Let all the people of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and those who journey with them, be organized into companies, with a covenant and promise to keep all the commandments and statutes of the Lord our God (Doctrines and Covenants 138:2).

CROSSING IOWA

By Sherrie Johnson/Illustrations courtesy of Visual Resource Library

On February 4, 1846, the Latter-day Saints began leaving Nauvoo. They had planned to leave in April, but threats from the mobs forced their early departure. Loading their wagons onto the ferry, they crossed the Mississippi River, leaving their homes behind—again! Traveling west about nine miles, they made camp at Sugar Creek, Iowa.

The first days of February were mild, but snow fell on the fourteenth, and on the nineteenth a storm dropped eight inches (20 cm) of it. Brigham Young had instructed the Saints to bring a year's supply of food as well as shelter and other supplies, but many left Nauvoo without the necessary provisions. Many had no tents, and others had unfinished tents that did little to protect them from the cold. After the snowstorms, the temperatures dropped and the Mississippi River froze. This was a blessing for those who were waiting for the ferry, because they could cross on the ice, but it was a trial for those in Sugar Creek. Many fell ill, and several babies were born in the damp and cold.

The main body of Saints waited in Sugar Creek until March 1. During this time additional wagons joined them daily, and Brigham Young organized the Camp of Israel into groups of hundreds, fifties, and tens, with leaders appointed over each group.

The trek across the Iowa territory was a nightmare. Spring thaws and heavy rains turned roads into mud holes. Wagons would sink in and have to be pulled out. During one week in April, the Saints could travel less than half a mile a day. Food supplies ran out, and men had to stop and do work for local residents to earn money to purchase more. William Pitt's brass band even presented concerts in towns along the way to raise funds.
The march was also slowed down by families traveling with small children and by sick people who needed special care. As the Saints crossed Iowa, they established camps where crops were planted to assist those who would follow. Two of these camps were Mount Pisgah and Garden Grove.

The main camp reached the Missouri River on June 14. The trip across Iowa had taken 131 days and covered some 300 miles (485 km). The next year the first company of pioneers traveled 1,050 miles (1690 km) to the Salt Lake Valley in only 111 days.

During the Iowa crossing, the United States declared war on Mexico and sent Captain James Allen to recruit 500 Mormon men to be part of the United States Army. Although this allowed many of the men to earn much needed money for their families, it was difficult for their families to be without them. On the twenty-first of July, 541 soldiers, 35 women (20 were laundresses for the army), and 42 children began the long trek to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and eventually to San Diego, California.

Before the battalion left, the Brethren told them "to remember their prayers, to see that the name of the Deity was revered, and that virtue and cleanliness were strictly observed." They were also told to "treat all men with kindness...and never take life when it could be avoided." They were promised that if they would remember the Lord, they would be protected. This promise was fulfilled. The only battle the Mormon Battalion fought was with a herd of stampeding bulls.

Brigham Young had hoped to send an advance company all the way west that year, but crossing Iowa took so long that it was too late in the year to continue. He ordered a settlement to be built on the west side of the Missouri River where the Saints could spend the winter. Streets were laid out and cabins built in what became known as Winter Quarters. Until the cabins were ready, the Saints lived in tents, dugouts, or caves.

On November 24, Hosea Stout moved into what he called his "little shanty," and wrote in his journal, "This day was the first day that my only living child now seven months and two days old ever was in a house, being born in the wild, rude and uninhabited prairies."

Living conditions were poor. There were few pieces of furniture. Cabins were furnished with planks, barrels, and anything else people could find. They were also very crowded. There were not enough cabins, so many homes had to house more than one family. By December 1846, Winter Quarters consisted of 538 log cabins, 83 sod houses, and 3,483 people.

Although most of the Saints had left Nauvoo by summertime, some still remained because of poverty or sickness. This made anti-Mormons very angry. On September 10,
1846, about eight hundred men with six cannons began to fire on the Saints still in Nauvoo. The attack continued for several days until an agreement was reached that every Mormon would leave except five men and their families, who would stay to sell the remaining property.

Five or six hundred of these last Saints crossed the Mississippi and camped on the riverbank in Iowa. They had only blankets and brush bower for shelter. None of them had food for more than a few days, and many were very sick. Of all the Saints, these suffered the most.

On October 9, a miracle occurred. Flocks of quail flew into the camps, landing on the ground and even on the tables. The hungry Saints were able to catch the birds. The meat saved many people from starving and stirred their hearts as they realized that the Lord was caring for them.

Their fellow Saints had not forgotten them either. Many came back from the Missouri River to help. Others went into neighboring cities to seek money to aid the poor and sick. In the end, the refugees were rescued and divided among the various camps in Iowa, a few even reaching Winter Quarters.

As winter approached, some 12,000 Latter-day Saints were scattered across the midwest. The largest group was in Winter Quarters. Some 2,500 were on the east bank of the Missouri. More than 2,000 were in the rest of Iowa. Some were in Mississippi River towns, 1,500 of them in St. Louis alone. More than 500 were marching west with the Mormon Battalion.

Because of sickness and poverty, it was important that the Saints living in the wilderness do things to encourage and uplift each other. Dances and musical events were held often. In Winter Quarters, Hiram Gates held a dancing school that was attended by three or four hundred pupils. Square dancing, cotillions, reels, and rounds were very popular. On other occasions, people gathered to hear singers or instrumental groups.

Still, the people often suffered from hunger and the elements. Many died of scurvy, malaria, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and other diseases. In all the history of the Church, the years between 1846 and 1848 may have been the most difficult. But it was also a time of great faith. Near Omaha, Nebraska, in a cemetery where many of the Saints of Winter Quarters were buried, stands a beautiful statue honoring the sacrifice of these pioneers. It is a fitting memorial to those who suffered so much in living and defending the gospel of Jesus Christ for us.

*Mormons at the Missouri, 1846–1852, Richard E. Bennett, page 78. All other information and quotes for this article are from the Church Institute manual, Church History in the Fullness of Times, pages 305–323.