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Paths to Zion: The Mormon Settlement at Wyoming, NE

Sherri L. Sklenar

Abstract: This preliminary study examined the cultural and logistical factors underlying the settlement of the historic town of Wyoming, Nebraska. Located along the Mormon Trail, this site provides a new window for understanding the dynamics of nineteenth century U.S. emigrant trails. Utilizing a body of primary and secondary documents as well as cartographic source, the preliminary analysis revealed two integrated themes: (1) frontier logistics and expansion and (2) religious values and experiences. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or Mormons, needed both a prosperous town to equip themselves for their journey to Salt Lake City and a smaller town relatively free from “immoral vices” such as taverns and brothels. This small Nebraska town not only fit both these criteria, but it was also free from Native American unrest and the epidemics that ravaged their former settlement at Winter Quarters near Omaha. Thus the town became the new starting point of the Mormon Trail west of the Missouri River. This study will also form the basis for the site’s nomination to the National Register of Historic Places and aid in the formulation of a data recovery plan for a future archaeological dig on the site.

Introduction

Well before Lewis and Clark first traveled the west in 1804, a network of Native American and later fur trade trails was forged across America. By the 1830s, millions of emigrants traveled west on trail systems for land, riches, and religious freedoms, but mainly for new opportunities and a new start. Many thousands of these emigrants were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, commonly called the Mormons, seeking a haven from religious persecution. They found it in Utah, which they called Zion, as they wanted to create a “promised land.” When the Mormons first started heading west, they had to stop in the winter of 1846 west of the Missouri River. They named this settlement Winter Quarters, located in present day Florence, Nebraska (Olson and Naugle 1997). Winter Quarters became the main outfitting station for the next decade or so. By 1864, however, Wyoming, Nebraska had become the new stopping point.

This paper will investigate the reasons for selecting Wyoming, Nebraska, as the new entrepot for the Mormon trek west. It will present
the background and methods used to gather data, and provide an analysis of pertinent cartographic and documentary materials. The results section will address the research questions, and lastly, there will be a summary and discussion of the results as well as implications for future directions.

Wyoming was a port town that lay close to the Missouri River in Otoe County, Nebraska. A frontier town, it was platted in 1856 by Jacob Dawson, editor of the town’s newspaper and legal advisor to its citizens (Williams 1936; Dawson 1856). According to Ann Wilhite in her article “Cities and Colleges in the Promised Land,” by 1858 the town had “eighty houses and 450-500 inhabitants, two newspapers, two sawmills, a hotel, coach and wagon factory, log school house, and a lyceum” (Wilhite 1986:332). The town also provided a ferry and a steam mill. It started out as a prosperous town with all the necessities that a traveling emigrant might need on the western trails. From 1864 until approximately 1867, the Mormons used this town as an outfitting station before their trek to the area previously known as the Utah Territory. Formerly, the Mormons often used the settlement at Winter Quarters for this purpose, but in 1864 they were forced to make a change. Winter Quarters was abandoned by the Mormons because the Bureau of Indian Affairs agents were concerned over the permanency of Winter Quarters and potential violence from Native Americans (Homer 1984), and a horrible cholera epidemic that broke out there (Olson and Naugle 1997). In addition, a new trail blazed out of Nebraska City, Nebraska, saved many emigrants time and money (Kimball 1980) (Figure 1). The Mormons may have wanted to take advantage of this new route. This research looks at questions behind this move as well as looking at the influence of religion on emigrants traveling west. The purpose of this study was to explore how the town of Wyoming, Nebraska, answered the geographical, logistical, and spiritual needs of the Mormons along with examining the role it played in frontier expansion.

In researching Wyoming, we get a glimpse of the lives of the pioneers who saw this tough land and a promise of a better life. It can provide insight into nineteenth century social life as well as the thoughts and feelings of those who traveled on the western trails. While site details are incomplete, the town played a large part in the dynamics of the trail life. By researching this site, we can understand the part it played for this time period, appreciate what motivated people to expand west, and recognize the influence of religion in frontier life and expansion.

