

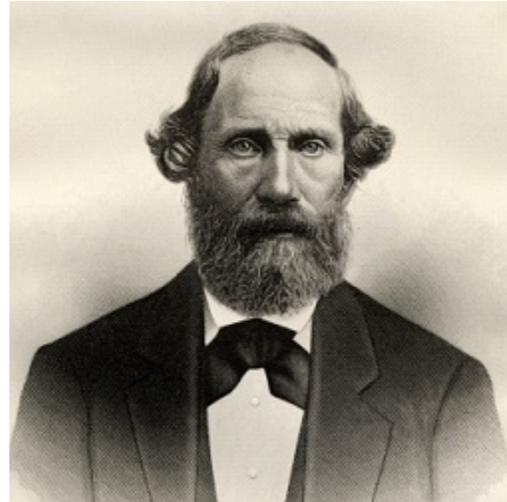
The World of Joseph Fielding: Chapter 31

Captain of Fifty: Perrigrine Sessions

Perrigrine Sessions described his company's departure from the Elk Horn outfitting post:

At this time the Indians seemed to be stirred up against us and we dared not travel in small companies and had to keep up guards night and day. This caused us much trouble as men were scarce in camp as we were now six hundred men short . . . five hundred had gone to the Mexican war and over one hundred Pioneers [had gone with Brigham Young]. This left us with almost half the teams without teamsters except females.

This was a scene of things that looked hard indeed, but go we must. At this crisis and under these circumstances [only] the God of Heaven knew when our journey would end. With a cheerful heart with the whole camp we went out into the trackless plains without a guide save the Almighty whom we trust in. . . . I was appointed captain of fifty, the first organized, and in the Company was Father John Smith the Patriarch of the whole Church & Parley P. Pratt one of the Twelve. In my company were eighty-seven Wagons and fifty men over fourteen and four hundred souls in all and four hundred head of Stock. Here we had some thirty wagons without a Man to drive them but the females volunteered to drive them. My Mother was one of them. . . . We had no road, only what we made. Here I was Obligated to direct almost the move of the Whole camp. Brother Pratt and I had to go ahead of the camp . . . on foot to hunt out the way, build bridges, hunt fords across the streams. This exposed us to the Indians more than any other men but we had not traveled far before, one day as we were some four miles ahead of the camp, we found each of us a fine horse, one of them had a saddle and bridle on. This gave us much joy and a thankful heart as we found it much easier to ride than to go afoot. I will say that this was a Blessing of God to us.¹



Perrigrine Sessions was a Captain of Fifty as he traveled 1000 miles to the Great Basin in 1847.

