



THE BATTLE WITH THE BULLS

MORMON BATTALION'S ONLY ACTUAL FIGHT IN MEXICAN WAR



"In nature's pasture, all unfenced. A dreadful battle was commenced. We knew we must ourselves defend, And each, to others, aid extend."

THE above is from a poem written on the spot by one who had a part in the battle. The gory conflict took place on the 11th of December, 1846, on the San Pedro river in Arizona—not far from the present town of St. David—not far north of the Mexican boundary line. There was a great shedding of blood during the alternating ebb and flow of charge and countercharge, and there were also many features that mark the engagement as one wholly unique in the annals of warfare. It is proposed here to tell the story of the famous fight. Prior to entering upon the narration, however, it will be proper to refresh the reader's mind on an important series of historical facts.

HISTORIC DATE ENDANGERED.

SOME one may be offended at the remark that Utah's settlement in 1847 was more or less an accident. It is the truth, nevertheless, so far as the date is concerned. If certain things hadn't happened, a party of Mormons would have penetrated, and no doubt a body of them would have settled, some part of the Rocky Mountain region some years earlier. It is well known that their first leader not only predicted their future establishment and growth along the continental back bone, but that he actually took steps, in preparation for this event, to organize expeditions to spy out the land with a view to settlement. At a later date, indeed the very last move he made, before turning his face toward the place of martyrdom, was toward the west, on which his thoughts had so much dwelt. He had even crossed the Mississippi and was planning to assemble a party for the journey to the mountains, when the importunities of timorous, unwise or treacherous friends caused him to retrace his steps and go to meet his doom.

His mantle having fallen on Brigham Young, that resolute chieftain took up and bore enthusiastically forward his liege-lord's great idea of western colonization. Nor was it in his case altogether left to his discretion or convenience as to when the mighty movement should begin. Pressure upon the inhabitants of the devoted city of Nauvoo became more and more severe. The blood of their prophets, instead of appeasing, served seemingly further to inflame the violence and rapacity of their enemies. With these latter they were compelled to treat for temporary cessations of hostilities in order that they might save, sell or convert even a portion of their property. They were forced to enter into agreements whose terms were most cruel and unjust if they would even save their lives. And no sooner did conditions become sufficiently settled for them to enter earnestly upon their preparations, would break again, and all pledges, stipulations, treaties and armistices would fall nullified to the ground. Instead of being permitted peacefully to exchange their farms and homes and surplus furniture and other comforts for the teams and wagons and compact supplies and outfits with which prosperous home-seekers in new lands try to provide themselves, they were continually interrupted by threats, depredations and even armed attack. Intending purchasers were made loath to buy through increasing evidence that the unfortunate owners had only the alternative of taking any poor price that might be offered, or being driven forth without getting any price at all. Much time that should have been profitably employed in getting ready for the migration, was perforce spent with gun in hand defending lives of loved ones. So that when at last their vanguard crossed the river in the bitter month of February—the ferry being soon abandoned for the solid ice which bridged the mighty stream—they were but ill-prepared for the long journey ahead of them.

WESTWARD HO, AT LAST.

But they were at last on the way to the west—the land of their destiny. Some of them tried to feel that they were glad they were on the move—and promised themselves that they would locate next time where persecution's heavy hand could not soon reach them. All agreed that whether they came willingly or not, they had to come, so they might as well say it was with willingness. Their pursuers had done this much for them, they had given them a good, swift start, incidentally contributing to the fulfillment of the prophecy of him whom they had slain as an impostor.

This was in 1846, and preparations were soon under way for the selection and equipment of the advance party which was to push on ahead, select the place where the new commonwealth was to be established, and plow and plant for those who were to follow along after as fast as they prudently and profitably could. This party was to consist of a hundred picked men with 25 wagons, drawn by 50 yokes of oxen—thus four oxen and four men to each wagon. Unencumbered by families, the party was to carry plenty of seed grain and vegetables, agricultural implements and sufficient provisions to sustain them for a year. Being all well mounted, well armed and able-bodied, and not too heavily loaded, it was expected they would travel along fairly rapidly and present such a martial array as would render them immune from the attack of marauding bands of Indians. By the month of June enlistments for this expedition were well advanced under Wilford Woodruff's energetic direction and only a short time would have been necessary to complete the party and start it on its journey.

