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Historic Sites and Markers Along the Mormon and Other Great Western Trails Stanley B. Kimball

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STANLEY B. KIMBALL. *Historic Sites and Markers Along the Mormon and Other Great Western Trails*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. xviii; 320 pp. \$15.95.

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As a mobile society, continually crisscrossing the continent, we have history often at our fingertips, and yet we miss much of it because we are either hurried or ignorant. How many of us have bypassed a host of Mormon and American historical sites time and again because we either didn't know they were there, didn't know who to ask, or just plain didn't have time to make the necessary contact? Stanley Kimball's new guide and commentary on *Historic Sites and Markers Along the Mormon and Other Great Western Trails* is an in-hand compass for both the "easy on, easy off" visitor and the dedicated scholar who wants to spend extended time tracking original routes. Hundreds of site descriptions and thirty quality maps, with insets depicting the locations within the greater geographical area, are augmented by seventy-one photographs to facilitate the reader's perception of place. Now there is little excuse for outbound trail enthusiasts not to slip onto one of these historically exciting corridors of yesteryear and satisfy a personal yen to stand on site.

Whenever a writer undertakes to identify more than 550 historic sites and markers, spread over some ten thousand miles of trail, the possibility of occasional errors, by author or publisher, is increased by sheer weight of numbers. A single example might be cited in the section entitled "The First Mormon Road West: Across New York in 1831," and the "Nineveh Historic Site," segment no. 2 (270). The author states, "In the 1830s Nineveh [Broome County, New York] was known as Colesville, the location of the first branch (congregation) of the Mormon church. This branch was one of the three groups of Mormons that followed their prophet west into Ohio" (270). In actuality, the village of Nineveh was likewise Nineveh in the latter 1820s and 1830s. Situated on the west side of the Susquehanna River in the township of Colesville, Nineveh existed as a contemporary community with the village of Colesville, for which the township was named. The village of Colesville formerly stood near the geographical east-west center of the township at the crossroads of what is now the Colesville Road (or Farm to Market Road) and Watrous Road, southwest of Harpursville. The original village of Colesville has disappeared today. The Mormon Colesville branch was centered in the rural

area of the township at the Joseph Knight, Sr., farm on the east side of the Susquehanna River, adjacent to the village of Nineveh.

There is nothing so sure as change. Throughout this exacting volume, Kimball makes mention of the continual alterations or new conditions affecting a particular site, for example, “New land-owners have removed signs and eliminated access to the ruts in this pass” (126), or “To walk there, permission and directions must be secured at the Steel Ranch” (225). Even as the author was putting his manuscript to bed, the rules changed at one of his favorite sites—the Zelph Mound in Pike County, Illinois (293–94). Donald Q. Cannon, who visited that location while researching in the summer of 1988, discovered that one doesn’t just “walk on.” He informed me that

the Zelph Mound is located on property owned by the Illinois Department of Conservation. In order to visit the site one should contact Warren Winston of Pittsfield, Illinois, the Pike County historian. Mr. Winston can then make contact with the guard for the Department of Conservation and arrange for an escorted tour of the site. Furthermore, the entire area is heavily wooded and, consequently, the mound is obscured and not visible from the dirt road. It is, therefore, helpful to have a guide when visiting the Zelph Mound in that restricted area.

All this to reiterate what Kimball has specified throughout his book, that fluctuating conditions are perpetual at historic sites and that visitors must remain flexible to those changes.

Through his initial interest in Mormon emigrant history, Stan Kimball has been following trails since 1963. His time in grade, almost a quarter of a century, has allowed him to more than sample the ruts and lore of the fifteen primary trails and their variants examined in this labyrinth of pioneering thoroughfares. A wagon master worth his salt can always be detected by his trail savvy and his ability to protect the people in his charge from potentially surprising or even perilous encounters. Kimball gives periodic warnings to the unsuspecting at crucial locations, such as: “This is rough, desolate country so anyone straying from the main roads should have a Gray, Haskell, and Grant counties’ maps” (200); or “With the proper Hidalgo County, New Mexico and Cochise County, Arizona (sheet 7) maps, an ORV [off-road-vehicle], and luck, you can attempt to follow the MB [Mormon Battalion]” (219); or “At California Hill you can see some of the most dramatic trail ruts . . . also watch out for a temperamental bull” (153); or, while at Chimney Rock, “The ambitious can clamber partway up its base, but watch out for snakes” (125); or, in the state of Kansas, “Watch your speedometer in Finney County. One of the few speeding

tickets I ever received while trailing was given to me here, and it set me back \$90.00” (244). Spicing his discourse throughout with a regular touch of wry humor, a tested trail boss talks us safely through the most troublesome stretches.

What has happened and what is now happening on western trails in regards to the erection of monuments and sites markers for the enjoyment and edification of the public did not just occur magically. Such placement has required careful research and planning by organized groups. Perhaps the general readership would have appreciated a brief introductory statement in this volume as to what is occurring among a representative group of U.S. government, state, and private agencies. Is the Mormon Pioneer Trails Foundation currently viable and functioning? Does it have other major works in mind? Are there other organizations interested in western trails? I recognize that design and space constraints in the volume preclude an in-depth treatment, but I would have enjoyed a brief survey of some of the front-running organizations and Kimball’s assessment of what the future might have in store for trail identification.

The text of this book is anything but a “dry run” from site to site. It is filled with highly useful historical information that will appeal to the novice and enlighten the scholar. I became completely absorbed in Kimball’s description of the Missouri Boonslick Trail used by the Lamanite missionaries in 1831, and of Joseph Smith’s employment of that route when first visiting Jackson County during the summer of that same year. Others will be sparked by the identification of five important feeder variants to the Oregon Trail or interested to learn that from 1812 until about 1827 the original Oregon Trail was on the north side of the Platte River and shifted to the south side when Independence became the eastern terminus. The Mormon pioneers of 1847 were primarily following the old traces of the former north side Oregon Trail to Fort Laramie.

I would hope that this volume is but a precursor to a subset of still other trails and sites in Mormon history that the author will undertake to define. I would like to see a similar diagraming of the so called “Mormon Corridor” from Salt Lake to San Diego; the northern routes followed by some members of the Mormon Battalion as they were mustered out at Los Angeles on 19 July 1847; the sites associated with the Latter-day Saint gold argonauts in California; the primary routes followed in the exploration and settlement of Arizona and the subsequent Mormon colonization of northern Mexico in the states of Sonora and Chihuahua; the avenues of settlement missions into western Canada; even the trails followed by “Mormon boys” freighting to the Montana mines. I

suppose a “wish list” of well-defined trails and sites could be endlessly imposed on such expertise as has been displayed by Stan Kimball in this and other trail guides he has published.

Kimball writes of our being in “the midst of a great American western trails renaissance” (xi) and suggests that interest in historic trails has never been greater. Those who have had a long-term fascination with these emigrant routes can only applaud what is happening and pledge their support of such monumental advances. Stan Kimball has been in the forefront of these events and as a recognized authority has given exceptional public service in assuring that both the contemporary generation and those yet future can identify their historical heritage. His current volume is a rare and carefully crafted index to an extensive geographical portion of that legacy.