

“Without Fear or Thought of Danger”: The Accidental Drowning of Mormon Teamsters at the Green River Ferry

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*We the boys of sanpete County
In Obedience to the Call
Started out with forty wagons
To bring in Emigrants this fall
Without fear or thought of danger
On our way we lightly sped
Every heart with joy abounding
Captain Seely at our head¹*

The lyrics of this song were composed by members of Mormon companies who tried to cross a spring runoff-swollen Green River on 25 June 1868.² They were teamsters headed east to meet and assist immigrants traveling to Utah. On that eventful day, they saw six of their number drown while trying to cross the raging river on a ferry. The words of this song and other contemporary records detail the story of this tragic, accidental drowning. This day of death takes on added significance when placed in the context of other accidental drownings during the years of overland Mormon travel. From 1847 to 1868, a total of eleven accidental drownings occurred in westbound Mormon immigrant companies.³ In one brief, horrific moment in 1868, full of fear and unexpected danger, more than half that total lost their lives in the onrushing waters of a cold river in southwestern Wyoming.

Between 1861 and 1868, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints successfully used the “down-and-back” method to gather thousands of Saints to Zion. Those who lent the Church wagons, teams and teamsters, and provisions to help bring immigrants to Utah received tithing credit. Women donated supplies that the teamsters could use—things like pots and

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plates and needle and thread. A trail historian noted that, with this method, there was “practically no cash cost to the Church.”⁴ Early in 1868, wards in southern Idaho and Utah were asked to furnish and outfit “500 four-yoke teams to start for the terminus in time to reach there about the middle of July” to meet the immigrants.⁵ With the completion of the transcontinental railroad, 1868 would be the final year for Mormon immigrant travel with wagons.

*To accomplish the mission
We were Called to fill below
Left our friends and wives and Children
On the dreary plains to go*

One of the companies was led by Bishop William S. Seeley of Mount Pleasant. He left Sanpete County with a contingent of thirty wagons, 242 oxen, thirty teamsters, and four night guards.⁶ Nine other mule and ox trains, totaling five hundred teams, left settlements from as far south as Beaver and St. George. They did not all start or leave at the same time, as they intended to travel independently to the rail terminus to meet the immigrants. As the railroad track progressed further west, the terminus changed locations. Some of the immigrants got only as far as Laramie, Wyoming, where they met the wagon companies. Other later-arriving immigrants were able to ride the train 125 miles farther to Benton where they met their wagons. Some eastbound companies, including Seeley’s Sanpete wagon train, passed through Salt Lake City first. Viewing this as a mission of service, some of the young men received their temple endowments before leaving with their wagon company. When John Johnson, a teamster with Holman’s company from Utah County, arrived in Salt Lake, he went to the Endowment House where he participated in the temple rites and ordinances. He explained: “It was cu[s]tomary for the missionaries to have that don before leaving whether it was a laborin or priching mission.”⁷ Having arrived in Salt Lake on 14 June, Seeley’s team left the following day going by way of Parley’s Canyon to meet the immigrants. The *Deseret Evening News* wished them a speedy, pleasant, and “safe” trip.⁸

Chester Loveland’s wagon train from northern Utah did not go to Salt Lake City. The road through Weber Canyon was their most direct route to connect with the road to the east. Loveland’s company assembled at the mouth of Weber Canyon where they listened attentively to a letter from Brigham Young. He warned them that the trip would be dangerous. It is recalled that he wrote, “If you will obey counsel and each of you pray when called upon, night and morning, and will not play cards, drink whiskey, or

profane the name of the Lord, you shall go in peace and return in safety.”⁹ For six of the east-bound teamsters, the hazards Brigham Young warned about proved deadly.

*Over hills and lofty mountains
Through the mud and in the dust
Slowly Climbed the lofty mountain
Far above the snows white Crust
With the sun to set declining
glad to welcome closing day
By some stream or gushing fountain
To refresh all night we stay*

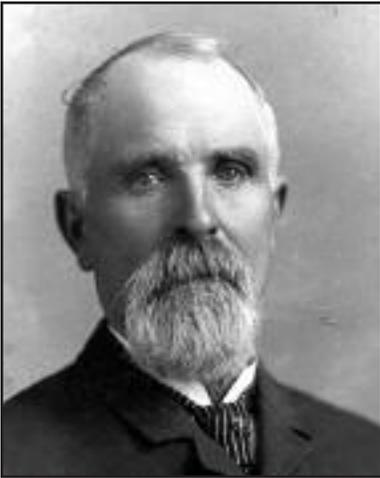


Fording the Platte River.