Today, very little is known about Wyoming although there is a rich supply of primary sources. There is mention of Wyoming in diaries of emigrants as well as from townspeople. Some of the newspapers printed in Wyoming are preserved on microfilm, and Wyoming is
Figure 1: Map of Nebraska,* showing trails system. The Mormon Trail is highlighted in red with the cutoff trail from Wyoming and Nebraska City in the south.

*Courtesy of Digging In: The Historic Trails of Nebraska project, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Anthropology Department
http://cdrb.unl.edu/diggingin/trailsummaries/index.html

featured on maps from the mid-1800s until the early twentieth century. The Office of the Otoe County Registrar features many plat maps including one filed by Jacob Dawson (1856). Conversely, secondary sources are more difficult to find. Although this article references many, there is no single comprehensive monograph written on Wyoming itself. Rather, information can be found by examining other topics such as the Mormon Trail or the history of Nebraska. Several articles were written by local or avocational historians for the Nebraska State Historical Society. In 1936, the Nebraska History Magazine published an essay by Helen Roberta Williams entitled, “Old Wyoming” (1936). It is a very interesting reference for the town of Wyoming, Nebraska, but no sources were cited for independent verification (Williams 1936). Although its lack of references makes it hard to credit, it is a useful source of information. Williams explores the early history of the town, mentioning the role Jacob Dawson had in its founding, and providing correspondences from citizens of the town (Williams 1936). Another interesting, though poorly referenced article from the Nebraska History Magazine was by Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints historian
Andrew Jenson entitled “Latter-Day Saints Emigration From Wyoming, Nebraska - 1864-1866” (Jenson 1936). This article consists mostly of journal entries by Joseph W. Young, the emigration agent chosen by the LDS church for Wyoming, Nebraska (Jenson 1936). While historically significant and an excellent printed primary source, it does not give much insight into the lives of the pioneers or the town as the entries dealt mainly with equipment and provisions or status of wagons (Jenson 1936). Wilhite’s (1986) article, mentioned earlier, also refers to Wyoming, but only in reference to her topic on colleges in Nebraska Territory. In 1857, Wyoming had petitioned for a grant to build a community college though it never came through (Wilhite 1986). Although she mentions the early prosperity of the town, she does not dwell on Wyoming. In other issues of the Nebraska History Magazine, Wyoming is briefly mentioned as being a ghost town in association with the Mormons such as “More Ghost Towns in Otoe County” by Mrs. Earl Seyfer (1938). There are other secondary sources that deal with Wyoming in passing such as History of Nebraska by Olson and Naugle (1997) or Hill’s The Mormon Trail: Yesterday And Today (1996), yet they only reference the town, in one to two sentences, in relation to the Mormons passing through on their way west.

As research continued, one other problem emerged: confirming which town the source was referencing. Sometime after 1880, the town of Wyoming moved west and south to be closer to the railroads (Perkey 1978). The old town of Wyoming was renamed Dresden for a time until this town, too, disappeared (Perkey 1978). Often the first town of Wyoming is referred to as Old Wyoming so as not to be confused with the newer Wyoming. This ambiguity in nomenclature was overcome by a careful study of the evolution of the town and for the Mormons who stopped there.

The town itself became the central focus with emphasis on the Mormons who once found shelter there while trekking to their promised land. By switching the focus onto the town of Wyoming, we gain valuable insight into the 1864-1867 Mormon involvement in the town, the implications of moving the outfitting station from Winter Quarters to Wyoming, and about the emigrant trails and religious experiences of those who sought a new life in the west.

Methods for Gathering and Analyzing Data

Data was gathered from cartography and primary and secondary documentary sources. This study utilizes 23 historical maps and four plat maps of both the Old and New Wyoming sites as well as topographical quadrangle maps of North Eastern Otoe County in Nebraska. The documentary inventory includes five primary sources and fifteen secondary sources. Of the secondary sources, only three
dealt with Wyoming as the primary topic. Collectively, these sources provide a wealth of information on site size and layout, industrial and commercial activities, population, social structure, and congruence of belief systems. The plat maps and other regional maps yield data to chart the evolution of the settlement, gauging its growing importance and prosperity. The U.S. topographical quadrangle maps were used to help locate the site of Old Wyoming and where it would be today.

