

From California to Council Bluffs By Larry C. Porter

Matthew Caldwell's journals give us new information about the return of fifteen Mormon Battalion soldiers to Council Bluffs.

Colonel Levi Williams of the largely anti-Mormon Warsaw, Illinois, militia stood on a plank placed across the box of a wagon and ordered his company commanders to form their units facing the wagon. Addressing his troops, he said, "Boys, the governor is not going to do anything for us. All that are in favor of going to Carthage in the morning step out three paces in front. Those contrary stand fast." ¹ All but six men stepped forward. The colonel placed the six under guard while the rest prepared to march to Carthage to assault Joseph and Hyrum Smith held in the jail there.

Matthew Caldwell was one of the six. Having married an LDS woman, Barzilla Guymon, in 1843, he chose to stand fast, demonstrating his opposition to the attack. Matthew had seen Joseph Smith on several occasions and had noted the respect his followers had for him. He had no desire to participate in any action that could harm the man.

Early the next morning, the captain of the guard took Matthew to a nearby hill overlooking the Mississippi River. A cannon had been positioned there to fire on any boat coming downriver from Nauvoo should it fail to stop when hailed. The captain pointed to the cannon and said, "Caldwell, there's a horse for you to ride today."

Matthew replied, "I'm not used to riding a horse like that."

"We will make you used to it," the guard retorted.

"They then proceeded to punch me with their bayonets until I was forced to get on the cannon," Matthew recalled. From this uncomfortable position, he saw two of his brothers ready to march with the Warsaw Dragoons to Carthage. Heedless of personal danger, Matthew got off the cannon and walked up to them. "I took them each by the shoulder and turned them around as if they were small boys and told them that they had promised me they would not go and for them to go back home, which they did."

Colonel Williams came up to Matthew and angrily drew his sword, threatening to "split him from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet." Matthew had to climb back on the cannon. He observed, "All through the 27th of June, a very hot day, I was forced to remain astride that cannon bareheaded." When the Smiths were assassinated, members of the mob-militia scattered, and Matthew was able to climb down and go home.

Less than two years later, in the spring of 1846, Matthew Caldwell and his wife joined the Saints' exile from Nauvoo into Iowa Territory. Having committed himself to the cause of the Saints, and with Brigham Young's encouragement, Matthew was baptized by Ezra T. Benson in the Grand River at Mt. Pisgah, Iowa, on 17 June 1846. One month later, he was recruited as a member of Company E of the Mormon Battalion for duty in the Mexican War.

When the battalion arrived in San Diego on 29 January 1847, Private Caldwell and his fellow Church members found themselves in the middle of one of the most highly charged political episodes of that volatile era. On January 10, Brigadier General Stephen W. Kearney and Commodore Robert F. Stockton, on orders from Washington, D.C., to take control of California, had seized Los Angeles, a bastion of rebel resistance. The Californians, led by Andres Pico, fled northward, then surrendered to another United States force commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John C. Fremont, who

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had been appointed temporary governor of California by Commodore Stockton. Under Pico's signature, they entered into what has been called the "Cahuenga Capitulation," or the treaty of 13 January 1847,² which essentially ended the war.

When Kearney arrived claiming to be the new governor, John Fremont refused to accept Kearney's claim. Direct orders from Washington clarified the confusion in Kearney's favor, but Fremont continued to subvert the work of his superior. Finally, General Kearney decided that he had no alternative but to initiate court-martial proceedings against Fremont.

This would necessitate a trip east to bring Fremont to trial. Accordingly, General Kearney wrote the United States adjutant general, "I shall be compelled on arriving in Missouri to arrest him and send him under charges to report to you."³

The general, under whose command the Mormon Battalion had received their marching orders, found loyal support from the battalion. In recognition of their firm stance in his behalf, he ordered that fifteen men from the battalion be detailed to escort him and his detachment as far as Fort Leavenworth (in present-day Kansas). In addition to Matthew Caldwell, those selected were Sylvester Hulet, Nathaniel V. Jones, John W. Binley, Samuel G. Clark, Amos Cox, Gilman Gordon, Thomas C. Ivie, Ebenezer Landers, William F. Reynolds, William M. Spencer, Joseph Taylor, Elanson Tuttle, Charles Y. Webb, and Jeremiah Willey. Hulet was a lieutenant, Jones was a sergeant, and the rest were privates.⁴

Kearney designated Monterey, California, as the gathering point for all the assorted contingents that would make the eastward journey. He then gave the Mormon Battalion escort a choice of traveling from Los Angeles to Monterey by land or by sea. The majority chose to go by land under the command of Lieutenant William Tecumseh Sherman (later the famed Union general in the Civil War). Following the route of El Camino Real, Sherman's overland unit reached Monterey by pack mule on 25 May 1847.⁵

Jeremiah Willey and two other members of the battalion elected to go by sea with General Kearney and Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, a former commander of the Mormon Battalion.⁶ They boarded the storeship USS Lexington in San Pedro Bay and set sail on May 15 to a "fresh breeze from the S. & W. and pleasant."⁷ They dropped anchor in Monterey Bay on May 27.

