

On the emigrant trail, 1862

Introduction

Samuel Russell, his mother, and his sisters emigrated to the Mormon settlement at Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1861. The next spring, Russell joined a “down-and-back” wagon train to escort new pioneers to the settlement. These caravans provided wagons, oxen, and supplies to carry needy church members to Utah. It was a six-month round-trip for the wagon crews.

In this letter dated June 10, 1862, Russell described some of the hazards he and his crew had encountered on their journey from Salt Lake City, in just the first few days of the journey:

’Tis 3 weeks last friday since we left the city. all day Saturday we lay in emigration & on Sunday ascended the little mountain & began our mud & water march which held good untill we had crossed Hams fork The road from the little mountain by way of parleys park – to the weber & till we got out of Echo was one of the roads you seldom read about in that time we had 13 turnovers 30 or 40 times to unload stuck wagons, after hitching on oxen and breaking by chains ’till we found it would not pay, One individual wagon has been to unload 11 different times

The challenges faced by Russell and his wagon company were experienced by most emigrants heading west prior to the completion of the transcontinental railroad.

Excerpt

We began to meet emigrants from the states on Hams fork & have met them daily ever since. Mostly Horse & mule trains some of the Largest Horses Mares & Mules I ever saw & I expect they have all been jayhawked from all reports there is a heavy emigration ahead of us & after a while we hardly expect to find room to corral. ’Tis 3 weeks last friday since we left the city. all day Saturday we lay in emigration & on Sunday ascended the little mountain & began our mud & water march which held good untill we had crossed Hams fork The road from the little mountain by way of parleys park – to the weber & till we got out of Echo was one of the roads you seldom read about in that time we had 13 turnovers 30 or 40 times to unload stuck wagons, after hitching on oxen and breaking by chains ’till we found it would not pay, One individual wagon has been to unload 11 different times we crossed the weber without any trouble but Echo made up for it, on our first entrance we had to put the wagons all over a bridge by hand; then three of the upsets was in her two of which wagons were hidden almost entirely from our view beneath her waters which was then no longer a creek but a river one gun one boot 2 shoes some \$10 money and several pieces of clothing were lost, the driver of one of the wagons went down under it but Luckily for him the water was deep, he was missing sometime but at length poked his head up through a hole large enough for a prairie dog between the Oxen one of which was strugling in the water the other hanging on the Bridge.

On the emigrant trail, 1862

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and the excerpt, and if time permits, the full transcript, and examine the handwritten letter. Questions 1–3 may be answered by reading the introduction and the excerpt. Questions 4–6 require a reading of the entire transcript and examination of the handwritten letter.

1. What were the responsibilities of Samuel Russell, the author of the letter?
2. Explain the process by which the horse and mule trains were prepared to cross Hams Fork.
3. List and describe the specific difficulties and dangers the wagon train encountered while crossing a body of water.
4. How did Samuel Russell account for the slow rate (seven miles in three days!) of travel?
5. According to Russell, one member of the wagon train remarked about the crossing of Hams fork: “We did not come over it sir, we came under it.” What events and conditions led to this description of the crossing.
6. Why did Russell find it necessary to write upside down on a few of the pages?

On the emigrant trail, 1862

Transcript

Tuesday, June 10th 1862

Dear Mother & sisters

For different reasons I have delayed writing much longer than I intended to first because the mail line was hardly in good running order 2nd I wanted to get past all the worst part of the road & 3rd I have scarcely had an opportunity to write. Our camp tonight is about 150 yds from the entrance of sweet water into devels gate. We crossed green river this day one week ago. There was a ferry there on which we crossed the wagons, & [*inserted*: we] swam the cattle & have traveled farther since that time than in twice the time previous so far we have avoided all crossings on sweet water & tomorrow we will cross it on a toll Bridge at the rock Murdock is just ahead of us & Horn behind We began to meet emigrants from the states on Hams fork & have met them daily ever since. Mostly Horse & mule trains some of the Largest Horses Mares & Mules I ever saw & I expect they have all been jayhawked from all reports there is a heavy emigration ahead of us & after a while we hardly expect to find room to corral. 'Tis 3 weeks last friday since we left the city. all day Saturday we lay in emigrations & on Sunday ascended the little mountain & began our mud & water march which held good untill we had crossed Hams fork The road from the little mountain by way of parleys park – to the weber & till we got out of Echo was one of the roads you seldom read about in that time we had 13 turnovers 30 or 40 times to unload stuck wagons, after hitching on oxen and breaking by chains 'till we found it would not pay, One individual wagon has been to unload 11 different [*inserted*: times] we crossed the weber without any trouble but Echo made up for it, on our first entrance we had to put the wagons all over a bridge by hand; then three of the upsets was in her two of which wagons were hidden almost entirely from our view beneath her waters which was then no longer a creek but a river one gun one boot 2 shoes some [*inserted*: \$10] money and several pieces of clothing were lost, the driver of one of the wagons went down under it but Luckily for him the water was deep, he was missing sometime but at length poked his head up through a hole large enough for a prairie dog between the Oxen one of which was struggling in the water the other hanging on the Bridge. The next night we camped at Cache Cave & I saw six name scratched therein. The next morning early we made yellow creek this we found about 300 yds in width