The primary documentary sources include period journals, newspapers, personal correspondence and reminiscences, and census data illuminating contemporary perspectives on town construction, civics, livelihoods, and views of frontier life. Secondary documentary sources such as published books and journal and magazine articles provided important timelines and biographical information.

Results

After gathering and analyzing the material, two dominant foci emerged: (1) frontier logistics and expansion, and (2) religious values and experiences. In addition to these foci, a prospective site for a future archaeological dig was located. Frontier logistics and expansion demonstrate the prosperity of Wyoming in addition to revealing that Wyoming had the necessities needed by emigrants traveling west. The plat maps confirmed that Wyoming lay close to the Missouri River enabling access to ferries and steamboats. They also showed that Wyoming was still a relatively small town surrounded by open land as well as being near the new cutoff trail. Many historical maps portray Wyoming, but after 1870 it is hard to confirm if this is a reference to Old or New Wyoming. However, this does indicate that Wyoming was important enough to feature on maps from the time it was incorporated in 1856 to its zenith prior to 1870.

The primary sources also provide a clear perception of logistical importance. The town had two newspapers, though neither lasted very
long. The surviving newspaper archives reveal services the town of Wyoming provided prior to 1860 that many emigrants may have needed. By providing services such as wagon repairs, cattle, etc., Wyoming made itself indispensable to emigrants on the trails. It also suggests the town had prosperous citizens who could afford a press to print the newspaper. The journal of emigration agent Joseph Young also sheds light on the necessities that Wyoming provided for emigrants, including the Mormon use of Wyoming as an outfitting station from 1864-1867 (Jenson 1936). A diary written by a Mormon emigrant also verifies that some Mormons did pass through Wyoming (Clark 1866) as well as the renowned Great Plains photographer, Charles Savage (Figure 2), who took a picture of the Mormon camps outside the town in 1866.

The second focus, religious values and experiences, also emerged in primary and secondary documentary sources. The *Wyoming Telescope*, the town’s first newspaper, featured articles and opinions about the Mormons before their arrival (Dawson 1857-1859). While a number of articles were anti-Mormon, it would appear that the residents of Wyoming also needed the Mormons if their own town was to compete and prosper against other frontier towns since merely a few years after the articles, the Mormons made Wyoming their new entrepot.

Regardless, Joseph Young’s diary confirmed that the Mormons preferred the small town by stating, “[Wyoming] is not much of a town, but so much the better” (Jenson 1936:114). Secondary sources also provide insight into the religious views and strategies employed by the Mormons. Olson and Naugle’s *History of Nebraska* mentioned that in order “to keep as far away from non-Mormons as possible, [Brigham] Young chose the north side of the Platte” (Olson and Naugle 1997:58). The Mormons traveled on the north side of the Platte to avoid contact with non-Mormon emigrants who traveled on the south side of the Platte. The Mormons chose this alternate route to avoid further altercations following violent encounters at Nauvoo, Illinois and Jackson County, Missouri (Olson and Naugle 1997).

The purpose of this research was also to aid planning for a future archaeological excavation. In order to form a data recovery plan for a future excavation, the site first had to be located. Using modern topographical quadrangle maps and historical accounts of township and range, a prospective site for Old Wyoming was located. In order to gain more information about Old Wyoming, its role in frontier expansion, and its role as an outfitting station for the Mormons, an archaeological survey or dig should take place at this location in the future.
Discussion

The Mormons sought to balance their practical needs with their spiritual needs in their move to Wyoming, Nebraska. While the Mormons needed to move from Winter Quarters, they did not have to make Wyoming their new outfitting station since Nebraska City was just as convenient. Both of these locations offered all the necessities for making a trip west and cut considerable time. But it was what Wyoming did not offer that appealed to the Mormons. Nebraska City was a larger town possessing many non-Mormon vices that the Mormons disagreed with, while Wyoming was still small enough that it had not attracted many taverns and brothels. The Mormons wanted to limit contact with the non-Mormon world, but needed external connections for outfitting purposes and to keep peace with non-Mormons. Indeed Joseph Young’s diary revealed his preference for a small town not yet corrupted by these worldly vices (Young 1864-1866).

