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1846 GRAND ENCAMPMENT

10,000 Religious Refugees Waited in Tents, Wagons

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (called Mormons or LDS) from western Illinois and southeastern Iowa camped here mid-June to mid-July 1846. They waited for 100 of their party to complete a ferry over the Missouri River, so they could move on and settle the Great Salt Lake Valley in the Rocky Mountains.

Grand Encampment started here and extended east nine miles. Covered wagons were drawn up in great squares on hill tops. Tents were pitched between wagons. Some squares were protected by split rail fences.

Boys watched over great herds of cattle, oxen, horses, mules, and over sheep. Women washed clothes and spread them out to dry on tall grass by little creeks. Girls cared for small children and helped with cooking, over smoking camp fires.

A tall pole with the American flag stood before the tent of Brigham Young, acting president of the Church. Not far off was a covered wagon post office, with its auxiliary tent pitched for a newspaper reading room. Men rode in or away, voluntarily carrying letters or messages from or to distant church camps.

Wood, water, and grass disappeared rapidly. Wagon masters searched for new camp sites. Even as the earliest to cross Iowa were being slowly ferried over the Missouri, later arrivals were abandoning Grand Encampment for sites with more wood, water, and grass.

They broke sod and planted late buckwheat, beets, and corn. They built roads, bridges, and ferries. Some set up blacksmith shops, wagon manufacturing, schools, small stores and other services. Branches of the Church were organized.

The short-lived Grand Encampment sheltered almost a third of the 1846-1853 Mormon migration to the Great Salt Lake Valley and gave birth to more than 80 mostly temporary southwest Iowa communities. Less than a dozen of those towns, adopted by non-LDS, still exist today.

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