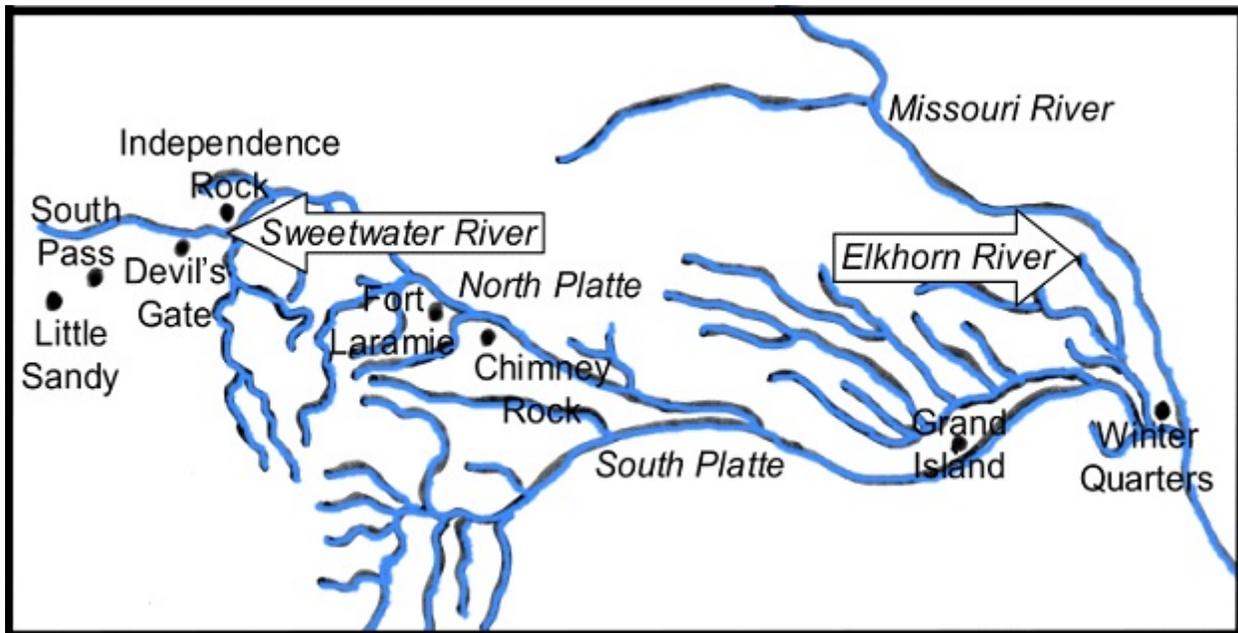
Perrigrine Session's and Elder Pratt's piloting ahead of the companies was essential. Snow was melting in the spring weather and the Platte River was very high. At one point the two had to ride forty miles along the Platte before they could find a place where the hundreds of wagons could cross. Brother Sessions wrote:

We found a place to ford the river, although we had to drive all our cattle several times across to tamp the quicksand so that we could cross our wagons. The stream was about one half mile wide. This hindered us two days but all got safe over.

We then had about thirty five miles without water over a sandy plain. In the afternoon it began to rain. This furnished us with plenty of water for the stock. Camped without wood. Here we found plenty of Antelope, killed several. Continued our journey to Wood River. . . Here we found a sign of the Pioneers and a letter that gave us much joy. I will

here say that once in awhile we could find the trail of the Pioneers. . . .

The companies traveled as they were organized, in groups of fifty wagons. The intent had been for the wagons to travel five abreast, but this often proved difficult. Two wagons traveling side-by-side was easier, and this was enough to keep the bison from dividing the companies. According to Elder Taylor's biographer, "when the prairies were wide and the ground unbroken, two companies often traveled abreast."²



The pioneers traveled west from Winter Quarters along the South Platte, heading north at the North Platte, seeking rangelands for the cattle and campgrounds with clean water. The Oregon pioneers followed part of this route.

They camped at night in two half-moon shapes, the wagons chained together and the cattle in the center. Night guards of several men protected the companies and the animals. Jesse Crosby, a member of Perrigrine Sessions' company, kept good details of their journey. He wrote, "In this order we traveled up the Platte at the rate of from 8 to 15 miles a day."³ The speed of the cattle was the limiting factor, and the pioneers quickly learned to take very good care of their oxen.

John Taylor's biographer wrote:

Public prayer was offered up daily in the camps. Sunday was observed as a day of rest, religious services were held in each camp, and the stillness of the great wilderness of the west was broken by Saints singing the songs of Zion.⁴

A blacksmith by the name of Alfred Lambson also traveled with the Sessions company. He had improvised a bellows which he carried on the back gate of his wagon. Brother Lambson and other smiths throughout the companies, including James Lawson, kept the hundreds of wagons repaired and working throughout their journey.

Brother Crosby recorded that they passed a Native American village. "The village of the Pawnees

seemed a work of some magnitude but [was] now in ruins, being burned by the Sioux last year. . . We saw and examined the cells in the earth where they concealed their corn. We saw no Indians, yet some few seemed [to be] lurking around, a calf which had lagged behind came up with an arrow shot through his back.”

