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Eastward to Eden: The Nauvoo Rescue Missions

Richard E. Bennett

I have felt sensibly there was a good deal of suffering among the saints in Nauvoo, as there has been amongst us, but the Lord God who has fed us all the day long, has his care still over us and when the saints are chastened enough, it will cease. I have never believed the Lord would suffer a general massacre of this people by a mob. If ten thousand men were to come against us, and no other way was open for our deliverance, the earth would swallow them up (Journal History, 27 Sept. 1846).

THESE WERE THE WORDS OF BRIGHAM YOUNG to his Mormon followers at the first Sunday services held at Winter Quarters on a wind-swept rise of land on the west side of the city's proposed Main Street. Daniel H. Wells and William Cutler had brought the sobering news into camp just two days before that Nauvoo had been overrun in the skirmish known as the Nauvoo Battle. The subsequent sufferings of the dispossessed and starving citizens of Nauvoo spurred Brigham and his fellow apostles into even greater relief action than that already underway. "Let the fire of the covenant which you made in the House of the Lord, burn in your hearts, like flame unquenchable," he reminded the Saints, "till you, by yourselves or delegates . . . [can] rise up with his team and go straightway and bring a load of the poor from Nauvoo . . . [for] this is a day of action and not of argument" (Journal History, 28 Sept. 1846).

Few episodes in the annals of Latter-day Saint history are as full of human suffering and pathos as the accounts of the so-called Poor Camps of Nauvoo in the fall of 1846. Yet few are as poorly understood or so myth-ridden. What caused this difficulty? What characterized the relief missions? Who was responsible? How many people were involved? Certainly lawless mob action

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forced their exile, but the Mormons were also in part the architects of their own fate. With better organization, communication, and plain good fortune, the Poor Camps might never have been.

The seeds of this autumn difficulty had been planted by the Quincy Committee Resolution of October 1845 which demanded the departure of the Latter-day Saints from Nauvoo by the following May or else face civil ruin. Realizing the futility of staying any longer in Illinois, Brigham Young and his colleagues of the Quorum of the Twelve set out a clear and systematic pattern of exodus. This multi-faceted plan had called for a vanguard company of the highest Church leaders — the so-called “Company of the Twelve” — to lead out in early spring, charting travel routes and building way stations for those to follow. In its wake, another twenty-five companies, each consisting of 100 families and some 500 people and presided over by a company captain, were to leave Nauvoo at set intervals throughout the spring and summer of 1846.

Near panic in early February, however, shattered these plans. Brigham Young, faced with an increased tempo of attempted arrests by federal and state officials on complicity charges stemming back to Joseph Smith’s destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* printing shop, aware that several assassination attempts had been made or were being planned, and faced with unsubstantiated but compelling rumors that the United States government was sending a federal army to interfere with their westward exodus, ordered a hasty February departure. In the ensuing confusion, many of the previously-appointed company captains abandoned their assignments and were allowed to join with the vanguard Company of the Twelve (Bennett 1984, Ch. 1).

In the subsequent confusion, what had been foreseen as a relatively small, orderly company of officials soon became a swollen, unwieldy amalgam. Mormons began crossing the broad Mississippi as early as 4 February to take up their proposed line of march at Sugar Creek, Iowa Territory, some nine miles west. Brigham Young arrived eleven days later. By the time the first wagons began rolling west in mid-March from their Sugar Creek encampment, the Company of the Twelve had multiplied into an army of over 2,000 men, women, and children (Journal History, 28 Feb. 1846).

Due in large measure to the unmanageable size of the company and to the incredibly wet spring weather, Brigham Young and his westward-bound pioneers failed to reach the Missouri River until mid-June, almost three months behind schedule. This fact, coupled with Washington’s request for a 500-man battalion to march to California in the U.S.-Mexican War, put an end to whatever lingering hopes Brigham had of sending a pared-down exploration company to the Rockies that summer of 1846. Rather, the top priority now became finding a winter location large enough to feed and shelter the oncoming thousands of uprooted Latter-day Saints in a frontier wilderness and among Pottawattamie, Otoe, and Omaha Indian tribes in the vicinity of Council Bluffs on the Missouri River.

Not long after the break-up of the Sugar Creek encampment in mid-March, other companies followed. Hundreds left Nauvoo intermittently during March and April, and at least 3,000 came on in May (Gregg 1880, 346–

47). While the majority chose an overland conveyance, some travelled by riverboat to St. Louis, St. Joseph, or other cities en route to the new hub of Church activity. With upwards of 8,000 people congregating at the Bluffs that summer of 1846, little wonder the new hub of Latter-day Saint activity was at the Missouri, not the Mississippi.

