

THE *Honeymoon* Trail

by Kenneth Mays

The story of Arizona's "Honeymoon Trail" is attributed to the hundreds of Latter-day Saints who followed it between 1877–1927 from areas of Arizona to be married in the St. George Temple.

The trail ran through the desert, "winding through steep canyons, crossing barren plateaus, and passing by rivers and pools of undrinkable water."¹ As historian Norma Ricketts concluded, the "overall story encompassed more than couples traveling to St. George because of their religious beliefs. It is also the history of the settlements and the families who came south . . . at great sacrifice to colonize Arizona. Combining these stories . . . [provides] intimate details of everyday life, of struggles and challenges, survival and faith."²

Intrepid pathfinders like Jacob Hamblin had entered northern Arizona by the 1850s. By assignment from President Brigham Young, exploring parties from northern Utah ventured into northeastern Arizona as early as 1873. These pioneers came south through Kanab or nearby Johnson Canyon, continued on to Lee's Ferry, and finally

reached the sites of future settlements on the Little Colorado River and beyond. The trail they followed had various names, including "Old Arizona Road," "Old Mormon Road," and "Mormon Wagon Road."

Discouraged by the desolation and harshness of the region, these first explorers abandoned their efforts to settle and went their separate ways, reporting the sorry news of their failed adventure to their leaders and other interested parties.³ James Brown and others took a second look at the region in 1875. Their reports led to a call from Church leaders for the establishment of settlements along the lower Little Colorado River in eastern Arizona. A year later, a number of gritty pioneer families led by Lot Smith initiated the colonization of this forbidding area, on the Little Colorado including Camp Obed, Sunset, Brigham City, and Joseph City. Within a period of several years, other settlements were established along Silver Creek, a tributary of the Little Colorado.⁴

Unfriendly elements produced never-ending challenges to the settlers. In particular, the irascible nature of the Little Colorado River was the greatest obstacle to



The Honeymoon Trail

success. It could be a raging torrent destroying dams and dykes one day, and a useless bed of mud and quicksand the next: “too thin to plow but too thick to drink.”⁵ “The Little Colorado is a treacherous stream at best, with a broad channel that wanders at will through the alluvial country that melts like sugar or salt at the touch of water.”⁶ Ultimately, it overwhelmed three of those four settlements—only Joseph City remains today.

The year 1877 brought the dedication of the St. George Temple, giving the Saints the opportunity to be married for eternity—provided they could get there and back. These faithful souls believed so completely in the cogency of the temple ordinances that they braved a most difficult undertaking in order to participate in them—a moving story of faith, love, and commitment.

“I imagine,” says trail researcher, Jim Byrkit, “that, for most people, the expression ‘Honeymoon Trail’ referred to the entire journey to St. George from where they lived: St. Johns, Pima, Pine, Show Low, Mesa, or wherever.”⁷

Two major trail networks were used, “the longest trail leading to St. George amounted to a distance of more than four hundred miles. In addition, Arizona trails that fed into the main Mormon Wagon Road . . . collectively totaled more than three hundred miles.”⁸ One system of trails from eastern and southeastern Arizona merged with the old Mormon Wagon Road on the Little Colorado River. It was utilized by travelers from the Pima Valley, Snowflake, St. Johns, the White Mountains region, and western New Mexico. The other system, including the Chavez Trail, worked its way north from Phoenix and Mesa and merged with the Mormon Wagon Road at Sunset Crossing near present-day Winslow, Arizona.

Ricketts suggests that the beginning of the “Honeymoon Trail” was the junction of the Chavez Trail and the Mormon Wagon Road at Sunset Crossing. She asserts, “It is this common road from Sunset . . . to St. George, Utah, that usually is considered to be the ‘Honeymoon Trail.’”⁹

From Sunset, the route utilized the Mormon Wagon Road, following the west side of the Little Colorado River to Grand Falls, where they crossed to the east side of the river near present-day Cameron, Arizona. At that point, they left the river, trekked north past the Echo Cliffs and Bitter Springs, arriving at Lee’s Ferry to cross

the Colorado River. The trail then circumnavigated the Vermillion Cliffs, passing through House Rock Valley and on to Kanab. Travelers continued westward, seeking the welcome waters of Pipe Spring, as they braved the barrenness of the Arizona Strip, eventually sliding through Canaan Gap, down the Hurricane Fault and into Warner Valley. Continuing on, they likely passed Fort Pearce of the Utah Black Hawk War, with only another 15 miles or so to St. George.

