



Cover Story

Never before in U.S. history had there been a military unit like the Mormon Battalion. Their march across the U.S. was historic. What they accomplished during and after their grueling 2000-mile trek to San Diego was unprecedented and unrivaled. The impact of their service changed the history of California and the U.S.

At Council Bluffs, Iowa in June of 1846, U.S. Army Captain James Allen, representing President James Polk, recruited into military service, 500 men and 38 women as laundresses. They had been traveling west with their families to the Great Salt Lake Valley under the leadership of President Brigham Young. Young and his group were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, nick-named “Mormons.” Severe religious persecution had forced them to relocate to the West. President Polk saw these able-bodied men as a ready-made military unit which could reinforce the Army of the West in California and a resource for building roads.

Service that Changed History

Never before in U.S. history had there been a military unit like the Mormon Battalion.

The Battalion left Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in July of 1846. Traveling on foot, they fulfilled their assignment to build a wagon road from Santa Fe to San Diego. They fought no battles but became peace-keepers in Southern California. They befriended the local citizens by giving service including white-washing almost every building in town. Many were skilled craftsmen. They built a brick kiln, then made and fired 40,000 bricks. They used the bricks to line new wells they had dug for the community and built the first fired-brick building which was used as a school and the first U.S. courthouse in California.

When it was time for re-assignment, the citizens did not want the Battalion to leave. A prominent citizen, Mrs. Bandini gave a touching speech on July 4, 1847 stating their feelings. A Battalion member, Henry G. Boyle recorded, “The citizens became so attached to us that...they got up a petition to the governor...to use his influence to keep us in the service...[it] was signed by every citizen in town.”

But it was not to be. The Battalion was ordered to finish building Fort Moore in Los Angeles. After mustering out of the Army just a few weeks later, some re-enlisted as the Mormon Volunteers and went back to San Diego. Others went north; 112 were hired by John Sutter, six of whom built the sawmill at Coloma

for James Marshall where gold was discovered. After participating in that gold discovery, they made the second and largest gold find of the Gold Rush on an island in the American River. In spite of their lucrative find, they left it for something more precious to them—they left to rejoin their families, many still camped on the plains of Iowa. Heading east, they carved the first road, known as the Mormon Emigrant Trail, through the Sierra Nevada Mountains which became the “Forty-niner’s Highway.” This opened Northern California to the Gold Rush. Over 50,000 wagons and 200,000 people used this trail during that time. A few years later, returning Battalion veterans developed an all-weather freighting road through the Cajon pass in the San Bernardino Mountains to Los Angeles.

Their legacy was road building and service. They helped to open the West for travel and commerce and helped fulfill President Polk’s dream for “manifest destiny.” The maps they created during their march became the basis for the Gadsden Purchase. There were few major events in the early history of the West that did not involve the Mormon Battalion.

This incredible saga is being preserved today for posterity at the new Mormon Battalion Historic Site in Old Town San Diego, where the Battalion served.

Article by Marilyn Mills

Norma B. Ricketts, The Mormon Battalion, U.S. Army of the West, 1846-1848, Logan, Utah State University Press, 1996.
Daniel S. Tyler, Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, Salt Lake City, 1881.



New Historic Site Opens in Old Town

The history of the Mormon Battalion, Army of the West, steps out of the 1840’s and into the multi-media world of the 21st century at the new Mormon Battalion Historic Site in Old Town .

The 40-minute tour begins in the courtyard of a California rancho from the 1800’s reproduced in great detail. Visitors will literally experience the history through exciting new technologies in cinema and special effects. Additionally, a resource room has been designed with interactive touch screen computers to allow for research on individual members of the Battalion. The Historic Site also has artifacts on display that were carried into San Diego by the Battalion as well as hands-on activities including gold panning, brick making, and dressing up in period clothing. Visitors may also pose for a free “old-time” photograph at the center which can then be emailed to any destination of their choice.

The Mormon Battalion Historic Site is located at 2510 Juan Street. It is open daily 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM, every day of the year including holidays. Large groups should make reservations by phoning 619-298-3317.