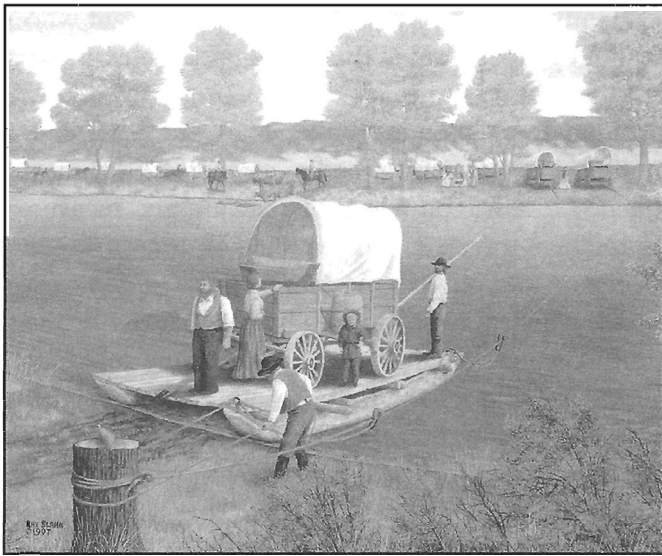


MORMON FERRY
at the
UPPER CROSSING
of
THE NORTH PLATTE



Mormon Ferry by Ray Blaha.

In 1847 Brigham Young and the Pioneer Party built and operated a ferry across the North Platte River near the site of present-day Fort Caspar Museum. A replica of the ferry can be found on the fort grounds.

Compliments of Fort Caspar Museum

THE TRAIL

The emigrant trail (Oregon, Mormon and California trails were essentially the same through most of Wyoming) saw a movement of an estimated 350,000 emigrants during the period 1836-1868, ending with the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. The predominant composition of these travelers were the optimistic farmers moving to Oregon and California, the persevering Mormons searching for a home where they might live in peace and the adventurous 49ers with visions of wealth.

Unlike the Oregon or California emigrant who did not expect to travel the trail again, the Mormons' first thought was to improve the journey for other Mormons who were to follow. They are generally credited with inventing the "roadometer," a device attached to a wagon wheel that accurately measured the mileage traveled. This enabled William Clayton to prepare and publish his *Emigrant's Guide* in 1848, a book which was used more by non-Mormons than Mormons and was the most complete and reliable guide available for the trail. Communication en route was imaginative. Bleached buffalo skulls were used for years as "news" agents by the Mormon emigrants. A board with a saw crack attached to a pole served as a mailbox and became known as the "Platte Post Office." The Mormons not only traveled west, but east in a constant two-way traffic for supplies and to assist new trains to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.

THE FERRY

On June 12, 1847, Brigham Young, the Mormon leader and the first Mormon pioneer party (144 men, 3 women and 2 children) arrived at the Upper Crossing of the North Platte (later to be Fort Casper). Rafts

were built to convey the empty wagons across. The wagon's contents were carried over on the Revenue Cutter, a leather boat carried on a wagon bed, which also served as butcher wagon and pulpit. High winds and dangerously high water (150 yards wide and 10-15 feet deep in the channel) made the crossing difficult. Only 23 wagons were crossed after a hard day. Tired of the slow progress, Brigham Young commissioned the construction of a larger ferry boat. Men were sent downstream to locate two large cottonwood trees to serve as a base. These were 23 feet long and were hollowed out like canoes. Cross timbers (gunwales) were obtained from the mountain and slabbing for the floor from other cottonwoods upriver. Completed in about three days, the ferry was provided with two oars and a rudder for control. The "ferry" is depicted by H.I. Hopkinson's painting, *Crossing the Platte* and Ray Blaha's painting, *Mormon Ferry*. An authentic replica of the ferry can be found on the Fort grounds. Meanwhile, other small trains en route to Oregon contracted with the ferrymen to carry them across as well. Young then named nine men to remain and operate the ferry while he and the others pushed on to their new home on June 19. Thomas Grover, a professional ferryman, was named captain; William Empey, assistant captain; Appleton Harmon, carpenter and mechanic (built roadometer and ox-shoeing frames); Luke Johnson, doctor/hunter; James Davenport, blacksmith; John Higbee, herdsman; Edmund Ellsworth and Francis Pomeroy, hunters; and Benjamin Stewart, miner (mined coal for forge at Deer Creek). Eric Glines later decided to stay with the ferrymen, making a total of ten men. The ferry was to be maintained for two purposes: To assist the main body of Mormons who were yet to follow and to earn needed provisions from other emigrants who needed this service (1847 cost—\$1.50 per wagon).

