

The Face of Fillmore

By Sherry Shepard

The recent winter storms have reminded me of one of the earliest written records of explorers and would-be settlers to the East Millard area. It tells of a tremendously brutal winter environment which caused a great deal of suffering for the travelers of Southern Expedition under the direction of the Apostle Parley P. Pratt. Pratt, who was chosen by Brigham Young for the assignment, selected his party carefully. It included surveyors, Indian scouts, hunters, clerks, and others with specific assignments. They were charged to return with "recommendations for town sites, to maintain a complete records of soil conditions, topography, streams, timber, vegetation, pasture lands and other natural resources" needed to establish communities.

The exploration group set out on November 24, 1849 with twelve large wagons, numerous horses, and forty-seven men.

The party faced a particularly harsh winter as it headed south crossing into what became Sanpete County and then traveling south through Sevier, Piute and Garfield Counties, following the Sevier River. The pass over the mountains into the future site of Parowan was especially difficult. From there, they follow the recently-established trail of those headed to the Gold Rush in California, continuing south as far as St. George.

On January 14, 1850, the group turned around had headed back north on what would be a miserable last leg of their journey. They traveled forward in a terrible snowstorm, eventually seeking rest and what sparse shelter they could find in the Sulpherdale area. They remained there for two days then pushed their exhausted animals on to a camp site about 10 miles west of the Cove Creek Crossing. The following day they trudged on to a spot near an Indian encampment on Corn Creek. Here they were forced to leave some of their draft animals that had become too exhausted and weak to travel on.

On January 21, they reach Chalk Creek and here they held a council meeting. It was recorded in the minutes of that meeting: "Our provisions would only sustain half of us until spring and it is impossible to travel with the wagons. We decided on leaving half of the company to winter there with the wagons and cattle and the other half with some of the strongest mules and horses should attempt to reach Provo." Those who were to remain were mostly young men without families, with David Fullmer in charge.

The next morning the group of 24 men and 26 horses and mules continued north through the deep snow. Nine miles up the trail Pratt himself said, he was "unable to sit any longer on my mule or stand on my feet." For five more days the company traveled in often four-foot deep snow.

Snow again blanketed the group near the present-day Juab/Millard County line. The sleeping men were under mounds of snow as morning came. Someone began shoveling out the men, but it was too difficult. In Pratt's words, "Raising my voice like a trumpet, I commanded that all should arise, when all at once there was a shaking among the piles of snow and the graves opened. All came forth." They called this Resurrection Camp.

With provisions nearly gone and the men spent from exertion, it was decided that Pratt and Chauncey West should take the two strongest horses and push through to Utah Valley, still fifty miles away. Before leaving Pratt praised his men for their "patience and obedience" and noted that "such difficulties they had faced would have killed lesser men."

Pratt and West reached Provo as temperatures plummeted to thirty degrees below zero. A rescue party was dispatched within hours to find the stranded men. Several of the group suffered permanent damage from frostbite. The advanced party reached Salt Lake City by February 1.

Those who remained at Chalk Creek were divided into groups of tens and tried to use their time as productively as possible. They constructed "cellar houses" in the banks of the creek with roofs and chimneys. These were used for storage and preparing food. They also spent time repairing wagons and each made snowshoes to help get around in the deep snow.

The stranded group left their camp along the banks of Chalk Creek on February 7, 1850. It took them seven weeks with the wagons to get to Salt Lake City. When they arrived, Brigham Young dismissed the meeting he was attending to immediately hear the report of the party.

Of the entire group, Charles Hopkins who turned 40 along the trail, was the only one to return to the area to live out his life. He was one of the first settlers of Petersburg, later renamed Kanosh. Hopkins died in 1863.

George Matson, another member of the party, returned to Fillmore to help build the Territorial Capitol but moved to Springville when he was finished with it to live there with his family.