The Pioneers See Bison

Within two weeks the companies were seeing bison, which they called buffalo. Jesse Crosby’s account is filled with the things he found interesting. He wrote:

July 6th Sunday camped on the Platte at Grand Island 170 miles from Winter Quarters. The whole camp of near 600 wagons arranged in order on a fine plain beautiful adorned with roses. The plant called the prickly pear grows spontaneously. Our cattle are seen in herds in the distance. The whole scene is grand and delightful. Good Health and good Spirits prevail in the camp. Our Labours are more than they otherwise would be, on account of the scarcity of men, 500 being in the Army, and about 200 Pioneers ahead of us.

Later Jesse wrote that they “saw herds of antelope, very wild. Shot one.” He continued:

July 8th Weather fine, for three days we have passed multitudes of Prairie dog villages, they are certainly a curiosity to the traveler, they live in cells, the entrance of which is guarded against the rain, thousands of these little creatures dwell in composts, and as we pass great numbers of them set themselves up to look at us. They resemble a ground hog or wood chuck but smaller.

Jesse continued to write about the enormous herds of bison they encountered. “The river, hills and valley were literally covered with them, their meat is good and wholesome.”

Fifteen-year-old Ann Cannon, traveling in the Edward Hunter company, also mentioned the bison:

The buffalo came like an avalanche. You would think the world was coming to an end, there were so many. We thought they would stampede our cattle but they turned and crossed the river.⁵

Alexander Lemon, a teenager in the Spencer/Sessions company, wrote:

We saw thousands of Buffalows day after day coming down to drink at the Platte River. One time they came to drink they were so thick that we had to stop our train and camp for the day. They come to water in a solid, compact body for two miles back [and] made a rumbling like thunder, a moving mass.⁶

In late July Brother Crosby recorded that a body of Sioux, “about 100 in number,” approached them. He wrote:

They are of the Sioux Nation, the neatest and most clean Indians I ever saw. They were

friendly. We gave them a feast of bread & etc. After firing a cannon, the Indians retired to their lodges about 2 miles distant.

The following day the Sioux visited their camp. “Our people traded with them, gave them bread, meal and corn & etc for moccasins, Buffalo robes, & etc.”

Jesse described the scenery as they approached Chimney Rock at the end of July:

29th Traveled 20 miles, camped near Chimney Rock about 90 miles from Fort Laramie; met a party of men from Oregon on horse back. Saw high bluffs in the distance. Weather fine.

30th Traveled 18 miles through a country almost barren and camped on a fine bottom of rich grass and rushes. Exceeding high bluffs & shelving rocks appear on our left across the river. Some men went to visit these heights. They found some creatures & killed them, that they called mountain goats. They resemble our sheep except the wool.

31st Traveled 15 miles, this high range continues and places resemble ruined castles & towers of immense magnitude.



Porter Rockwell, left, and Apostle Ezra T. Benson left the Great Basin in the summer of 1847 and headed east for Winter Quarters.

The ongoing war with Mexico put the territories along the Pacific coast in jeopardy. On the fourth of August, Brother Crosby mentioned seeing a military troop which had traveled from California. The soldiers had stayed at Fort Laramie, which was not too far ahead of the pioneers, and the troops were heading east, back to the United States. The following day the pioneers reached Fort Laramie and were able to trade for new cattle and some supplies as they prepared to cross the Rocky Mountain range, which they could see in the distance.

Brother Lambson, the blacksmith, worked very hard at this time. Under his direction, eighty-five tires were built by the company blacksmiths in just one day to replace wagon wheels as they prepared the last major undertaking of their journey.

In mid-August, Porter Rockwell and Ezra T. Benson arrived in their camp after leaving the Great Basin.⁷ The two men had been sent ahead by Brigham Young who was concerned about the oncoming companies' progress. Having arrived in the Valley a month earlier, President Young was preparing to return to Winter Quarters before winter set in. Brother Crosby



Chimney Rock is along the North Platte River, a landmark for the pioneers.

wrote that Brother Rockwell and Elder Benson “brought tidings from the pioneers, that they had pitched upon a place for the saints to locate, had laid off a city and temple lot near Salt Lake 450 miles from us.”