“The round trip,” reports Dean Garrett, “sometimes took as long as six weeks, yet couples embarked on the trip willingly and gladly.”¹⁰ Garrett explains that those not yet married, either did so civilly before leaving or invited chaperones to go with them until they arrived at the temple to be married.

According to sources, the first trip made for the purpose of being sealed in the St. George Temple was from Snowflake, a settlement on Silver Creek. “Adolf Larsen (who married May Hunt) was captain of the first group. . . . During most of their twenty-day trip to St. George, they enjoyed fair weather. Adolf and May were married on October 26, 1881, and they were back in Snowflake by December 5, 1881.”¹¹

The difficult trek through rugged and forbidding country to the temple was evidence of those pioneers’ deep faith in the temple ordinances and the eternal nature of marriage. Their commitment provided a solid foundation to endure the sacrifices necessary in establishing their homes in a desert wilderness. There is much to be learned from their stories. ■

1 H. Dean Garrett, “The Honeymoon Trail,” *Ensign*, July 1989, 23.

2 Norma Baldwin Ricketts, ed., *Arizona’s Honeymoon Trail and Mormon Wagon Roads* (Mesa, Ariz.: Maricopa East Company, International Society, Daughters of Utah Pioneers, c2001 [Mesa, Ariz.: Cox Printing Co.]), xi.

3 George S. Tanner and J. Morris Richards, *Colonization on the Little Colorado: The Joseph City Region* (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland Press, 1977), 12.

4 Charles S. Peterson, *Take Up Your Mission: Mormon Colonizing along the Little Colorado River, 1870–1900* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1973), 46.

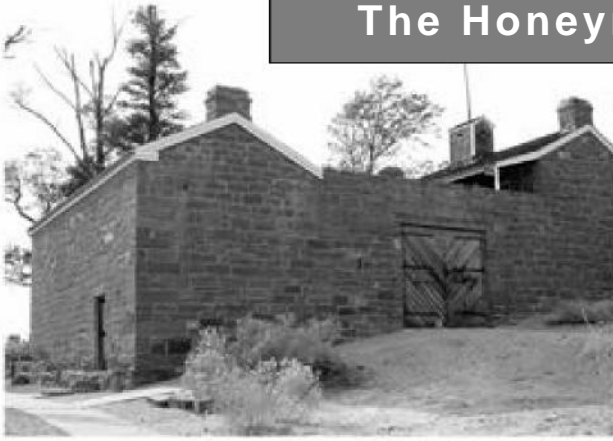
5 Ricketts, 9.

6 James H. McClintock, *Mormon Settlement in Arizona* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, c1985), 141.

7 Jim Byrkit, “Location of the Honeymoon Trail,” in Ricketts, *Arizona’s Honeymoon Trail*, 16.

8 *Ibid.*, 13. (continued on page 36 . . .)

The Honeymoon Trail



G. Winsor Castle



H. Canaan Gap



G. The Winsor Castle fort was constructed at Pipe Spring by the Latter-day Saints as part of a tithing ranch. Its walls offered protection for those raising cattle. Today, the site is a national monument. **H.** Canaan Gap is a unique natural feature near the present-day cities of Hilldale, Utah, and Colorado City, Arizona. Saints following the "Honeymoon Trail" passed through the gap prior to descending the Hurricane Fault on the way to the St. George Temple. **I.** The background view with "Honeymoon Trail" marker shows the Warner Valley from on top of the Hurricane Fault looking in the direction of the route to St. George. **J.** After descending the Hurricane Fault, the "Honeymoon Trail" passed along the Warner Valley Gap Road and Fort Pearce. This 1866 fort was named for John D. L. Pearce and was built for protection during the Utah Blackhawk War.¹⁶ By the time travelers reached this point, they were only about 15 miles from reaching their goal—the St. George Temple.



J. Fort Pearce

