

The Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail

Some two decades ago, **Linnea Koch** worked with the National Park Service's Long Distance Trails Office on developing interpretive roadside signage for the Mormon Trail through Iowa and Nebraska; a total of 37 roadside signs she designed cover about two thirds of the 1300 mile distance between Nauvoo, Illinois and Salt Lake City, Utah. As part of the project, the Kochs collected much information on the history of the trek and its significance to the later development of the American West. During the following years, the Kochs have traveled to many sites along the trail and supplemented their collection of information about the Mormon Trail history and significance.

Under the leadership of Joseph Smith, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) established several communities throughout the United States between 1830 and 1844, most notably in Kirtland, Ohio; Independence, Missouri; and Nauvoo, Illinois. However, the Saints were driven out of each of them in turn, due to conflicts with other settlers. Nauvoo became the principal settlement of the Latter Day Saints from 1839 to 1846, a period which saw the town's population increase from 100 to 12,000. After Joseph Smith's murder in 1844, continued violence from surrounding non-Mormons forced most Latter-Day Saints to leave Nauvoo in early 1846, with most of the followers, led by Brigham Young, emigrating to the Great Salt Lake Valley by 1847, after spending the winter in Kaneshville, Iowa (now Council Bluffs) and across the Missouri River at Winter Quarters, in what was then Indian Territory. Crossing Iowa was a difficult journey, hampered by severe weather problems; by the time the group arrived at the Missouri River, remaining funds were insufficient to continue westward.

The U.S. annexation of Texas in 1845 ultimately resulted in the Mexican-American War a year later. The army was in need of recruits and approached the LDS which formed the Mormon Battalion in exchange for upfront payments. The Battalion of about 500 men left Council Bluffs in June 1846, marching towards San Diego, arriving in early 1847 about the time the conflict ended; they established the first practical wagon road to the Pacific coast. In early 1847, the main LDS group left Winter Quarters, arriving in Salt Lake City during late summer. The trail system they developed was used for the next 20 years until it was replaced by the railroad.

While history books teach about Mormon persecution and the trek westward to Salt Lake City, they are generally silent about the very significant contributions LDS members made during their trek: they built passes across the Rocky Mountains and constructed bridges and operated ferries across the rivers of the American West. During the trip home to Salt Lake City, members of the Mormon Battalion developed much of the early infrastructure in California, building roads, forts, sawmills, bridges, etc., and enabling thousands of settlers to travel through the Sierra Nevada during the Gold Rush. In many ways, it was the ingenuity, determination and discipline of this relatively small group of dedicated people who contributed greatly to the early westward expansion of this country.

Wolf Koch and his wife **Linnea** travel extensively; their interest in history has taken them to many historical sites in European countries as well as to the Heartland of the US. They have traveled multiple times to areas along the Western Trails and have researched and photographed the sites and scenery along the roadsides. Dr. Koch, a Sterling resident, is a consultant to the oil and petrochemical industry and has been a professor of chemical engineering. Linnea Koch is a graphic designer and photographer, known for her photos of local landmarks and documenting the Whiteside County Barn Tours since their beginning. Together, they lecture on historical events and wildlife photography, teach photography seminars and exhibit their photos at local venues.