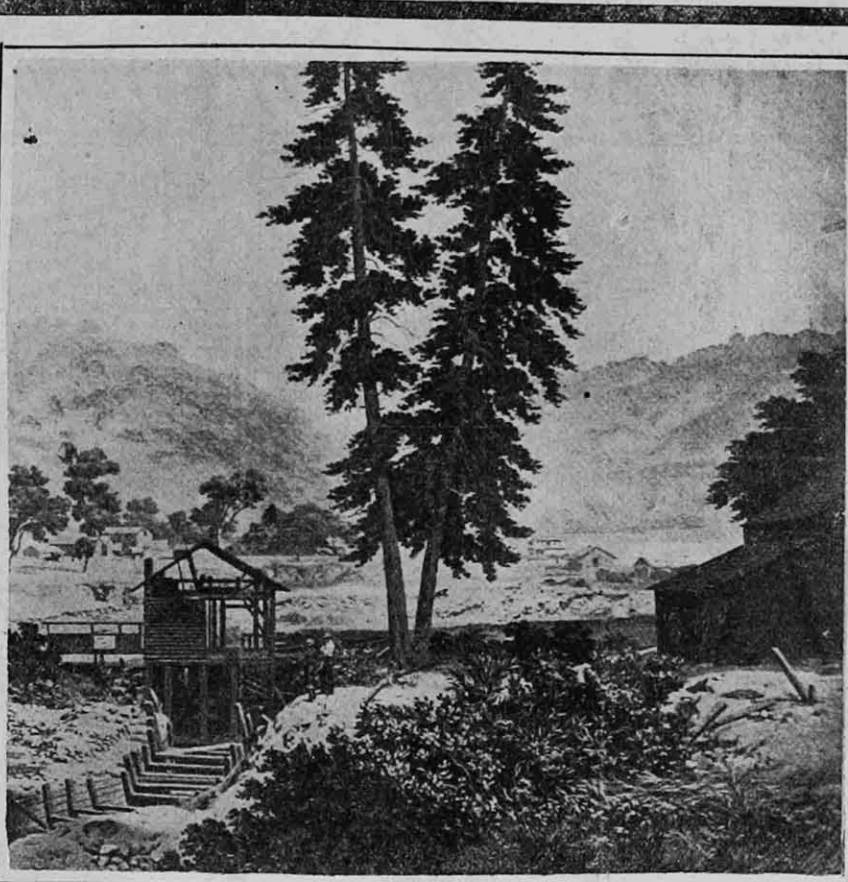
THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENED.

If something unforeseen had not happened just then, the people of today would not be celebrating the 24th of July as Utah's birthday, and possibly the figures 1846 would now be adorning the great seal of the state in place of the year which is there commemorated at present.

This "something unforeseen" was just about the most improbable event that could have occurred. Any number of unlooked-for incidents might have come between them and the accomplishment of their plan—any number of incidents which while perhaps unexpected could not be deemed wholly unlikely. But this was none of these. It could only be compared as a surprise to that oft-quoted phenomenon—a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

What was it? One day in the latter part of June a captain of dragoons, U. S. army, rode into one of the more permanent and populous camps of the Mormons on the prairies of Iowa, with a momentous message. He lost no time in making his business known to the leading men in the camp, who listened respectfully though with amazement, and treated him with every courtesy. They could only refer him to their leader who was at the time 140 miles away on the far western border of Iowa with another body of emigrants, encamped on the old-time council grounds of the Indians, along the bluffs overlooking the great river whose name being interpreted is "Big Muddy." The officer hastened westward with typical dragoon celerity, and on

Sutter's Mill in 1851



Surviving Members of The Mormon Battalion at The Old Fort's Gallery July 16th, Ogden, 1896

the first day of July his message was laid before the Mormon leader and his associates.

THE DRAGOON'S ERRAND.

"I have come among you to accept the service, for 12 months, of four or five companies of Mormon men for our present war with Mexico. They will be marched as infantry via Fort Leavenworth to join the army of the west at Santa Fe, and thence to California, where they will be discharged. I will receive healthy, able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 45; and hope to complete the enlistment of the force within a few days."

A brief argument as to the advantage to the emigrants in sending at government expense a portion of their young men in advance to the ultimate destination of the whole people; a terse statement of the conditions, as to pay, allowances, etc., under which the force would serve, with a passing allusion to the patriotic duty of supporting their country—such was the message set forth with military brevity and directness.

"You shall have your battalion," promptly answered Brigham Young; "you shall have the companies your requisition calls for, if we have to fill them up with Mormon elders. If young men enough are not forthcoming, we'll take the old men, and if they are not enough, we'll supply women to make up the deficiency," he added with a touch of serious humor. And so, the spiritual shepherds of the people acting as recruiting sergeants, the camps of the emigrants from the Missouri river to the Mississippi, clear across Iowa, were searched and scoured for "healthy, able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 45." Two weeks later an American flag was brought out from one of the wagons and lashed to a tree top. Beneath its folds were mustered into the service of the United States five companies consisting of 400 men not counting officers, non-commissioned officers and musicians. Including these, and some women and children, who accompanied the command, the former probably carried on the rolls as laundresses (of which, under the order for the enlistment of the force, four were to be permitted to each company), and counting in a few who were classed as officers' servants, the total force numbered 549.