Yet during this busy summer of 1846, Brigham kept an anxious eye on Nauvoo. Besides disrupting the original plan of exodus, their hasty departure had negatively affected the sale of both private and Church properties in and about the city. Consequently, before leaving Nauvoo, Brigham had appointed Joseph L. Heywood, John S. Fullmer, and Almon W. Babbitt legal trustees to sell Church and private properties, pay the most pressing debts and obligations, and provide for the safe departure of those left behind. He also assigned Apostle Orson Hyde to remain at least until the dedication of the Nauvoo Temple and to keep a vigil against the encroaching emissaries of James J. Strang, who was then claiming succession to Joseph Smith and who eyed not only new converts but also the temple itself to fit his own religious and economic purposes (*Voree Herald*, Sept. 1846, p. 2).

The Quorum of the Twelve had secretly sought various government grants to assist in their exodus plans since late 1845; but by early 1846, it had become clear that the only way left to pay their debts and the costs of exodus was to sell both the Kirtland and Nauvoo temples. The idea had been quietly discussed among selected members of the Twelve even before the February exodus but without resolution (Smith to Young, 26 April 1846). But six weeks into Iowa, upon hearing from Orson Hyde of the possibility of an immediate sale, Brigham startled his colleagues by declaring his intention to sell the Nauvoo Temple there and then at a price of \$200,000 (Council of the Twelve to Orson Hyde and Wilford Woodruff, 30 April 1846, Brigham Young Papers). Orson Pratt wrote in his journal, 28 April 1846, "The Council met. The subject of the Temple was taken into consideration. It was considered that inasmuch as we were driven from our inheritances and homes and from the Temple that all sales of our property were forced sales done for the purpose of keeping a poor people from perishing and that we would be justified by our Heavenly Father in so doing." What good was the temple to them now, he argued, if the Church perished in the wilderness? Now was the time, and Brigham, ever the pragmatist, was insistent.

Furthermore, unless the temple were sold it would either be seized by anxious creditors and mortgage holders as collateral against a mounting backlog of unpaid debts and assignments or be claimed by other parties seeking ownership of the land and the temple. George A. Smith, speaking on behalf of his fellow apostles, finally and grudgingly consented. In that 26 April 1846 letter to Brigham Young, he wrote: "If you in your wisdom should think it best to sell the same for to help the poor in the present emergency, we frankly concur notwithstanding we feel opposed to a Methodist Congregation listening to a Mob Priest in that holly [sic] place" (Brigham Young Papers). Thereupon Brigham instructed Orson Hyde to send only a fraction — \$25,000 — of the anticipated proceeds to the main camp and to turn the balance over to the

trustees to pay the temple builders up to half their overdue wages, pay the most pressing debts, and provide desperately needed teams, wagons or steamboat passages for the Nauvoo poor (Council of the Twelve to Orson Hyde and W. Woodruff, 30 April 1846).

Terms of the proposed sale were not announced in Nauvoo until the very day the temple was dedicated (Scott, 1 May 1846). William Felshaw, one of the many temple builders, voted in support of the decision for he, like most others, saw in it his only means of deliverance: "Even if I should get the half pay," he wrote, "it would not buy teams sufficient to move my family let alone buy clothing and provisions . . . my life is in danger here, and what to do I know not. I am lying on my oars for there is nothing to do in this place to obtain means."

But Orson Hyde's possible sale never materialized, and the workers were not paid even half their wages. In October, Brigham Young slashed the price to \$125,000, then tried to rent it for \$400 a year "just to keep it in repairs" (Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 17 October 1846; Minutes, Meeting of the Twelve and the Nauvoo Trustees, 22 Jan. 1847 Young Papers.)

Meanwhile, the situation in Nauvoo steadily deteriorated. People left by whatever means possible. By mid-August fewer than 1,500 remained, some of them new converts from the East who had arrived too late to join the advanced companies. As James Whitehead indicated in an 18 August 1846 letter to Brigham Young (Young Papers) most had exhausted all their savings just to reach Nauvoo and now looked to Brigham and the Trustees as their only hope. Wrote one almost penniless but imploring widow to Brigham in mid-August: "[Nauvoo] is truly a lonesome and dismal place . . . I want to know what I shall do. Is it best for me to remain among the gentiles? . . . My body is almost worn out a struggling to get a shelter for my head . . . If you think it wisdom for me to come out this fall how shall I gather. . . . Council me as though I was your child or Sister and whatever you say that I will do" (Elizabeth Gilbert to Brigham Young, 13 August 1846, Brigham Young Papers).