Perrigrine Sessions wrote about their visit with the first returning pioneers:

When we arrived at the upper crossing of the Platte we met several of the Pioneers on their way back after their families. This gave us fresh courage although our teams were quite feeble.

On the 24th of August they passed Independence Rock, “a place of monument with travelers where hundreds of names are painted or engraved.” Brother Crosby wrote, “Here we enter the pass of the mountains. Rocky points appear on every side with a narrow defile.” The next day they “passed through Devil’s Gate, a defile with rocky heights on either side.” By the end of the month the pioneers were waking up to frost on the ground



Many westward pioneers took the time to scratch their names into Independence Rock. On September 3rd, they left the

Oregon Trail and turned south to what Brother Crosby called the California Trail. They had crossed the South Pass the previous day, the low point in the Continental Divide, and because their company was in the lead, there were still hundreds of wagons behind them.



Jesse Crosby, a pioneer in the same company as Mercy Fielding Thompson, wrote that they passed through Devil’s Gate.

Pioneers Heading West Meet Brigham Young Returning to Winter Quarters

In the early days of September, as the Hunter company crossed the Green River in what is now Wyoming, they encountered Brigham Young and others returning from the Valley. His vanguard company had selected a site for the companies, had plowed several acres of land and planted some crops, and were heading back to Winter Quarters.⁸ It was only at this point in their thousand-mile journey that the pioneers knew exactly where they were going.⁹

Recognizing the significance of this occasion, Bishop Hunter killed one of his steers. The women in the company unpacked their dishes and worked together to prepare a feast. Their efforts were hampered by snow, which quit falling before dinner. Isabella Horne, the wife of one of the company leaders, wrote, “I assure you we had a feast indeed, spiritual as well as temporal.”¹⁰

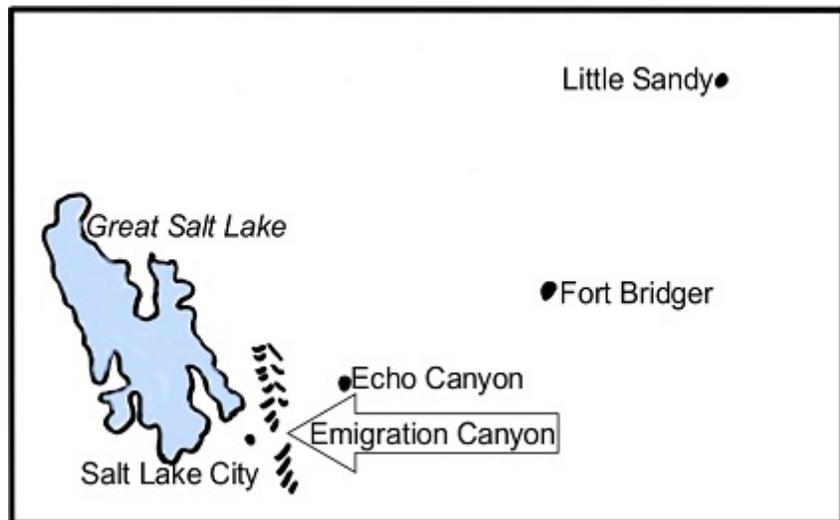
John Taylor described the event, saying it was a surprise to the pioneers returning from the Valley. The meal had been prepared while the apostles, seven heading east and two heading west,¹¹ met in council:

Trunks that had been undisturbed on the journey were opened, their contents investigated and certain articles hurriedly conveyed to a beautiful, natural lawn enclosed by a dense growth of bushes. Several improvised tables of uncommon length, covered with snow-white linen, and fast being burdened with glittering tableware, gave evidence that a surprise was in store for the weary pioneers. The ‘fatted calf’ was killed; game and fish were prepared in abundance; fruits, jellies and relishes reserved for special occasions were brought out until truly it was a royal feast. . . . One hundred and thirty sat down at the supper; and if for a moment rising emotions at this manifestation of love choked their utterance and threatened to blunt the edge of appetite, the danger soon passed under the genial influence of the sisters who waited upon the tables and pressed their guests to eat; in the end they paid a full and hearty compliment to the culinary skill of the sisters. Supper over and cleared away, preparations were made for dancing; and soon was added to the sweet confusion of laughter and cheerful conversation the merry strains of the violin, and the strong, clear voice of the prompter directing the dancers through the mazes of quadrilles, Scotch-reels, French-fours and other figures of harmless dances suitable to the guileless manners and the religious character of the participants. . . .

Elder Taylor wrote, “We felt mutually edified and blessed. . . we praised the Lord and blessed one another.”¹²

Young George Cannon later described the event, stating that his stomach had shrunk so much during the journey that he could not eat half of what he wanted to at this feast.

Young Mary Jane Thompson remembered meeting the company of pioneers with Brigham Young at the Green River. William Staines was with this returning group and visited with Mary Jane’s family for a short time, telling of his experiences in crossing the plains and seeing the Valley. Mary Jane wrote, “He presented me with a papoose’s moccasin ornamented with beads, which was very pretty and to me quite a curiosity.” Mary kept the moccasin for many years, finally removing the beads and saving them on a string.¹³



The pioneers hosted a lavish feast at Little Sandy when the apostles met them on their journey back to Winter Quarters in 1847. They had 200 miles left to go.

Perrigrine Sessions wrote:

By the blessing of God we continued our journey and met the first Presidency of the Church on a stream called the Little Sandy. Here we called a halt and they gave us a brief account of the Valley with many instructions pertaining to the course that the camp should

pursue when we got into the Valley. This was cheering to the camp as we had but about two hundred miles to travel before we could begin to build and inhabit. Although in the midst of the wild men of the mountains, yet our Spirits were refreshed and it seemed as though our burdens were light although we were worn out with the long and tedious journey.

However, within just a few days, the pioneers were traveling in snowy weather. Perrigrine Sessions wrote:

When we got to Big Sandy there fell about four inches of snow. This was about the first of September and the weather cold. The ground frozen some but after two or three days the weather turned warm and we were able to travel on.

By mid-September they neared Fort Bridger, a trading post which bartered for furs from the Yellowstone area. Although prices were high, some supplies were available.¹⁴

The Pioneer Companies Finally Reach the Valley in September 1847

By the 20th of September the companies were nearing their destination. They reached Echo Canyon, which Brother Crosby described as “very high rocks, which in places tower for hundreds of feet above and in places nearly over us as we passed in or near the bed of the stream.” It was here that settlers from the Valley met them with oxen and other assistance. By the 24th of September, the companies began their descent into the Salt Lake Valley.

Mary Jane Thompson wrote:

The first thing which attracted my attention when we came into the camping grounds which is now called the Old Fort Square in this city, was a liberty pole from which floated our national banner, the beautiful stars and stripes, the sight of which cheered my heart and gave me a homelike feeling although in a strange land, for I hadn't seen our flag it seemed to me for almost an age, and the sight of it under the circumstances seemed an assurance that our journey was practically at an end, and it awakened a lively gratitude to God and hope for better times.

A woman¹⁵ in Mary Jane's company wrote:

When my eyes rested on the beautiful entrancing sight--the Valley; Oh! how my heart swelled within me, I could have laughed and cried, such a commingling of emotions I cannot describe. My soul was filled with thankfulness to God for bringing us to a place of rest and safety--a home. No doubt our valley looks astonishingly beautiful to the strangers who come here now, but it cannot evoke the same emotion as it did to us, poor weary tired, worn out, ragged travelers. When I drove into camp, unyoked my cattle, and sat down on the wagon tongue, and began to realize that in the morning I would not have to hitch up and toil through another day, such a feeling of rest--blessed rest permeated my whole being that is impossible to describe, and cannot be realized except by those who have passed through similar scenes.