On the emigrant trail, 1862

Murdock had just got through and left it nothing but a bed of mortar & water. We concluded we would have to Bridge the worst part with logs & willows. This all hands went to work & done (except a few shirks that we always find in a camp like this) the logs we floated down from an old bridge above about ¼ mile after working this way most of the day & doing all we could, we still found we could'nt cross loaded, we then went to work & constructed a floating foot Bridge on this we carried over all the flour, & then made out to get the wagons through empty [*inserted:* We] were one & half days in crossing all this time in water & mud from knee deep up to our necks & often swimming & that water running through snow banks then in sight, still I heard no complaints of sickness in camp, not even a cough; we found Bear river high but Bridged, by paying toll we crossed with little trouble, we crossed big muddy twice on toll Bridges by so [*inserted:* doing] we avoided Blacks fork entirely I had thought after crossing yellow creek that there could'nt be such another place this side of [of the 12th letter of the alphabet¹] But by the time we crossed Hams fork I could only compare yellow creek to it, as a gnat to a horse fly. In 3 days including the crossing we traveled 7 miles The best illustration I can give of it is the answer one of our boys gave to a man who enquired; how we came over Hams fork, We did not come over it sir, we came under it, was the answer. It was full half a mile in width & we saw by the time Murdock crossed at the Crossing, there would be no chance for us, by working half a day helping a dozen mail coaches (loaded with grain) across we got the use of an old boat, (as big as a wash tub) we then went a mile below; stretched a rope across the main channel on to a small island, took everything out of the waggons, took them over to the Island in the Boat and unloaded, tied our wagon beds down tight, tied a rope to the end of the tongue took the end of the rope across in the boat, launched the wagon in to the water, then with 20 men to the rope brought her through loaded up [*inserted:* swam the cattle over] put on 10 & 12 yoke [*strikeout:* of oxen] & wallowed out the best way we could, Murdock drowned 2 head of his cattle & another one has, since, died One of our boys, in driving the cattle into the water got over his length (& whether he came near drowning or not) I do not know, but he called manfully for help, which was soon rendered him an other man belonging to the mail company in swimming over a drove of mules took hold of the narrative of one to assist him across but a mule coming up behind

¹ Possibly the letter representing H in the Deseret Alphabet, a phonetic alphabet adopted by Mormons on January 19, 1854. The new alphabet consisted of 38 to 40 letters. <http://www.deseretalphabet.org/>

On the emigrant trail, 1862

[shove] him under & although he was a very good swimmer the blow had stunned him so that he to called for help, by the time I reached him he got in water he could bottom & came out The Indian fuss on the sweet water I believe to be a pretty good Humbug, the snow was deep feed scarce the roads bad, & it was a very good ruse to avoid the payment of the heavy liabilities they were under, for not putting the mails through, we get more papers than we can read (though of february & march dates) many of them Harpers & Leslies weeklies & some of arthurs & petersons Magazines the road thick with them in places & I expect many a wagon load has been [illegible] In a list of names of state officers of missouri who would not take the oath of allegiance under Hallecks Orders, is that of Judge Dunn, this accounts for King being Circuit judge of that district (Hurrah for Dunn) Tell frank I have sold none of the tan yet nor do I expect to – will have to leave it at Deer creek, or try to trade it for skins Murdock supplies all the demand there is for it ahead of us & we have met two or three from the states peddling it already Give my respects to mr green & tell him to turn them over to miss Lucy when he gets dun with them, tell him I carry his instrument of destruction but so far I have pulled trigger on nothing larger than a Buffalo skull when we were crossing the little mountain a man passed by on the stage and called out how are you Russell where are you bound for, I answered east, who are you, he took of his hat & raised his hair with his fingers to give me a chance to recognise him, but I couldnt & he passed on without telling me who he was