The makeup of the company that left Monterey on 31 May 1847 was both impressive and interesting. With Brigadier General Stephen W. Kearney were Lieutenant Colonel Cooke; member-elect to Congress Willard P. Hall, a former interpreter and guide for the Mormon Battalion; George B. Sanderson, formerly a surgeon to the Mormon Battalion; the fifteen-man battalion escort; Lieutenant Colonel John C. Fremont; two future witnesses in the court-martial, Major Thomas Swords and Captain Henry S. Turner; Lieutenant William Radford of the U. S. Navy; nineteen members of Fremont's old topographical party; and some servants, citizens, guides, and discharged dragoons. The unit totaled an estimated sixty-four men.⁸

Riding horses and mules, General Kearney's detachment progressed northward from Monterey to Sutter's Fort, then to Truckee Lake (later renamed Donner Lake), near the northern California and Nevada border. There they encountered the site where the George and Jacob Donner company had been trapped by the winter snows a few months before. Although survivors had already spread news of the disasters, no one had been able to reach the site to bury the bodies until the detachments arrived—probably in June 1847. Matthew Caldwell expressed his horror at the gruesome spectacle:

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“As we were the first ones there, after the horrible death of these people, we made shovels, and after clearing out an old cellar, we put the bones of 150 persons [the Donner company actually comprised eighty-one people, thirty-six of whom perished from starvation and exposure to cold] into it and covered them as best we could.

“This was the most awful sight that my eyes were ever to behold. There was not a whole person that we could find.”⁹

From the Truckee, the detachment rode to Fort Hall (near present-day Pocatello, Idaho), then to Fort Bridger (in present-day Wyoming). Between Fort Bridger and Fort Laramie, the Latter-day Saints joyfully encountered an LDS pioneer company led by Elder Parley P. Pratt and John Smith, Joseph Smith’s uncle. The pioneers were on their way to the Salt Lake Valley.

While helping to bury the dead of the Donner party, the bugler, J. C. Truigley (variously spelled), accidentally shot himself just below the collarbone. His condition steadily worsened, and twenty miles east of Fort Laramie, on the North Platte River, he requested that the general leave him behind with a small squad who could walk, bringing him along at a slower pace. Kearney detailed three of his LDS escorts, Matthew Caldwell, Charles Y. Webb, and William Spencer, to follow behind the detachment and assist the ailing bugler.

Unfortunately, while traveling at night, these men became lost and wandered for several days. They suffered extensively from want of food. They were saved only by an accidental meeting with a detail of five soldiers from Fort Laramie who were on a bee hunt for honey.¹⁰ Matthew Caldwell described their appearance when they finally reached Fort Leavenworth:

“Webb and Spencer had the raggedest pants that I had ever seen, and my antelope breeches had been wet and dry so much that they drew up to my knees. Our shirts were gone except the collars and a few strips down the back. I was entirely barefoot.”¹¹

Reporting to the paymaster at the fort on or about 25 September 1847, they received an issue of clothing, seventy-five dollars, and their discharge from the service (the other battalion members had already been discharged). These veterans crossed to the east bank of the Missouri River by ferry and then walked to the Saints’ camp at Kanessville (Council Bluffs), Iowa.

Matthew wrote of the more-than-4,000-mile round-trip in simple yet telling terms: “This [last] two hundred miles on foot after being used to riding all summer was very hard on us. But as usual, we took it as we had done through the whole of the Battalion journey—as best we could.”¹²

During the Mexican War and the postwar era, the men and women of the battalion had a traceable impact on the territories and states through which they marched and in which they eventually made their homes. They were, for instance, instrumental in establishing a number of communities. Matthew Caldwell reportedly built the first cabin in what is now American Fork, Utah; served as the first mayor of Spanish Fork, Utah; was a justice of the peace; worked as a schoolteacher; and served as a delegate to the Utah territorial legislature.

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1. This passage and the material up to Matthew Caldwell's recruitment in the Mormon Battalion rely upon Robert Lewis Woodward and Lucinda Uzella Caldwell Koch, comp., "The Life Story of Matthew Caldwell, a Member of the Mormon Battalion Company E" (n.p., n.d.), pp. 3–6. The writer is grateful to Glade I. Nelson and C. Max Caldwell, great-grandsons of Matthew Caldwell, for providing family documents.
2. See Robert Glass Cleland, *A History of California: The American Period* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), pp. 224–25.
3. Dwight L. Clarke, Stephen Watts Kearney, *Soldier of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), p. 316.
4. See Elmer J. Carr, ed., *Honorable Remembrance, The San Diego Master List of the Mormon Battalion* (San Diego: Mormon Battalion Visitors' Center, 1972–78), p. 83. The name of Sylvester Hulet should be added to this compilation.
5. See *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1875), p. 28; see also diary of Nathaniel V. Jones, 25 May 1847.
6. See Sherman, p. 317; Jones, 13 May 1847; see also diary of James Pace, 13 May 1847.
7. USS Lexington Deck Log, National Archives, Washington, D.C., 15 May 1847.
8. See Dwight L. Clarke, ed., *The Original Journals of Henry Smith Turner* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1966), pp. 125–26.
9. Woodward and Koch, p. 9. The Kearney detachment did not inter all the remains.
10. See Woodward and Koch, pp. 9–10; "Deposition A., Case of Matthew Caldwell, No. 761," 17 May 1895, Department of the Interior, Bureau of Pensions, Washington, D.C.
11. Woodward and Koch, p. 10.
12. Woodward and Koch, p. 11; "Deposition A."