Elder Pratt's oldest son and namesake, the son of his deceased wife Thankful, was ten years old at the time of their journey across the plains. His father had secured a pony from one of the tribes as they crossed the plains, from which he drove cows for hundreds of miles that summer. He later wrote:

The journey across the plains to the mothers and fathers of Israel, was for the most part, one of trial, hardships and sacrifice; to the young men and maidens, the darkest clouds had their silver lining. The trip to me, as a boy, although I was sorely vexed at times, was some of interest, novelty and pleasure. As the Camps of Zion wended their way towards the land of Promise, daily, new scenes burst upon our view, and now and again we would meet the hunter and the trapper or a band of Indians decked with beads, ornaments and feathers. The novelty and bustle of camp life, the neighing of the horse, the lowing of the cows with their young calves, the deer, antelope and buffalo and flocks of wild geese, the rocks, hills and caves, the lone tree by the wayside, the cold spring, the oasis in the desert, the Indian wickiup and grave, the wild flowers and laughing children, the prairie fires and moonlight nights, the howling wolves and screeching night owls, the inspired Sabbath address and song of Zion, all filled my young heart with delight and inspiration.¹⁶

Perrigrine Sessions wrote:

After a long journey of almost four months, we landed in Great Salt Lake Valley on the twenty-fourth of September 1847. All well and not a death while on the journey in my company of four hundred Souls, yet several children were born on the way.

Battalion soldiers from Colorado and California had built a fort on ten acres of ground. The arriving pioneers tripled the size of the fort. John Taylor wrote:

Our houses were built on the outside line of the fort in shanty form, with the highest wall outside, the roof sloping towards the interior. The windows and doors were placed on the side facing the enclosure, the outside being left solid, except loop holes—for protection. Our corrals, haystacks and stables were some distance behind and outside the fort.¹⁷

John Taylor's biographer wrote about the spiritual undertakings the pioneers made that winter:

In the midst of these busy scenes, the spiritual instruction of the people was not neglected. After the arrival of the several divisions of the company that left Winter Quarters in June, they were called upon to repent and renew their covenants in baptism. Elders Taylor and Pratt set the example. The Saints very generally responded to this requirement and the Spirit of God rested upon them in great power.¹⁸

Angus Cannon, the younger brother of George Q. and Ann Cannon, crossed the plains in 1849 when he was fifteen. He traveled with his sister Mary Alice and her husband George Lambert, who also brought their younger brother and sister.

Angus later explained that the baptisms performed upon arriving in the Salt Lake Valley were associated with a vow not to seek revenge on those who had persecuted them. He wrote:

I saw my little brother David cry with cold and hunger, which so aroused me that I swore I would live to avenge myself on those who had robbed us of our home and possessions, and driven us out to perish in the desert simply because we believed in the faith of our deceased parents. I knew we had harmed no mortal being, hence my indignation at the wrongs our enemies had heaped upon us. [It was two years before I could repent] of the rash vows I had made of living for revenge, [and be baptized].¹⁹

Widow Mercy Fielding Thompson Marries James Lawson

Before the last of the California battalion members headed east to Winter Quarters that fall, James Lawson and Mercy had married.²⁰ This happy event was likely celebrated by all in the traveling companies who knew and loved them both. Mercy and her daughter Mary Jane likely moved into a log home in the fort which might have been completed by James Lawson before winter set in.²¹



Making a home together in the fort in the Salt Lake Valley was most certainly approved by Elder Taylor.

Log homes were built into the fort which was constructed at what is now Pioneer Park in Salt Lake City. Mercy and Mary Jane would have spent the first winter in a home such as this one, sketched in 1893.

