



## Face of Fillmore

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This week the Face of Fillmore pays tribute to the determination and hard work of the pioneers who settled towns all over Utah and in neighboring states. Certainly, each settlement had its share of challenges and problems. I am certain the early Fillmore residents had their own set of difficulties to deal with.

Recently I had the opportunity to take a closer look at one group of settlers whose challenges ranked high on the list. They were the people of the San Juan Mission.

While it may seem that these people had no connection to our area, on closer look, I found that several members of the party were actually early residents of Millard County. From Oak City came the Lyman's: Edward L., Ida E., Joseph A. and Nellie Roper Lyman, May, Platte DeAlton and Walter C. Coming from Holden were the Stevens': David Alma, Roswell, and Walter Joshua and Elizabeth Kenney Stevens.

In early 1879 the group set out to settle Southeast Utah, more specifically Montezuma Creek. An earlier exploration party had tried the route through Northern Arizona, but found that water was very scarce and Indian problems plentiful. A route further north was selected and the group set out. Deep snow soon filled the mountains behind them and the possibility of "returning home" was gone, so forward, eastward, they went, despite the unfriendly geography they found themselves in.

Sixty miles outside Escalante, they met their first huge obstacle – the infamous Hole-in-the Rock. Here they took almost two months to build dugways, blasting rock to enable them to lower the wagons the 1800 feet to the river below. On January 6, 1880, the first group of 26 wagons were lowered through this crack and down to the Colorado River to ferry across. Days later when all had crossed the river, the pioneers were once again on their way to find even more natural roadblocks against them. The next would be Cottonwood Hill – much the same only uphill instead of down. Here as in other places yet to come, it took seven span of horses to pull a single wagon up the hill. No wagon road was built through harsher country than the Hole-in-the-Rock Trail. Due to the rough terrain, it took twice as long for the San Juan pioneers to travel the 250 miles to Bluff as it took the companies to pull hand carts 1300 miles from



Winter Quarters to Salt Lake City. They averaged only 1.7 miles per day, slower even than the ill-fated Donner Party.

It is interesting to note this was the last organized wagon train of its size in the United States. There were 258 people in the company with 83 wagons. There were also approximately 200 draft animals and 1800 loose stock. There were only 43 men in the group at an average age of 33. The children numbered 129 under the age of 18 with 26 of them less than a year old. Three babies were born along the trail. This was a group of mostly young people with an enormous task before them.

Another fact that amazed me was that some of the members of the San Juan Mission had also been members of the Willie and other handcart companies who suffered greatly just a short time before on their way to Salt Lake City only to be called again for another arduous assignment.

One of those was Olivia Larson who, in a raging blizzard on Grey Mesa, gave birth to her third child. The top of Grey Mesa looks down some 1000 feet to the San Juan River on one side and the Colorado River can be seen from many points along that trail as well. Thus, the baby was named John Rio Larson.



Commenting on his experiences Mons Larson described the journey in which he made the trip from Winter Quarters to Salt Lake City in a handcart company as not nearly so hard as the journey through Hole-in-the-Rock.

After surviving the rigors of the Hole-in-the-Rock, Cottonwood Canyon, the Chute, the Slickrock, Grey Mesa, Clay Hill Pass and others in the cold, and often the snow and mud, the group was hoping that their destination was near, but sadly after descending the Twist, they found one more enormous obstacle – Comb Ridge. This sheer, perpendicular cliff rose over 1000 feet above them and looked impossible to climb, so the group continued south along the foot of the cliff through the sandy bottom for another ten miles, hoping to build a road around the Comb where it met the San Juan River. As they rounded the end of the Comb, they soon realized that a road along the river was impossible because in many places the sheer cliffs met the river. Instead, they again headed upward one last time to climb San Juan Hill, but it was a mile long, and steep, ledgy and sidling. Again, it would require the pick work to dig out dugways and foot holds for the horses. Rock masonry had to be built on the steep side hills, not to mention the fact that the people and horses were completely worn out at this point. The horrors of the trek up San Juan Hill are recorded in the journals of those who were there.

At the top of the hill, under an overhanging ledge, someone took the time to carve in the words, “We Thank



Thee Oh God.” The San Juan Mission pioneers went only a few miles farther, to settle in Bluff some eighteen miles short of their original destination.

My experience at San Juan Hill just weeks ago, was one of crossing something off my bucket list. I had been there before, but never attempted the summit. I watched as my family ascended the steep climb at different paces. My husband and a couple we didn’t know from Colorado climbing ahead with seemingly little effort with a five-year-old grandson and a ten-year-old granddaughter scampering after them. I was thankful for a son-in-law and two daughters who climbed with me at a slower pace and visited about what had happened there so many years before. I thought of the young men in the original group who were busy with teams and wagons and had no time to help anyone up the hill, as Kent was doing for me in the steeper sections. I thought of the young mothers with babies in their arms as they climbed and of how exhausted the entire company was after all of the hardships they had endured. I purposely put my shoes into the holes carved out to help the horses get a hold on the slick rock and watched for obvious wagon wheel tracks in both the rock and the vegetation, as well as sections of rock built up along the hill. When we finally spotted the carving on the rock, I too felt thankful that I had made the climb.