FAREWELL DANCE AT THE BLUFFS.

Thus was brought into existence the famous

Mormon Battalion. Its members were sworn into the service on the 16th of July. A farewell afternoon ball was given in their honor in the bowery at the Bluffs, where to improvised music the last sad hours of parting were danced away with at least the semblance of gaiety. On Monday, the 20th they took up the journey southward along the east bank of the Missouri. The morning came on wet and gloomy, with a heavy rainstorm—as if the heavens themselves were moved to tears—but in the afternoon, the musicians striking up, "The Girl I Left Behind Me," the gallant volunteers marched gaily away and made a few miles through mud and sand before going into camp for the night. The trumpet and drum, with heads up and swinging military step, do not always signify buoyant spirits. They are sometimes put forth to conceal the utmost heaviness of the heart's despair. The reader will realize which was the case in the present instance.

NOTHING LEFT TO EXPLORE WITH.

The male strength and flower of their camps having thus "gone off to the war"—the old men and striplings remaining were hardly the sort of material from which to select an exploring advance party for the rugged journey of a thousand miles still further west. So all thoughts were turned to gathering up the scattered emigrants into settlements, and preparing with shelter, fuel and foodstuff for the winter. For that year, at any rate, there could be no more expedition to the Rocky Mountains. And that is how July, 1847, came after all to be the date celebrated as Utah's birthday.

ON TO LEAVENWORTH.

On the morning of the third day after leaving the Bluffs, the Battalion boys were called upon to perform the first sad duty of the burial of a comrade, who had died the previous midnight. Wrapped in his blanket, and placed in a rough lumber coffin, he was lowered into a lonely prairie grave. Next day they camped in Missouri, and were beginning already to feel the inconvenience of short rations through the non-arrival of supplies. Parched corn supplied a few scant meals to some—others went more than once supperless to bed. The ninth day out they marched past the town of "St. Joe" even then a place of some importance, keeping time to their favorite tune,

"The Girl I Left Behind Me." The next day they came opposite Fort Leavenworth, and were five hours in crossing the river and making their way to the post. Here they received their tents and the balance of their equipment, and went into camp on the public square within the fort. Most of the arms issued were flint-lock muskets, but as a special favor,—for hunting and sharp-shooting purposes—a few cap-lock "saunders" were distributed. In drill, outfitting and the usual routine of garrison duty 10 days were spent; and then the orders were to take up the line of march to Santa Fe.

WHY THIS BATTALION.

It is quite plain to the reader why this Mormon Battalion had been enlisted, and what was meant by the recruiting officer's allusion to their march to and disbandment in California? What was this "army of the west," which they were to join at Santa Fe, and what was it expected to do, and what were they expected to do, after they did join it?

The annexation of Texas in 1845 had given Mexico cause for hard feelings against the United States; but those feelings were not sufficiently acute to find expression in an actual declaration of immediate war. In the early spring of 1846, however, the situation became more strained by reason of the occupation, by United States troops, of certain disputed territory on the Texan frontier. This was too much for Mexican pride and dignity to stand—it was like adding insult to injury. In April she began hostilities, a proceeding on her part which was not at all terrifying to the United States, but on the other hand quite acceptable, especially to the south, which section was inclined to welcome any proposition, even war, that offered opportunity for the extension of slavery. Before Mexico's troops had fairly begun to administer the chastisement she thought the United States needed, a military minion of the latter, Zachary Taylor by name, a really energetic and combative sort of gentleman, entered upon the scene. In two smashing battles early in May he sent the Mexicans flying back homeward across the Rio Grande—which seemed to a good many, among the Mexicans particularly, an appropriate time and place to consider the war ended.

GOOD TIME TO QUIT, BUT—

But it didn't end with the victories at Palo Alto

and Resaca de la Palma. American destiny and power were not to be pent up or prevented from reaching the Pacific. It is well to recall that at this time what Mexico did not own or claim in the western part of the present United States, England did. The latter regarded the vast region known as Oregon as hers. Everything south of that and west of the Rio Grande was considered Mexico. Accordingly not only California, but Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada and at least the southern part of Colorado were the prize that a successful war held out. Furthermore, England was understood to be casting envious eyes upon California. If she acquired it, she might become a troublesome, as she certainly was a powerful neighbor. Much easier, argued the American jingoes of the period, to follow up the successes against Mexico now and wrest from her the imperial provinces of New Mexico and California, than to allow England to acquire anything more on the Pacific coast than she already had.

NO HITCH IN PROGRAM.