In the Wyoming Telescope (Dawson 1857-1859), articles on the Mormons put them in a poor light revealing the persecution felt by the Mormons and the negative feelings on the part of non-Mormons. On the other hand, though, the citizens of Wyoming allowed the Mormons to use their town as an outfitting station only a few years after the articles were written. Wyoming was a small town trying to compete with its larger neighbors, especially Nebraska City. Thus its townspeople set aside their negative feelings and dealt with the Mormons. Conversely, the citizens of Nebraska City would have thought of their town as being large enough that they did not need to accommodate a religious group they may have disliked.

In the end, both the Mormons and the townspeople of Wyoming benefited from this relationship. The Mormons had a place to outfit emigrants heading to Salt Lake as well as send supplies to settlers already there. They also used their encounter in this town to improve their overall image. They were not afraid of using violence to demonstrate their convictions in their faith, but their peaceful involvement at Wyoming shows a different, more tolerant side of the Mormon experience. This lesson was also easier to demonstrate to a smaller amount of people than to a larger town. Wyoming did reap economic benefits and became a transportation hub by selling supplies to the Mormons and attracting other emigrants to the area as well. For a time, these advantages helped the townspeople of Wyoming carve out a piece of the new frontier for themselves.

The fact that Wyoming was chosen based on religious values illustrates the importance of religion in frontier expansion. The Mormons ventured west solely because they were looking for land to settle where they could practice their religion in peace, and they chose
Wyoming because it suited their religious doctrine. Hence, religion could have played a greater role in decision making for those who traveled west then previously thought. More research and an archaeological excavation at the site of Old Wyoming could foster additional insight into what role religion played at the town, and more specifically on the western frontier.

Also of importance is the role that Wyoming played in the expansion west. As a town on the frontier, it was also an outfitting station for emigrants heading further west, greatly facilitating the frontier expansion beyond the eastern United States. While historical documents identify Wyoming as an outfitting station, it is unclear how many non-Mormons used Wyoming for the same purpose. While Old Wyoming was important to the Mormon story of frontier expansion, many undocumented non-Mormon journeys through Wyoming could also shed light on its part on the frontier.

Unfortunately, when the railroads were built connecting the coasts, Wyoming, Nebraska, was bypassed (Williams 1936). In turn, the trail system became obsolete as emigrants could now take the train all the way to their western destinations (Homer 1984). The Mormons no longer needed an outfitting station, and Wyoming disappeared shortly thereafter (Perkey 1978). In 1868, its post office was discontinued, but in 1873, a new town called Dresden was incorporated on the same site as Old Wyoming (Perkey 1978). Unfortunately, in 1887, this post office was discontinued as well. That same year, though, a new town of Wyoming was incorporated a few miles west and south of the old site (Perkey 1978). The new Wyoming was relocated to be closer to the railroads, but in 1928, the post office for this town, too, was discontinued (Perkey 1978).

Many early towns had the same eventual demise that Wyoming had, but it is historically significant because of its role as an outfitting station. What should not be forgotten, though, is that Wyoming was an early frontier town. As an early town, it could hold insight into the social roles and structures of the mid-nineteenth century during this time of expansion and manifest destiny. Wyoming, before its role as an outfitting station was a bustling up-and-coming town, and as such, it could hold knowledge of how these towns were built, functioned, and how people socially interacted at these towns.

Although Wyoming, Nebraska no longer exists, it once played an important part in American history and the trail systems of the 1800s, as a part in the Mormon trail and an early frontier town. This continuing research will form the basis to nominate the site to the National Register of Historic Places and for a data recovery plan for a future archaeological dig. Through this research a prospective location for the site of Old Wyoming has been found. Further research may reveal a more concrete area and it is important to remember that the
archaeological remains of Wyoming can still furnish us with clues about its heyday and its frontier legacy. Archaeology provides a tangible link with the past by recovering the actual materials used by people at the site. In this fashion, archaeology provides data and perspectives on past lives that no other data source can replicate. As historical archaeologists piece together all of these different lines of evidence, we can better understand Wyoming's role in the trails system, frontier expansion, and the dynamics of life in the trail experience.

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