union—served in at least part of the “Utah Expedition,” or at the Camp Floyd it created, according to amateur historian Curtis Allen. Johnston was one. He commanded all western Confederate forces and was killed at Shiloh.

The Utah War showed that Americans who think they are being invaded will fight. It should have shown the government that more than a mere show of force would be needed to stop a perceived rebellion. And it should have shown the South that force to quell a revolution was not only possible but almost a sure thing.

Randolph B. Marcy, who had almost ambushed Lot Smith and later became a Union general, observed in his memoirs that he considered the Utah Expedition to be a prelude to the Civil War. “The sequel of the Mormon expedition,” he wrote in his conclusion, “is well known to the public.”