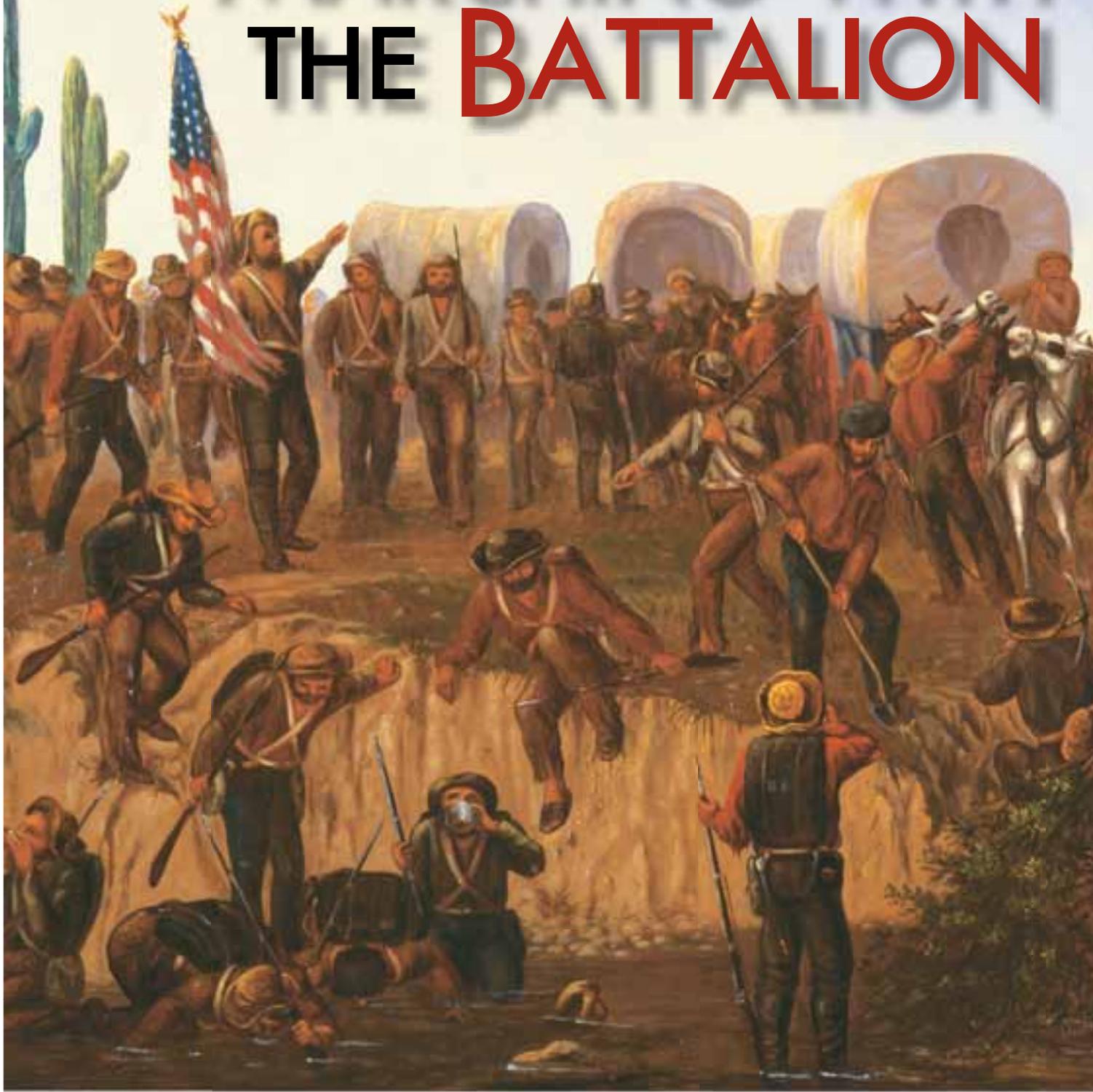


# MARCHING WITH THE BATTALION



*Though they never fought a battle, the Mormon Battalion set an example of courage, commitment, and sacrifice.*