So Congress voted ten million dollars for war purposes, and President Polk was authorized to call for fifty thousand volunteers. Then the military authorities sat down and figured out an extensive plan of campaign. General Taylor who had already done so well along the Rio Grande was to continue his operations in that region. General Scott was to invade the enemy's country from the Gulf coast and carry his victorious banners to the very walls of the city of the Montezumas. General Kearney was to cut his way through the northern provinces, while Taylor and Scott had the enemy otherwise engaged, conquer, and take possession of them, planting the Stars and Stripes on the Pacific coast itself. His was to be the "army of the west." This was the army for which the Mormon Battalion was recruited. Prior to this enlargement of his powers Kearney was colonel commanding the Second United States dragoons. It was one of his captains who had visited the Mormon camps in Iowa, as mustering officer, and who, upon completing the enlistment of four companies necessary to constitute a battalion, was authorized to assume command of the force with the rank and pay of a lieutenant-colonel. This volunteer force was to proceed through an enemy's country to effect a junction with the general at the capital of that enemy's territory. From that capital after such incidental fighting as might be necessary to clear its pathway, the army was to be led along to California. The plan of campaign did not seem to contemplate anything else than victory all along the line, so the time of enlistment of the Battalion was given as 12 months and its place of disbandment as California, having reached which region it was confidently anticipated that the war would be over and the volunteers no more needed.

Generally speaking the plan was carried out according to program. There were inevitably some slight variations, but these, it is only courteous to the enemy, to say, were not due to any unforeseen activity or achievements of his. So far as the working out of the scheme was concerned, the Mexicans might about as well have been left out of consideration altogether, for they did not particularly hinder it, and of course they were not expected to help it. They were hardly important enough to be deemed even supernumeraries in the presentation of the drama. They might be regarded more correctly as an audience which had the highest-priced seats in the house but didn't like the piece.

FORWARD TO SANTA FE.

"Forward march!" rang out the command which put the column in motion on the 12th of August. On the 15th they crossed the Kaw or Kansas river, and continued on in a southwesterly direction by stages which, while not long for seasoned men in moderate weather, were very trying to those recruits on account of the great heat. There was much sickness and an occasional death. Those who, in addition to the chills and fever, had to take the surgeon's invariable dose of calomel, had all they could do to pull through—for some of them the struggle was too severe, and they succumbed. On the 2nd of September the detachment entered the Comanche Indian territory, the Indians being very hostile at the time. On the 5th they first saw buffalo. About the 8th they received word by courier of the surrender of Santa Fe to Gen. Kearney without resistance; also instructions to proceed direct to that point instead of via Fort Bent as previously ordered. Still traveling southwesterly, the command reached and crossed the Arkansas on the 11th, after many hardships and the sending of one detachment of invalids and women north to Pueblo along the Arkansas river. The main body reached Santa Fe in October, the vanguard on the 9th, the remainder on the 12th. Their Lieut. Col. Cooke assumed command, and his first order thereafter directed the return to Pueblo of another invalid detachment of 88 men and nearly all the women—the intention being to push on without delay over the remaining 1,100 miles of the journey.

A TERRIBLE MARCH.

For this tremendous march there were wholly inadequate transportation facilities and even insufficient rations, so it was decided that only the most vigorous should be permitted to undertake it. The new commander was a bluff, strict disciplinarian, but impartial, resourceful and just. He placed the men on part rations, looked closely after the lightening and equalizing of the loads, and gave generally experienced and beneficial personal supervision to every detail. All the remainder of that month the troops toiled the weary days through heavy sand. With the advent of November came worse weather, worse roads and a yet further reduction in rations. On the 10th, 55 more sick men were sent back, via Santa Fe, to Pueblo for the winter. The main body, much reduced in number and still more reduced in vitality, heroically pushed on, now leaving stock, now wagons, some days without water, all days without sufficient flour or vegetable food. Toward the end of November they reached the base of the continental divide, the water flowing from the one side into the Gulf of Mexico, from the other into the Pacific ocean. On the 28th, they reached the summit or backbone; and if the ascent had been hazardous and difficult, the descent looked impossible. Col. Cooke figured that it would require from five to ten days to make the distance of six miles into the valley visible below. The command, after three cold days spent on the summit, accomplished the descent in two, long ropes being attached to the wagons which the emaciated men held and steadied and at last lowered in safety.

WILD CATTLE CURE.

December 2nd, they came to a deserted rancho where they had hoped to replenish their commissary stores, but were of course disappointed. Here too they came in contact with the first wild Mexican cattle. One long horned prince of the herd was brought down only after six half-course balls, each penetrating a vital place, had been spent on him. He was fat and round, with a royal spread of horns six feet from tip to tip. Here seemed to be an abundance of fresh beef any way, when to the men's dismay an order from

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