this letter has been written with something like a sharp stick in one hand and the paper in the other a position I seldom ever wrote in before so you need not criticise to heavily as my paper is scarce I will close for the present this leaves us all pretty well this far on our journey with pretty much all we started with except one wagon part of which sleeps beneath the “briny waves”—on the muddy waters of Hams fork, while the remaining part stands alone and forsaken on the Banks there of—schrouded in mud—mourning the requiem of its bigger half, the hind wheels

with Hopes that all is well with you I remain your son & Brother – Sincerely–

Samuel Russell

[*upside down on pg 6*]: The Captain talks of writing to day remember us to miss Julia if I am partial

On the emigrant trail, 1862

[*upside down on pg 3*] my principal individual troubles [*inserted: so far*] has been [*strikeout*] Boils. one in particular, of considerable magnitude, has been a source of great annoyance his location being near the top of the saddles (especialy when I am in it) thereby causing me to assume a position resembling the cavalier, heavy on the stirrups & somewhat on a perpendicularity (amen

[*upside down on pg 2*] give my best respects to Mrs. & miss Nebeker. And tell Berry, if I was a girl I would send them to him too

On the emigrant trail, 1862

Images

Tuesday, June 10th 1862

Dear Mother & Sisters

For different reasons I have delayed writing much longer than I ^{used} intend to first because the mail line was hardly in good running order and I wanted to get past all the worst part of the road. And I have scarcely had an opportunity to write. Our camp tonight is about 150 yds from the entrance of Sweetwater into Devils gate. We crossed Green river this day one week ago there was a ferry there on which we crossed the wagons, & ^{we} swam the cattle & have traveled farther since that time than in twice the time previous. So far we have avoided all crossings on Sweetwater & tomorrow we will cross it on a toll bridge at the rock. Murdoch is just ahead of us & Horn behind. We began to meet emigrants from the states on Hams fork & have met them daily ever since. Mostly horse & mule trains some of the largest horses, mares & mules I ever saw & I expect they have all been jay hawked from all depots. There is a heavy emigration ahead of us & after a while we hardly expect to find room to Corral's 3 to 3 weeks last Friday since we left the city. all day Saturday we lay in emigration & on Sunday ascended the little mountain & began our mud & water march which held good until we had crossed Hams fork.

Samuel Russell to his mother and sisters, June 10, 1862, p. 1. (Gilder Lehrman Institution, GLC05493.01)

On the emigrant trail, 1862

The road from the little mountain by way of party's
 park to the water & till we got out of Echo was one of
 the roads you seldom read a bout in that time we
 had 13 turnovers 30 or 40 times to unload stock -
 wagons, after hitching on oxen and breaking
 log chains till we found it would not pay, one
 individual wagon has been to unload ^{times} 11 different
 we crossed the water without any trouble but
 Echo made up for it; on our first entrance we had to
 put the wagons all over a bridge by hand; then three
 of the upsets was in her two of which wagons were
 hidden almost entirely from our view beneath her
 waters which was then no longer a creek but a river
 one gun one boot & shoes some ^{\$10} money and several pieces
 of clothing were lost; the driver of one of the wagons
 went down under it but luckily for him the water
 was deep; he was missing sometime but at last
 poked his head up through a hole large enough for a ^{big} ~~big~~
 dog between the oxen one of which was struggling in the water
 the other hanging on the bridge. The next night we camped at
 Cache Cave & I saw his name scratched there in. The
 next morning early we made yellow creek this we found
 about 300 yds in and the Murdock had just got through and
 left it nothing but a bed of mortar & water. we concluded
 we could have the bridge the worst part with logs & willows, this all
 hands went to work & done (except a few shirks that we always
 find in a camp like this)

Samuel Russell to his mother and sisters, June 10, 1862, p. 2. (Gilder Lehrman Institution, GLC05493.01)