BY ARIANNE B. COPE

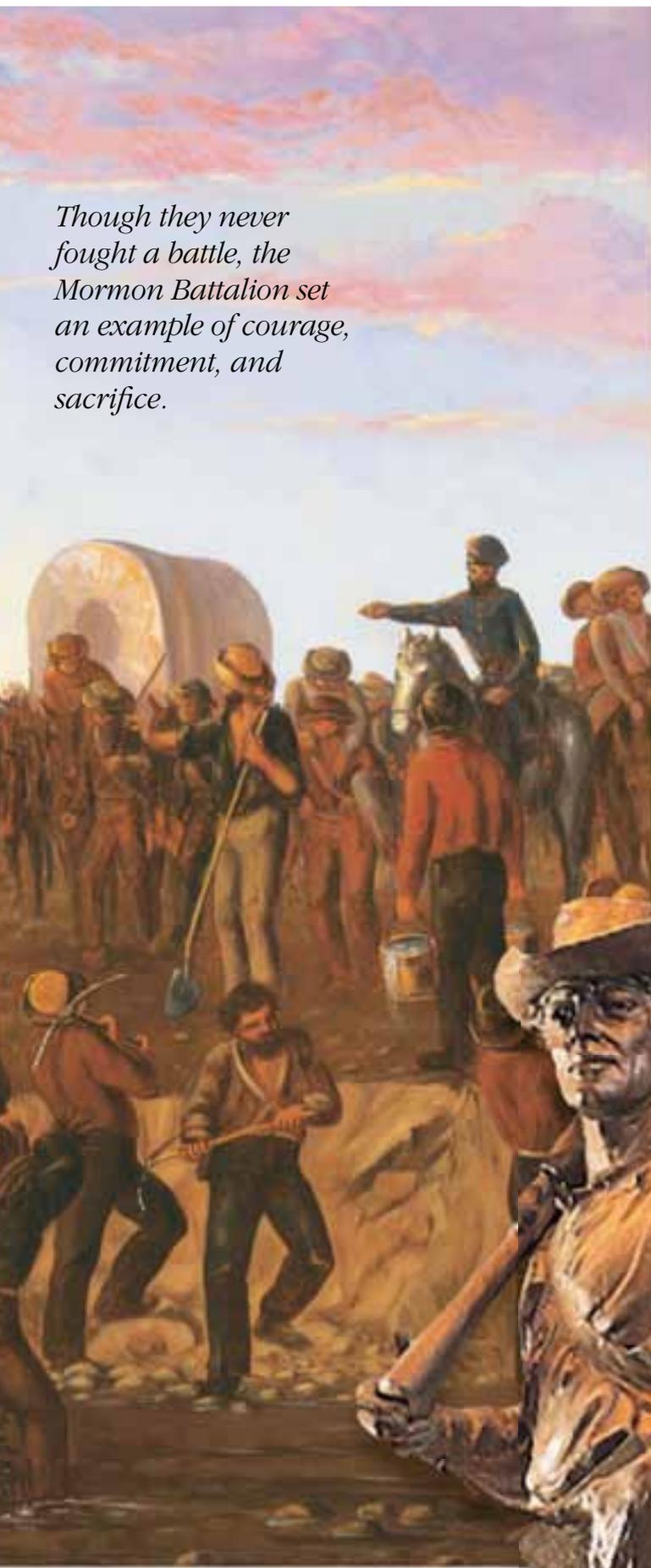
**B**efore I stepped on a plane bound for California, I thought the Mormon Battalion was just a bunch of guys who walked for a really long time while their pioneer families had it tough crossing the plains. What I learned in Old Town, San Diego, California, was surprising.

After being driven out of their homes by brutal mobs, the battalion members signed up to fight a war against Mexico for the U.S. government, which had turned its back on them. They joined because President Brigham Young had asked them to do so in order to give financial support to the Saints traveling west.

About 500 men enlisted, along with about 80 women and children, including 20 laundresses. They began their journey in the sweltering heat of Council Bluffs, Iowa, on 20 July 1846, leaving their loved ones behind. Their destitute families bravely waved good-bye, knowing they'd have to make their way west alone without their husbands or fathers to protect them.

The battalion completed one of the longest infantry marches in American history—about 2,000 miles (3,220 km) through what are now seven states and into Mexico. They had inadequate supplies. Their feet burned on hot desert sand because their shoes had worn out, they were frequently thirsty, and at times they resorted to drinking from mud holes.

After that long journey, the



THE MORMON BATTALION BY GEORGE OTTINGER

**A**lthough the Battalion volunteers would be separated from their families, Brigham Young recognized that military pay would help in crossing the plains, and the effort would help prove the Church's loyalty to the country.



battalion worked on construction projects in San Diego and a fort near Los Angeles, California. They gave the money they earned, including their clothing allowance, to the Church to support the Saints on their trek to Utah. After being discharged, battalion members were present when gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill and blazed a new trail used by thousands during the California gold rush. Turning their backs on a possible fortune, they turned eastward to rejoin the Saints and were some of the first to reach the Salt Lake Valley.

I also found out they were more than a ragged bunch of soldiers. They were noble, faithful, heroic men and women—and some of them were my ancestors.

### Runaway

When one of my great-grandfathers, Philander Colton, marched off with the battalion from Council Bluffs, he didn't realize he was being followed. His nine-year-old son, Charles, secretly ran away to join the battalion. He couldn't bear having his father

leave him behind. The night Charles sneaked into the battalion's camp in Nodaway, Missouri, he sang to the men around the campfire. His clear soprano voice softened the soldiers' hearts, and they decided to let him stay with his father in the battalion as an officers' aide.