*Although not the Green River, this image and a following picture depict the perils the teamsters would have faced at Green River Ferry.
Courtesy Church Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.*

The out-and-back companies were generally organized with a captain, an assistant captain, and four night guards. The teams were divided into groups of tens with a cook selected for each ten and the other nine men tending the oxen and sharing camp duties. The night guards worked in two shifts to prevent the livestock from straying and to guard against rustling or thievery. After the teamsters ate their breakfast, they yoked up the oxen while the guards had something to eat, following which the company rolled

out. There was little variety in the three meals: breakfast, mid-day dinner, and supper. For a quick and easy breakfast, they usually just had hot pone, which was a fried cornmeal cake or bread. For dinner and supper, they had hot pone again, slathered with some bacon grease that served as a kind of butter or sop. Sometimes they added a little water to the standard pone recipe and thickened it with flour, making what they called “dundy-funk” or “skilligalee.” Potatoes, dried or stewed peaches, and homemade sorghum supplemented with fresh beef and wild game constituted the bill of fare. Water from streams and rivers was the sole beverage.¹⁰



*John R. Murdock.
Courtesy Church Archives,
Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter-day Saints.*

In traveling up Echo Canyon, the wagon companies passed Union Pacific Railroad grading camps. While camped in Echo Canyon, wagers were made in John R. Murdock’s company to see who was the fastest runner among the boys from Fillmore and Beaver.¹¹ When the European immigrants first met the Mormon boys who were sent to help bring them to Utah, they were astonished at their rough frontier ways and profane language. One Welshman was shocked at seeing them indulge in a stag dance that he considered “uncouth.” He was also shocked at their language. It ran counter to his expectations, assuming that he would “find the people of Zion almost perfect.” The Mormon boys, most of whom were single young

men, indeed did have some rough edges, but they were good-intentioned and large-hearted—and the immigrants “shortly became one with them.”¹²

*When we reached green river ferry
On its banks all night we stay
Next morning ferried our wagons over
Thinking soon to roll away
Next to drive our Cattle over
But we found they would not swim
Though the boys were in the water
Many hours up to the Chin*

Although the streams and rivers were very high with the spring runoff, none were formidable until Green River above the mouth of Big Sandy.



Crossing the Platte River.

Courtesy Church Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Lewis Robison operated a ferry at the point on the trail where it crossed the river. He spent his winters in Pleasant Grove and operated a ferry on the Green River from 1856 until some years after the completion of the transcontinental railroad. In 1868, the river was extraordinarily high and fast-running compared with other years. At many places along the river, it had overflowed its banks. One company that crossed the river twenty-five miles downstream from the ferry “had to travel in water from two to three feet deep for a mile or more.”¹³

At the ferry location, the river was about two hundred yards wide and eight to twelve feet deep. Robison’s ferryboat was a flat-bottomed raft approximately 35 by 50 feet in size. It could transport a couple of wagons, several men, and about three yoke of oxen at a time. A taut, three-inch-diameter rope was securely staked to the bank on each side of the river. The flatboat was anchored to this thick guideline by means of pulleys and ropes affixed to the bow and stern. By loosening the stern rope and employing the force of the current, the men could easily maneuver the flatboat from shore to shore.¹⁴

*While the boat was passing Over
The water into it did pour
The Captain cried boys wel’ire going under
We shall sink this very hour*

Several of the wagon companies arrived at the ferry about the same time. These included Seeley's company, Simpson Molen's train from Hyde Park, and Chester Loveland's wagon company from Brigham City (including teamsters from northern and central Utah). On the evening of 24 June, they began ferrying the wagons across the river. By the next day, 25 June, all the wagons had been safely ferried across the river. Then, they tried to swim the cattle across the river. The cattle would swim a short way across and then return to the western shore, forced back by high winds and a very strong current. The teamsters kept trying to get the cattle to swim across, but it was futile. After an ox drowned, the teamsters finally decided that they would have to ferry the animals across. They successfully ferried one load across and returned to the western shore to bring a second load across. They loaded the boat with oxen and nineteen men who were exhausted and cold from trying earlier to swim their cattle. They wanted to cross the river to get dry clothing from their wagons on the eastern shore. When they were about two-thirds of the way across the river, two yoke of oxen became excited and started pushing their way to the upper side of the boat. The teamsters rushed to quiet them. This sudden, uneven distribution of weight caused the flatboat to tilt under the fast-moving current, and all the men and cattle were thrown into the river. The pressure on the submerged flatboat put such a strain on the thick guideline rope that it broke, and the boat floated away.

*One had landed on an island
 Clinging to the willow green
 But with him life soon extinguished
 Backwards fell into the stre[am]
 Thus six boys from parents [d]riven
 And from friends whom they did love
 But we yet again shall meet them
 In that better world above*

The teamsters and men were swept downstream in the fast-moving current. Floundering in the water, some were able to cling to the horns of oxen while others grabbed on to planks and boards. A few were able to climb back on the flatboat, from which they threw out ropes to those coursing downstream. To others they voiced words of encouragement to hang on to their timbers and planks and steer for the nearest bank. They finally landed the flatboat on the eastern bank about a mile downstream. Across from where the boat lodged was a small island on which they found Julius Johnson, who had come ashore at that point after floating on a piece of timber. Robison, who had followed the flatboat down the river on the bank, was the first to arrive at the flatboat and to assist others. When heads were counted, six men



Green River, Wyoming.