On the emigrant trail, 1862

The logs we floated down from an old bridge above about 1/4 mile
 after working this way most of the day & doing all we could do & still found
 we could not cross loaded, we then went to work & constructed
 a floating foot bridge on this we carried over all the flour & then
 made out to get the wagons through empty ^{we} were one & half days in
 crossing all this time in water & mud from knee deep up
 to our necks & often swimming & that water running
 through snow banks then in sight, still I heard no complaint
 of sickness in camp, not even a cough; we found Bear river
 high but bridged, by paying toll we crossed with little
 trouble, we crossed big muddy twice on toll bridges by ^{doing} ~~doing~~
 we avoided Black's fork entirely I had thought after
 crossing yellow creek that there couldn't be such another
 place this side of the 1st letter of the alphabet But by the
 time we crossed Hams fork I could only compare yellow creek
 to it, as a gnat to a horse fly. In 3 days including the ^{long} ~~long~~
 we traveled 7 miles. The best illustration I can give of it
 is the answer one of our boys gave to a man who en-
 quired how we came over Hams fork, we did not come
 over it Sir, we came under it, was the answer.
 It was full half a mile in width & we saw by the time our work
 crossed at the crossing, there would be no chance for us, by working
 half a day helping a dozen mail coaches (loaded with grain) across
 we got the use of an old boat, (as big as a wash tub) we then went
 a mile below, stretched a rope across the main channel
 into a small island, took everything out of the wagons, took

Samuel Russell to his mother and sisters, June 10, 1862, p. 3. (Gilder Lehrman Institution, GLC05493.01)

On the emigrant trail, 1862

them over to the island in the boat and unloaded, tied our
 wagon beds down tight, tied a rope to the end of the tongue,
 took the end of the rope across in the boat, launched the wagon in
 to the water, then with 20 men to the rope brought her through,
 loaded up, ^{swam the cattle over} put on 108 yoke of ~~oxen~~ & wallowed out the
 best way we could, Murdoch drowned a head of his
 cattle & another one has, since, died. One of our boys in driving
 the cattle into the water got over his limb & whether he
 came near drowning or not I do not know, but he
 called manfully for help, which was soon rendered him
 an other man belonging to the mail company, swimming
 over a doove of miles took hold of the narrative of
 one to assist him a cross but a mule coming up behind
 threw him under & although he was a very good swimmer
 the blow had stunned him so that he called for
 help by the time I reached him he got in water he could
 bottom & came out. The Indians fuss on the sweet water I believe
 to be a pretty good humbug, the snow was deep feet & across
 the roads back, & it was a very good ruse to avoid the
 payment of the heavy liabilities they were under for not
 expediting the mails through, we get more papers than
 we can read (though of february & march dates) many
 of them Harpers & Leslies weeklies & some of Arthur's &
 Petersons Magazines the road thick with them in
 places & I expect many a wagon load has been ~~burned~~
 In a list of names of state officers of Missouri who
 would not take the oath of allegiance under
 Hallecks Orders, is that of judge Dunn, this
 accounts for King being Circuit judge of that
 district (for sake for Dunn) I'll frank I have sold none
 of the tan yet - nor do I expect to - will have to leave it at
 Deer creek or try to trade it for skins Murdoch supplies
 all this demand there is for it a head of us I've have
 met two or three from the states peddling it already
 Give my respects to Mr Green & tell him to turn them
 over to Miss Lucy when he gets down with them, tell him I
 carry his instrument of destruction but so far I have
 pulled trigger on nothing larger than a Buffale skull

Samuel Russell to his mother & sisters, June 10, 1862, p. 4. (Gilder Lehrman Institution, GLC05493.01)

On the emigrant trail, 1862

20 2 -
 When we were crossing the little mountain an man
 passed by on the stage and called out how are
 you Russell. Where are you bound for, I answered
 east; Who are you, he took of his hat & raised
 his hair with his fingers to give me a chance
 to recognize him, but I couldnt, & he passed
 on without telling me who he was. This letter has
 been written with something like a sharp stick
 in one hand and the paper in the other a
 position I seldom ever written in before. So you
 need not criticise too heavily

Samuel Russell to his mother and sisters, June 10, 1862, p. 5. (Gilder Lehrman Institution, GLC05493.01)

As my paper is scarce I will close for the present
 This leaves us all pretty well this far on our
 journey with pretty much all we started
 with except one wagon part of which
 sleeps beneath the "Briny waves" in the
 muddy waters of Hams fork, while the
 remaining part stands alone and forsaken
 on the Banks there of & surrounded around
 mourning the requiem of its bigger half, the
 hind wheels
 With hopes that all is well with
 you I remain your son & brother Sincerely
 Samuel Russell
 (The Capt. in the
 1st Regt. 1st Div. 1st Army)

Samuel Russell to his mother and sisters, June 10, 1862, p. 6. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05493.01)