Chapter 31 Endnotes Pages 475-483:

1. Perrigrine Sessions's account of the journey is found at the Overland Trail Database.
2. Life of John Taylor, page 189.
3. I have used extensive quotes from Jesse Crosby. His account can be found in the Overland Travel Database.
4. Life of John Taylor, page 189.
5. Cannon Family Historical Treasury, page 168. Joseph Hyrum Moesser was a pioneer in the Spencer/Sessions company. He wrote something similar to Ann's account. "As we were nearing Chimney Rock, there was a large buffalo coming towards the wagon. Two of the men went out on horses and killed it, supplying the company with meat. When we came to the rock, we all went up to it and wrote our names on it. At one of the camps on the Platte River we heard a great rumbling noise, and looking up saw a large herd of buffalo coming directly towards our camp. They crossed the river opposite and turned to one side and went on without making any disturbance, and we felt the Lord had surely turned them aside as they rarely turn out of their course." Priscilla Parish Roundy, also in the Spencer/Parish company, wrote, "We camped on the Platt[e] River, when we heard a herd of buffalo coming down to drink. They would have run right through the camp but the men shot at them and the women shouted and they went by, and just missed the wagons. If they had gone through the camp they would have destroyed all we had, and killed many people."

6. Alexander Abraham Lemon's account of the bison was included in his biography held in the Church History Library. The short bison account is found at the Overland Trail database.

7. Parley P. Pratt and Jesse Crosby both told of meeting these two men. Jesse did not name Porter Rockwell.

8. Life of John Taylor, page 190.

9. Priscilla Parish Roundy wrote, "We did not know just where we were going until we met the first pioneers coming back from the Valley." Her account is found in the Overland Trail database.

10. Horne, M. Isabella, "Pioneer Reminiscences," Young Women's Journal, July 1902, pages 292-293, found online at history.lds.org/overlandtravels.

11. Using the Overland Trail Database, I was able to determine that six of the apostles who headed west with Brigham Young in 1847 returned with him that year. Brigham Young led a large company west in 1848, as did Heber C. Kimball. Willard Richards and Amasa Lyman also led a company that next summer. George A. Smith led a company west in 1849. Wilford Woodruff led a company in 1850. Orson Pratt, according to his brother Parley (page 331 of Parley P. Pratt's autobiography), was also with President Young heading east to Winter Quarters. Orson would not settle in the Salt Lake Valley for three more years, spending some of that time in England, but he would subsequently make four more trips from Winter Quarters to the Salt Lake Valley beginning in 1851. Elder Pratt and Elder Taylor remained in the valley through the winter of 1847-1848.

12. Life of John Taylor, pages 191-192.

13. Thompson, M. J., Recollections. Mary Jane wrote that she gave the string of beads to Joseph S. Nelson, a grandson of her cousin Joseph F. Smith.

14. Ten years later, my ancestor Charlotte Boulter Driver would trade a valuable brooch she had brought from England for a can of oyster stew available at Fort Bridger. She believed her husband William was dying and that the can of stew saved his life.

15. This was the woman who called herself Gretha, mentioned in the previous chapter's endnotes.

16. The account of Parley Parker Pratt, Jr. is found in the Overland Trail database.

17. Life of John Taylor, page 193.

18. Life of John Taylor, page 193.

19. Cannon Family Historical Treasury, pages 192-193.

20. Joseph Fielding Diary, page 147. I quote an excerpt later from Joseph Fielding's diary where he learned via the returning soldiers that Mercy and James Lawson had married. I will discuss this marriage in subsequent chapters. In proofreading this work, Geneil Harris asked me if the 1851 Iron County census was the only record which showed Mercy's surname as Lawson. Before replying to her email, I searched Utah State Records and found her divorce record. At that point I had to back up and rewrite several paragraphs about her marriage.

21. Sketch of the Life of Rachel Fielding Burton. Rachel wrote that her father's and Aunt Smith's families moved into Mercy's log home when they first arrived. She did not ever mention James Lawson.