Courtesy Church Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

were missing. This accident caused the death of six men and three oxen—all drowned.¹⁵

The men who drowned were Niels Christoffersen and Peter Smith, from Manti; Peter Nielson, from Fairview; Christian P. Jensen and Jens Christian Nybolle, from Mount Pleasant; and Thomas Yeates, from Millville, Cache county.¹⁶ Although the song leaves the impression that all the men who drowned were teamsters in Seeley's company, two were teamsters traveling with other companies. Nielson was a teamster in Captain Loveland's company, and Yeates traveled in Captain Molen's company.¹⁷

Another company of east-bound, down-and-back teamsters reached Green River three days following this drowning accident. They found Seeley's company still there looking for "the bodies of their comrades." William Lindsay thought that some "were never found although the river & its banks were searched for miles."¹⁸ Thomas Yeates's body was found a month later. They found his badly decomposed body on the west side of the river and buried it there.¹⁹ Lindsay's own company also had difficulties in getting across. It took them almost two full days to get their four hundred head of oxen over. One man narrowly escaped drowning by grabbing hold of an ox's tail as he was being carried downstream. Another teamster riding a horse against the upstream current was kicked by his horse when the two were overturned by the raging current, but others nearby saved him and helped him out. Scottish-born Lindsay expressed his relief after surviving this harrowing river crossing: "I tell you we were all thankful & happy when everything was landed safely on the other side."²⁰ Although the crossing of

Green River in 1868 was extremely dangerous for all east-bound Mormon teamsters, it proved fatal for six unfortunate men.²¹ Their fellow teamsters' only consolation was that they would "meet them" in a "better world" hereafter.

When Captain Seeley returned home to Mount Pleasant in early September, he brought with him a number of emigrants who wanted to make their home in that Sanpete Valley town. Also returning with him were just nine of the eleven young men from Mount Pleasant who had gone east in 1868 to assist emigrants.²² Sorrowfully absent from this returning group were Christian Jensen and Christian Nybolle, both only sons in their respective families, victims of the roiling waters of Green River. Seeley, the surviving teamsters, and the emigrants were met at the crossing of the Sanpitch River by the Mount Pleasant Brass Band and at the entrance to town by a gathering of Sunday School children. In the evening they were feted at a grand welcome party given in their honor.²³ Several months had passed since the drowning. At least for the community if not yet for the effected individual families, grieving times had been replaced with thankfulness and joy for those who had returned home. But the accident that had taken the lives of several Mormon teamsters lived on for years in the words of the song about "the boys of Sanpete County." Thomas Bingham, whose out-and-back company reached Green River a day after the drowning accident, "learned the words and used to sing the song."²⁴ The song was sung in Mormon gatherings for years. It was sung not only in Sanpete Valley, where it memorialized a tragic event of local import, but throughout the Church.²⁵ For these six Mormon "missionary" martyrs who drowned at Green River in 1868, "The Boys of Sanpete County" song similarly served like the hymn "Come, Come, Ye Saints" does for the pioneers—to memorialize their sacrifice.

Notes

1. "The Green River Song" was written about 1868, holograph, LDS Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives). Published versions of this song, some with slightly different words, may be found in *Pioneer Songs*, comp. Daughters of Utah Pioneers and arranged by Alfred M. Durham (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1940), 150–51; *Songs of the American West*, comp. and ed. Richard E. Lingenfelter, Richard A. Dwyer, and David Cohen (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1968), 254–55; Thomas E. Cheney, *Mormon Songs from the Rocky Mountains: A Compilation of Mormon Folksong* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1981), 128–29; and Lester A. Hubbard, ed., *Ballads and Songs from Utah* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1961), 404. A recording on compact disk is also available: Beehive Band, *Hymns, Songs, and Fiddle Tunes of the Utah Pioneers* (Salt Lake City: Honeybee Recordings, 1997). "The Green River Song" manuscript is lacking some of the

verses that appear in lyrics in the Daughters of Utah Pioneers version in *Pioneer Songs*. The missing lyrics are verses four, six, and the last four lines of verse five. All verses quoted in this article are taken from "The Green River Song" manuscript.

