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The Gold Discovery Journal of Azariah Smith David L. Bigler, ed.

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DAVID L. BIGLER, ed. *The Gold Discovery Journal of Azariah Smith*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990. ix; 159 pp. 22 illus., 4 maps, index. \$17.50.

Reviewed by Susan Easton Black, director of Church History, Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University.

The Mormon Battalion trek from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to the Pacific Ocean helped shape the American West and the future of the Mormon pioneers. One of the few teenagers to join Stephen Kearny's Army of the West was eighteen-year-old Azariah Smith, who stood 5'10" and weighed a slight 130 pounds. In his pocket diary, Smith chronicled some of the most decisive events in the history of the American West. From July 1846 through September 1848, he captured the deeds, travels, and sentiments of the battalion from their enlistment to their discharge. He also recorded the discovery of gold at Sutter's mill and the opening of the Mormon Carson Pass Emigrant Trail over the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Young Smith seemed unaware of the monumental nature of the daily events he recorded. Historians have likewise seemed unaware that an account other than Henry W. Bigler's journals could serve as a primary source for this phase of the Western pioneering movement. Fortunately, David L. Bigler, a distant relative of both Henry W. Bigler and Azariah Smith, recognized the worth of Smith's firsthand account of some of the events that shaped the West. Bigler's scholarly editing of *The Gold Discovery Journal of Azariah Smith* preserves its value for the reader of California and Western history. He has added copious notes, illustrations, and background information that enable the reader to place Smith's diary accounts in a meaningful historical context. Bigler's meticulous editing is commendable, and his contribution to the historic legacy of the Mormon Battalion is laudable.

Bigler divides Smith's journal into five chapters, each differing in historic content and in Smith's personal focus. The first chapter, "By the Cimarron to Santa Fe, August 1–October 16, 1846," reflects the march's physical hardships. "My eyes were so sore that I could not travail [*sic*] in the dust of the Battalion" (23) is a typical entry. Smith's discomfort quickly escalates from mere mentions of physical duress to consuming entries of survival in the wilderness. His search for "Buffalo chips for fuel" and digging of "holes in the Sand for water" (26) describe the desperate condition of those who marched.

“Cooke’s Wagon Road West, October 18, 1846–January 21, 1847,” the second division, depicts the wagon route to the Pacific Ocean. Again, the necessity for survival is evident in Smith’s writing, but a new preoccupation with the distance traveled each day dominates his entries. However, Smith is not always serious; his youthful personality and teenage interest in “ladies, some of which looked very pretty, others looked like destruction” (41), is a welcome relief from the logged miles.

In the third division, “California Occupied, January 22–July 20, 1847,” Smith settles into garrison life. Here he spends more time on personal grooming, such as washing belts and preparing for general inspection. He seems to have an excess of free time to play ball, fish, race, jump, and sing. Yet amid this freedom, Smith pens, “I feel very lonesum and want to see home but comfort myself thinking that it is only a little more than three months more till our discharge” (82). Following his discharge, Smith expresses what was perhaps the feeling of many members of the battalion: “[We] are now our own men” (89).

The fourth division, “Gold at Sutter’s Mill, July 28, 1847–June 22, 1848,” contrasts Smith’s desire to return home with his disdain at the discovery of gold. His most enthusiastic entry is written regarding his mother: “In the evening there was a letter read from the Twelve to the Battalion which gave us much joy. I and Father received a letter from mother which gave us much more” (102). The Twelve counseled single men to work in California for one year before migrating to the Salt Lake Valley. Smith, obedient to counsel, remained in California but pined for his family: “I miss Father and feel very lonesum here in the mountains” (103). His emotional pain heightens as he suffers from a fever. His reaction to the discovery of gold, which he calls “the root of all evil” (110), is one of contempt. Nevertheless, Smith did temporarily join in the quest for nuggets when James Marshall promised him “half we find” (112).

As news of the gold rush spread, Smith penned the fifth division, “Trail to El Dorado, June 25–September 29, 1848.” He begins with his oft-repeated emotion, “I wanted to see my mother and I did not care whether there was gold in the locality or not” (122; quoted from *San Francisco Examiner*, January 24, 1898). In contrast, once on the trail to the Salt Lake Valley, he writes with enthusiasm and optimism. The complaints of a fever or sore eyes, which dominate his previous writings, are now absent; he even treats a personal injury with unusual nonchalance: “I fell on my shoulder,

and hurt it pretty bad, but ac[ci]dents will happen with the best of folks” (140). Finally, after two years of separation, twenty-year-old Smith “found Father, Mother, Sisters and brother; and they were all w[ell]” (146).

On the whole, Bigler’s editing of Smith’s journal is professional and helpful. His scholarly notes on the rich historical and literary heritage of the Mormon Battalion provide valuable background information for each division of the journal. Brief, clarifying introductions to each division strengthen the text. By separating journal entries from footnoted source material, Bigler helps maintain the integrity and flow of Smith’s own words. The ample footnotes provide relevant biographical, historical, geographical, and interpretative analysis. The illustrations, maps, photographs, and samples of handwriting also significantly contribute to the text.

Unfortunately, due to the rather redundant nature of Azariah Smith’s diary entries, it is often difficult to maintain interest in the book. The laborious entries, coupled with lengthy footnotes, make this text more a reference work than a book of intriguing reading. Yet when *The Gold Discovery Journal of Azariah Smith* is viewed solely as an objective reference text, problems arise. Bigler’s explanatory references sometimes fail to be objective because of his interpretive editorial bias. For example, Bigler refers to the writings of David Pettegrew, the respected father-figure of the battalion, as “yarns,” but credits his teenaged ancestor with writing an objective account (50 n. 30). When Smith mentions Adjutant Staff Commandant George P. Dykes but does not express any feelings, Bigler concludes that Dykes “was not hated or resented by either young Smith or his father [and that this] does credit to their good sense” (20 n. 23). Bigler also says Smith’s entries show “irrepressible optimism . . . where others saw wasteland” (37). This conclusion seems gratuitous since it is not directly supported in the journal entries. Thus there is a modest but consistent pattern of lionizing an esteemed ancestor.

When Bigler is unable to develop a brief biographical sketch on a battalion member noted in Smith’s journal, he often concludes that “little is known about” the man. He uses this apologetic phrase even for such well-documented battalion members as Colonel James Allen (21 n. 26) and William Barger (111 n. 46). Bigler’s inclusion of an autobiographical sketch emphasizing Smith’s Latter-day Saint affiliation and his life prior to enlistment is informative. However, at the end of his text, Bigler neglects fifty years of

Smith's later life. In the epilogue, Bigler briefly alludes to those fifty years by writing "for [the next] fifty years" and then leaps to "early in 1898" (147). This fifty-year hiatus is a startling contrast to his detailed attention to hundreds of daily entries. Another surprising omission is Bigler's failure to comment on the improvement in Smith's writing style, vocabulary, and grammar over the course of the journal.

Azariah Smith persisted in writing until 1912 and became a detailed, descriptive writer during his adult years. These later journals promise to reveal much of the first fifty years of Latter-day Saint settlement in Utah. They may become the basis for a further text. I applaud Bigler's informative editorial efforts and encourage him to continue his editing of Smith's journals to help us better understand America's pioneering years. His first endeavor, *The Gold Discovery Journal of Azariah Smith*, is a valuable resource to historians and to posterity.