By late August, anti-Mormon vigilante groups had taken the law into their own hands and, under the flimsy pretext of enforcing the Quincy Resolution, burned outlying Mormon farmlands and laid siege to the city. Thomas Bullock, himself without teams or wagon, described their perilous circumstances in a letter to Willard Richards 10 September 1846:

If you was to see me and my family at this moment, you would say we had either been whitewashed or had risen out of our graves — we have not the least idea where our next meal is to come from. . . . Some subsist by selling their clothes for food. There have been many saints who were preparing as fast as they could to go to the West who have gone to the grave, many literally dying for want — two or three dying in a house (Thomas Bullock Papers).

Between 12 and 15 September a small band of 100–150 men tried to stave off an attack of several hundred men long enough to allow the remnant of the Nauvoo population to ferry to Iowa. After four days of intermittent skirmishes, the Mormon defenders surrendered unconditionally. In the ensuing march upon the city, many homes were damaged and the temple desecrated. Only

ten men, including the trustees, were allowed to remain temporarily to pay off debts and obligations (Whitney Journal, 24–25, 27 Sept. 1846).

The resulting refugees, comprised of several hundred dispossessed men, women, and children—some too sick to travel—scattered themselves in camps along two miles of river banks above Montrose, Iowa. Few had the luxury of either tent or wagon (John M. Bernhisel to Brigham Young, 27 Oct. 1846, Brigham Young Papers). Most hung quilts or blankets for shelter or used bowers made of brush. Subsisting on little more than boiled or parched corn, several died “from sheer want of nourishment,” as eyewitness Henry Young described. The situation was perilous in the extreme, the “bottom of the bottomless pit” to quote Joseph Heywood (Nauvoo Trustees to Brigham Young, 6 Dec. 1846). Had they not been blessed with such fine autumn weather and had not the rescue missions arrived, their fate would have been much worse.

With respect to these rescue efforts, misconceptions still persist. B. H. Roberts, in his standard account of the last days of Nauvoo, argues that the O. M. Allen rescue party left after word of the Nauvoo Battle had reached Winter Quarters (CHC 3:136). In fact, the recently selected Winter Quarters high council and Newel K. Whitney, Presiding Bishop of the Church, had already organized an eleven-man rescue party under Allen’s command two weeks *before* William Cutler and Daniel H. Wells arrived in camp with news of the battle. Allen reported that his company did not hear of the battle until they met Cutler coming west one week after Allen had started back on 14 September, picking up volunteers and provisions along the way (Allen, 20 Sept. 1846).

Almost all of Allen’s party were drawn from the Winter Quarters (Nebraska) side of the Missouri River and had parents, wives, and children back along the Iowa trail or at the Mississippi. Just east of Pisgah, 29 September, they met the westbound Evans Company. “We told them we wanted something to eat,” Allen records:

and they were very liberal in giving to us in the evening we met Sister Mary Fielding Smith with her company she met us with a welcome how do you do, and her other hand was full of charity of the right kind, for she felt for her brethren and sisters who were driven from their homes, she placed in my hand fifteen dollars to keep the poor, she told me she was scarce of provisions, so I told her that if the poor did not need it, that I would bring one half of the amount to her when I returned, she afterwards gave us about sixty pounds weight of flour . . . Sister [Mercy Fielding] Thompson gave me three dollars for the same purpose.

Quickening his pace to take full advantage of lingering good weather, Allen reached Montrose, Lee County, Iowa, on 6 October with twenty wagons, seventeen oxen, forty-one cows, four horses and several volunteer teamsters.¹

In the Poor Camps, Allen “found their circumstances very different” to what he had expected. He was surprised that many refused to go west to the

¹ These included Samuel Smith, James Sprague, Amos Tubbs, Pliny Fishers, Amasa Russell, James McFale, Samuel Savoy, W. G. Sterrit, Clement Evens, and Peter Van Orden (Winter Quarters High Council Minutes, 8 Sept. 1846; Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 7 Oct. 1846; Allen Journal, 6 Oct. 1846).

Missouri. Rather than rescue he had to preach, cajole, and persuade. After he “repelled the reports that were circulated about the Main [Missouri] Camp and shewed their falsity,” he wrote on 7 October 1846 (no doubt referring to the rumors of tragic deaths and Indian difficulties), “I spoke of the Spirit of gathering and not of scattering, and that there was a sufficing for their maintenance in the Missouri River . . . I told them that if they would uphold me I would uphold them and get them to Council Bluffs.”