Blacksmithing, horse and oxen shoeing and doctoring were also provided. A sign board was erected at Deer Creek (Glenrock) advertising this service.

Dubbed the "Mormon" ferry, the initial ferry site was located near the present fort but a few days after Young's departure and in response to temporary competition, it was moved downstream seven miles near the North Casper ballfields. Thus was born the first substantial commercial venture in the Casper area. During 1847-1848, the Mormons had a near monopoly on commercial ferrying. In 1849, however, competitors arrived and at least three non-Mormon ferries thrived, all patterned largely after the original. Even so, heavy traffic to the gold fields of California made delays of up to a week common while wagon trains waited to be crossed. Using a rope and pulley system, the Mormon ferry was greatly improved from earlier years and could cross a loaded wagon in five minutes.

Hunting by the ferrymen was an important activity though Young had strongly counseled his followers against wasting game. There was an abundance of buffalo, antelope and deer. Bear (including grizzlies), elk, mountain sheep and grouse (pheasants) are commonly mentioned. Wolves and mountain lions presented problems while excellent fishing was described at Deer Creek and Garden Creek (un-named then).

The Mormon ferry marked the beginning of commercial ferrying in the Rocky Mountains. Each year through 1852, men were sent from Salt Lake City to "raise" the ferry and operate it during the high water period (usually late May through July). The Reshaw (Richard's) bridge completed near the ferry site at Evansville in 1853 and the Guinnard bridge near the present fort in 1859 essentially ended serious ferry operations.

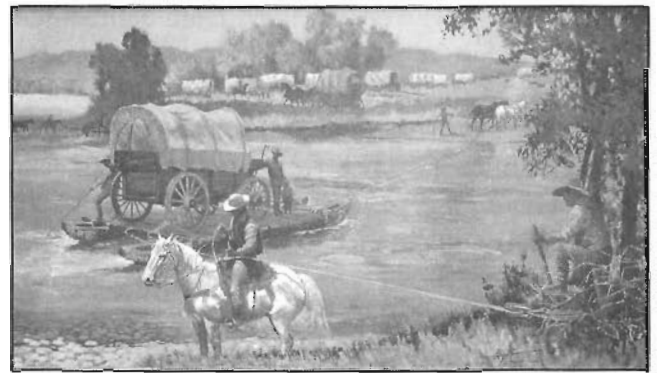
THE HANDCART MIGRATION

A unique migration during the years 1856-1860 was that of the Mormon handcart pioneers. Ten companies totaling about 3,000 people walked the 1300 miles to the Salt Lake Valley. Most of these people were European converts. The entire trip from Liverpool, England to the Salt Lake Valley cost only \$45.00 via handcart, far less costly than other means. The handcart companies covered greater mileage per day and generally had a lower death rate than was experienced by those traveling by wagon train. The exception was the Willie and Martin companies who left Iowa dangerously late in the year 1856 and met with terrible tragedy due to a fierce, early winter. The Willie company suffered 67 deaths; the Martin company about 145. Most of the Martin company losses occurred after fording the North Platte at the Upper Crossing (Casper, Wyoming) on October 19. Winter arrived with all its fury; over 18 inches of snow fell and temperatures reached -14° F before supply wagons of the first rescue party reached them just east of Independence Rock on November 1, 1856.

In thinking of this tragedy, one is inclined to compare it with the Donner party in the High Sierras in 1846 and the Fremont party in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado in 1849. Both of these parties had a higher percent of their numbers die but the number of deaths in the handcart companies was much larger.

These tragedies have been compared by Wallace Stegner - "Perhaps their suffering seems less dramatic because the handcart pioneers bore it meekly, praising God, instead of fighting for life with the ferocity of animals and eating their dead to keep their own life beating, as both the Fremont and Donner parties did. And assuredly, the handcart

pioneer was less skilled, less well-equipped, to be a pioneer but if courage and endurance make a story; if human kindness in the midst of raw horror are worth recording, this half-forgotten episode of the Mormon migration is one of the great tales of the west and of America."



Crossing the Platte by Harold Hopkinson.

Led by Brigham Young, the original company of pioneers reached the present-day site of Casper, Wyoming in June of 1847. After considerable difficulty, they successfully crossed the river using rafts.