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Review of Villages on Wheels: A Social History of the Gathering to Zion by Stanley B. Kimball and Violet T. Kimball

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Villages on Wheels is the culmination of historian Stanley B. Kimball’s more than fifteen years’ research on and long career as a scholar of the Mormon Trail. When he died in 2003, his wife, Violet, a writer, photojournalist, and occasional student of the trail herself, completed the project. This social history, a detailed examination of the everyday aspects of creating and maintaining a mobile society, is the result of their collaboration.

Based upon “hundreds of journals”—mostly located at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ Church History Library in Salt Lake City, the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at Brigham Young University, and the Western Americana Archives at the University of Utah—Villages on
Wheels is organized topically, with a slight nod to chronology across the span of the book. It offers a unique glimpse into the ways the lives of Mormon travelers were shaped by the overland trail, a transitory period in which traditional conventions and daily routines were suspended in deference to the realities of constant mobility.

Despite the upheaval the trail represented, the Kimballs pay close attention to the ways the travelers attempted to maintain order and preserve social norms. Their study's strength lies in the various lenses through which they seek to view and understand the seemingly mundane aspects of life. In the chapter on “Young Pioneers,” they cover such topics as recreation, toys, parties, pranks, pets, lost children, and death. In the chapter on “Intimate Mormon Family Life,” the more delicate aspects of life on the trail, such as bathing, bodily functions, flirting, marriage, divorce, childbirth, child care, and illness all receive attention. Some aspects of the book demonstrate the ways Mormon travels were similar to their counterparts on the Oregon and California trails (trade, food, weather, accidents, disease, death, burials), while others highlight the travelers' lives as religious people, such as speaking in tongues, evil spirits, prayers, sermons, and miracles.

Villages on Wheels is a narrative history aimed at a popular audience. While students of the trail will find fascinating anecdotes and quotes from Mormon journals, scholars will be disappointed in its lack of citations, bibliography, or source notes of any kind.

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