However, in actuality his rescue efforts proved very selective. He had a predetermined list of whom to bring back that included Thomas Bullock, “adopted” into the family of Apostle Willard Richards, and others. “I found the brethren that I was sent for,” Allen wrote Brigham on 15 November 1846, “in a sick and destitute situation. I loaded up the same with those persons whose names were written in my instructions (Young Papers). To his credit, he also took back several families not on his list. Having taken longer to cross Iowa than anticipated, Allen spent only two days on these rescue efforts and left for Winter Quarters on 9 October with 87 children, 24 men, and 35 women plus five others — a total of 151, 44 of whom were listed as sick.

Allen’s relief efforts, though welcome, were insufficient. Thirty-five men and women of those still left behind wrote Brigham a formal complaint: “Brother Allen came and took some away to Camp,” wrote Henry Young on their behalf on 27 October. “But the very poorest, the widow, and the orphan without food, without clothes, without means of going anywhere, and without tents, wagons, and teams — many without shoes and other warm clothing, are left — many have died . . . from sheer want of nourishment” (Henry Young to Brigham Young, 27 Oct. 1846, Young Papers). In addition to criticizing the Nauvoo trustees for making too few visits and supplying inadequate provisions, they also expressed doubts that they would be any better off on the banks of the Missouri among the Indians than at the Mississippi nearer their homes.

These charges of neglect, however, were not fully justified. Trustees Heywood, Fullmer, and Babbitt, though in truth infrequent visitors to the camps, had been pleading with the citizens of Galena, Quincy, Rock Island, Burlington, St. Louis, and other river towns for money and supplies. John M. Bernhisel, who accompanied Heywood on one of his fund-raising expeditions, reported that they succeeded in raising only \$100. “Many thought the Mormons had been harshly treated,” he wrote Brigham, “yet the prejudice against them was deep and strong. Had I been soliciting relief for any other people under similar circumstances I should have received much more” (Journal History, 4 Nov. 1846). Meanwhile, as early as 6 October, Presiding Bishop Newel K. Whitney, using Church funds, had purchased “some flour” at Bonaparte, a few miles west of Montrose for distribution among the Poor Camps (Journal History, 6 Oct. 1846).

The news of the Nauvoo Battle, if not the catalyst for the Allen relief teams, was certainly the cause of the heretofore little known second rescue mission. Comprised mainly of farmers and haycutters, this time drawn from members settling on the eastern or Council Bluffs side of the Missouri River rather than from Winter Quarters, they were, at first, reluctant to go. Some worried about

the lateness of the season and their uncut hay. And fewer, if any of these later rescuers, had family members back in the Poor Camps. But most irritatingly, more families on the Pottawattamie or Council Bluffs side had given up family members to serve in the Mormon Battalion than had those families living in Winter Quarters. Had they not already made the greatest sacrifices? Who would take care of their families while they were away?

Despite some bickerings, however, the Pottawattamie High Council succeeded in dispatching a rescue team in early October under the direction of James Murdock and Allen Taylor who hurried east across Iowa and arrived in Montrose sometime near the end of October (Pottawattamie High Council Minutes, 2 Oct. 1846). The number they transported back is not known, but it seems to have been less selective, helping virtually everyone who was left requiring travel assistance.

Another misconception surrounding the poor camps pertains to the numbers involved. The standard version, first popularized by the crusading pen of Thomas L. Kane, and later accepted by B. H. Roberts and more recent writers, set the figure at 640 (CHC 3:135; Allen and Leonard, 1976, 222). While this may have been true in mid-September, Bishop Newel K. Whitney, then on the scene and writing in his journal before even Allen arrived, suggested that only fifty relief wagons would be needed to move the entire camp. Since Allen's rescue and relief mission consisted of 28 wagons and a roster listing only 151 people, the estimated size of the second rescue team was near 22 wagons and correspondingly fewer people — perhaps as few as 125.

Even if the numbers which Murdock and Taylor brought back with them were comparable to Allen's, it is clear that the Poor Camps of October numbered at most 300. If ever there had been 600+ on the banks of the Mississippi that fall (which under careful scrutiny now appears unlikely), by the time help arrived many had left on their own power (Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 6 Oct. 1846; Journal History, 4 Nov. 1846; Bullock, 15 Nov. 1846; Allen, 15 Nov. 1846). A further clue that fewer people returned in the second relief company is its much quicker return to the Missouri than Allen's. A letter from Brigham Young to Henry Young, 6 November 1846, indicates that the second rescue company was scaled down to accommodate the fewer-than-expected numbers.

