

For Immediate Release (June 9, 2014)

Beehive Archive

Welcome to the Beehive Archive—your weekly bite-sized look at some of the most pivotal—and peculiar—events in Utah history. With all of the history and none of the dust, the Beehive Archive is a fun way to catch up on Utah’s past. Beehive Archive is a production of the Utah Humanities Council, provided to local papers as a weekly feature article focusing on Utah history topics drawn from our award-winning radio series, which can be heard each week on KCPW and Utah Public Radio.

Edwin Bryant’s Mule Ride

Nine men riding mules journeyed across the Great Salt Lake Desert in a single scorching August day.

August 3, 1846, Edwin Bryant woke up at 1:30 a.m. The silence around him seemed ominous. Camped this night on the Cedar Mountains at the eastern edge of the Great Salt Lake Desert, he planned to make it across in just one day.

Bryant and eight other men were on their way to California, and had already met with plenty of perils and hardships along their journey from Missouri. But now they faced a most formidable task. In the hours before dawn, the men ate a skimpy breakfast, packed their mules, collected a little brackish water, and set off on the “much-dreaded march.”

James Hudspeth, the mountain man who had guided them this far, turned back at this point. As the group rode down the mountain toward the vast desert, he shouted after them, “Now, boys, put spurs to your mules and ride like hell!”

The group did just that trotted out briskly. In the next hours, they got to know the clay and salt crust of the desert intimately. They saw strange mirages. A furious windstorm choked them. Thirst tormented them. Salt crusted their nostrils and lips. After 17 hours and 75 miles, the exhausted party finally reached Pilot Peak, at the western edge of the salt desert in what is now Nevada. Men and animals “madly rushed” to drink from a little stream.

Four weeks later, the Donner Party would follow Bryant’s group, but with heavy wagons they spent six days crossing the desert instead of one. Bryant had actually left letters for them back at Fort Bridger urging them not take this route to California. If the Donner Party had received those letters, they may have changed their plans and avoided their journey’s tragic end.

But Edwin Bryant did reach California and wrote a book about his adventures that became very popular with later emigrants, who used it to guide their own journeys out West.

Beehive Archive is a production of the Utah Humanities Council. Sources consulted in the creation of the Beehive Archive and past episodes may be found at www.utahhumanities.org/BeehiveArchive.htm. Kristen Rogers Iversen of the Utah Division of State History © Utah Humanities Council 2014.

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