2. The prefatory note to the lyrics in *Pioneer Songs*, entitled "The Boys of Sanpete County," states that the song was composed by members of the companies who were at Green River when this accident occurred. Thomas Bingham, an out-and-back teamster in John Gillespie's company, reached the river the day after the accident. He stated that the song was composed by a single teamster who was "in the train in which the boys were drowned." In his history, he recorded a variant remembered version of the song. "History of Thomas Bingham Sr. and Thomas Bingham, Jr." Transcription available online from: <http://homepages.rootsweb.com/~dagjones/docs/History%20of%20Thomas%20Bingham%20Sr%20&%20Jr.doc>.

3. The number of drowning deaths comes from the author's study of mortality on the Mormon Trail.

4. William G. Hartley, "The Great Florence Fitout of 1861," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 3 (summer 1984): 346.

5. Brigham Young to Franklin D. Richards, 28 March 1868, in *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 30, no. 18 (2 May 1868): 284.

6. Perpetual Emigration Fund Company, Financial Accounts, microfilm of holograph, fd. 80, 89–90, LDS Church Archives.

7. John Johnson, Reminiscence, photocopy of holograph, LDS Church Archives.

8. "Trains Starting," *Deseret Evening News*, 16 June 1868, 3; and "Leaving," *Salt Lake Daily Reporter*, 15 June 1868, 2.

9. W. D. Cranney, Reminiscence, in *Willard Duane Cranney, Sr.: His Life and Letters*, comp., Harriet Hinckley Eliason, vol. 1 (W. D. Cranney, Sr. Family Association, 1957), 10.

10. Don Johnson, Reminiscence, *Journal History of the Church*, 2 September 1868, 3–5, LDS Church Archives (hereafter cited as *Journal History*).

11. David D. Bulloch, "Recollections of David D. Bulloch," in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 20 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1975), 18:226.

12. Albert R. Lyman, "An Appreciation and a Biographical Sketch of Benjamin Perkins, 1936," typescript copy, 5, LDS Church Archives.

13. Bulloch, Reminiscence in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 18:226.

14. Information about Robison's ferry is found in Don Johnson, Reminiscence, *Journal History*, 2 September 1868, 10–11. For information about ferries and the hazards of crossing streams and rivers on overland journeys, see Audrey M. Godfrey, "All Are Safely Across," *Nauvoo Journal* 10, no. 1 (spring 1998): 53–65.

15. A contemporary report giving the sequence of events of this river-crossing accident is E. T. Mumford to Brigham Young, 25 June 1868, Robinson's [sic] Ferry, in "Correspondence," *Deseret Evening News*, 29 June 1868, 3. Additional details were found in "The Boys of Sanpete County," *Pioneer Songs*, 150–51; Don Johnson, Reminiscence, *Journal History*, 2 September 1868, 10–11; Orson F. Whitney, *History of Utah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1904), 4:123; and James Albert Jones, *Some Early Pioneers of Huntington, Utah and Surrounding Area* (1980), 158. Whitney's *History of Utah* states that the flatboat traveled downstream three miles.

16. Church and genealogical records were searched to try to identify these drowning victims. Yeates, a son of George and Mary Yeates, was twenty-seven, English-born, and unmarried. Records of the Millville Ward mention that he "Drowned in Green River Going for Saints." Millville Ward Record of Members, 14, LDS Church Archives. Peter P. Smith, a son of Albert and Sophia Smith, was Danish-born and twenty-one years old.

Nybolle, son of Rasmus and Hedevig Nybolle, was also Danish-born and twenty-one years old according to records of the Mount Pleasant Ward and Ancestral File database. Christian Jensen, unmarried, was the only son in his family according to Hilda Madsen Longsdorf, *Mount Pleasant, 1859–1939* (Mt. Pleasant Pioneer Historical Association, 1939), 124. Vital details were not found for Nielson or Christoffersen.

17. Lists of teamsters in Loveland's and Molen's companies can be found in Perpetual Emigration Fund Company, Financial Accounts, microfilm of holograph, fd. 80, 85–86, 93–94, LDS Church Archives.

18. William Lindsay, Reminiscence, microfilm of holograph, LDS Church Archives.

19. See "Body Found," *Deseret Evening News*, 7 August 1868, 3; and "Recognized," *Deseret Evening News*, 10 August 1868, 3.

20. See "Body Found," *Deseret Evening News*, 7 August 1868, 3; "Recognized," *Deseret Evening News*, 10 August 1868, 3.

21. Other accounts of near drownings in other companies may be found in John Johnson, Reminiscence, LDS Church Archives; and William Van Orden Carbine, Autobiography, in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 20 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1963), 6:212.

22. For a list of all the east-bound missionaries from Mount Pleasant in 1868, see Mt. Pleasant Ward, Historical Record, 1858-1871, p. 79, Church Archives.

23. Longsdorf, *Mount Pleasant, 1859-1939*, 124.

24. "History of Thomas Bingham Sr. and Thomas Bingham, Jr."

25. Cheney, *Mormon Songs from the Rocky Mountains*, 128.