With this clearer picture of the numbers involved, it is hard to accept Pearson's recent defense (1981) of the recurring legend that nine children were born in a single night at the Poor Camps. While it is true that a Jane Johnston wrote in Joseph Smith Black's diary (p. 5) of nine infants being born in one night, one must regard her memory with suspicion. Written thirty-seven years after the fact, her account would place this episode on or immediately *after* 9 October, for she indicates that she delivered the infants after "the Lord had sent quails amongst us", an event Allen dates on the 9th. Significantly, no contemporary account reports any such births; in fact, Bullock's census of the names and ages of the 151 people returning with the Allen Company includes

only three infants under the age of twelve months, only one of whom was born in Iowa.²

While it is true that no comparable roster has yet been found for the Murdock-Taylor rescue company, the odds of nine women in their group of no more than 150 being at full term in their pregnancies are remote; the chance of all nine of them giving birth the same night is beyond belief. If there ever was any truth to the story, first mentioned by Eliza R. Snow who participated in the first vanguard company exodus, it must have occurred, as she herself said, in the February Sugar Creek encampment of the previous February/March where almost 2,000 people waited a month before heading west, with another 8,000 just across the river (Tullidge 1877, 307).

Another story, one with more credibility, deals with the "miracle" of the quails. While assisting Allen in organizing the first rescue company, Thomas Bullock recorded that on 9 October, when food was critically scarce, several large flocks of quail flew into camp, some falling on the wagons, some under, some even on the bare breakfast tables. "The boys caught about 20 alive . . . every man and woman and child had quails to eat for their dinner," Bullock observed. "After dinner the flocks increased in size. Captain Allen ordered the brethren not to kill . . . not a gun was afterwards fired and the quails flew round the camp, many a lighted in it . . . this was repeated more than half a dozen times." To the faithful it was a manna-like sign of God's mercy to modern Israel.

The return journeys of both rescue teams were uneventful with only one or two deaths (Bullock, 30 Oct. 1846). Very few were transported all the way to the Missouri. Rather, most were left in various small Mormon settlements scattered along their newly made Iowa trail. Only a handful accompanied Allen and Bullock all the way back to Winter Quarters, arriving there 26 November, fifty days after leaving Montrose (Bullock, 26 Nov. 1846).

In retrospect, one can see a connection between the hasty February departure from Nauvoo and the later Poor Camps of October 1846. The panic of February was allowed to wreck months of careful planning leaving many without a clear blueprint of departure. And even if the original twenty-six company exodus plan had been followed, it is not clear if everyone who wanted to leave could have gone. Brigham Young may have assumed the reins of leadership too gradually, while his followers chose to obey but occasionally only on their own terms. Had concentrated efforts been made earlier to find buyers for the temple and had others shared sooner Brigham's practical vision, the needed money to pay workers and move out the Nauvoo poor may have been available in time to prevent much of the September sufferings. Still it is impressive that so few were left in the city by September and that the Church did not abandon them.

² Another bit of information that casts serious doubts on the dependability of Johnston's memory is her mention of boiling maple juice and getting cakes of maple sugar. If such maple juice were taken from the sap of local maple trees, the season must have been spring.

But the incidentals of the forgoing account may be of lesser interest than what they have come to signify in Mormon history and tradition. Seen here was a firm reiteration of the "camp welfare" mentality, i.e., that despite the acute difficulty in establishing Winter Quarters, the poverty and uprooted state of its people, or how recent or how poor the converts back at Nauvoo, the Church exercised responsibility for the welfare of all its citizens from at least three levels of administration. The presiding authorities and quorums provided the impetus, motivation, and coordination of welfare relief. (Brigham himself sent three yoke of oxen back with Allen).

Second, the Nauvoo rescue missions illustrate the central role of the Presiding Bishop — in this case Newel K. Whitney's purchase of wagon loads of flour — in meeting the welfare needs of the Church. And third, it was the local high councils at the Missouri River that effectively mobilized the systematic sacrifice of the collective Church membership to remember and assist the poor and less advantaged among them. Welfare relief was not a case of affordability, of convenience, of discriminate selection or even of deservability, but one answered by the sacrifices of the rank and file, the Mary Smiths, the Orville M. Allens, the Mercy Thompsons, and the James Murdocks.

Finally, the story of the Poor Camps shows the pragmatic vision of Brigham Young's administration. For him, it was not where the Church had been but where it was going that mattered most. The present and future welfare of the Church and not its buildings and properties was his chief concern. His decision to sell off the temples to assist them in their travel plans and strengthen their financial footing evidenced a practical, forward-looking policy. To him, Church history was prologue, not precedent.

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