I can imagine how carefully Philander protected Charles on their journey—he had already lost one son in Nauvoo, Illinois. Charles's love for his father kept his little legs marching—all 2,000 miles from Iowa to San Diego.

### Forty Thousand Bricks

Today San Diego is a panorama of skyscrapers and freeways, but when the Mormon Battalion arrived after their long march across the country, San Diego was little more than a few dozen adobe structures. Even so, Charles, Philander, and the other exhausted soldiers shouted for joy when they arrived.



Philander was a brick maker. He and three other men made 40,000 bricks that were used in a building, some chimneys and wells, and a walkway of Old Town. With the help of Philander's strong, weathered hands, the battalion began to improve this desert village, which is now a beautiful coastal city.

Making bricks isn't easy. They are put

under intense heat. I learned from Philander that people are like bricks. His life was a fierce furnace of trials. But he emerged rock solid, with a testimony strong enough for others to build on. Philander and Charles marched for me and all who would come after them, to show us that if we endure trials well, we don't have to crack.

**“Until I See You”**

Near Old Town, San Diego, the Mormon Battalion Visitors’ Center on Juan Street is a white building with white arches, surrounded by bright pink and red flowers.

Inside the visitors’ center, I found a gigantic statue of a battalion soldier. Then a photo in the corner of the room taken at the battalion’s 50th anniversary caught my eye. I thought about all the missing faces.

Because there were no deaths in battle, people often assume no one died in the Mormon Battalion. Actually, 22 men from the battalion died from disease, exposure, and accident. One of these men was another of my great-grandfathers, Arnold Stevens.

Arnold was a large, gentle man, and first corporal in Company D. He went with the battalion’s first detachment of sick soldiers to Pueblo, Colorado, where he stayed through the difficult winter of 1846. Huddled in the frigid December air, Arnold wrote a letter to his wife, Lois, on Christmas Day, describing his concern for his family’s safety and their lack of money. He longed to be with them again.

“My dear Lois, you know my family was always my delight, yet [I] never knew how to prize or appreciate their society. There is



scarcely a night passes, but I dream about you. . . .

“I will send Ransome Abram a Christmas gift.

Yours I will keep until I see you; if I can get anything for the girls I will. Give them my love, and may the Lord bless you all. Farewell. Pray for me.”

Arnold never gave Lois her Christmas gift. In March, he was dragged over several logs by a wild mule. He died a few days later.

Arnold didn’t have to enlist in the battalion, but he heeded the prophet Brigham Young’s call. He died before he could return to his family. His conviction and unselfishness allowed him to pass away peacefully in the face of tragedy. He taught me that dedicating my life to God means trusting Him no matter what happens.

**T**he Battalion’s only engagement was an incident where wild cattle stampeded into the company. They lost two mules, and three men were injured.



**Dangerous Mission**

The letters written and the money earned by Arnold and the other men in Pueblo, Colorado, were carried to their





**A**fter being discharged from the Battalion, a few men took jobs at Sutter's Mill and were there when gold was discovered.



families by another of my great-grandfathers, Thomas Woolsey.

Thomas was a courier for Company E. He went with the women and children and the sick battalion members to Pueblo in the first and second detachment groups. After reaching Pueblo the second time, he was asked, along with John Tippets, to carry messages and money from the battalion to Winter Quarters, Nebraska. They left Pueblo in December and traveled alone, making their own trail as they went.

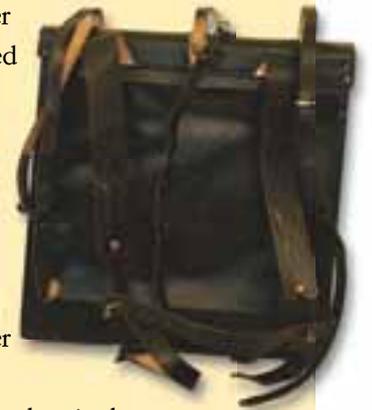
On their 600-mile (965-km), 52-day journey, Thomas and John nearly froze and starved to death while being lost most of the time. At one point they were captured and almost killed and scalped by a group of Pawnee Indians, but thanks to the timely mercy of Chief Setchmalin, they were released unharmed. They finally arrived at Winter Quarters exhausted on the night of February 15, 1847.

Thomas's adventures carrying mail and escorting people for the battalion served him well as a member of Brigham Young's

1847 pioneer company. At Fort Laramie, President Young sent him to Pueblo to help the remaining Saints travel to the Salt Lake Valley. He remained devoted to the gospel for the rest of his life. He showed me that commitment takes courage, but when we give our all to God, He'll protect us and use us to help others on their way.

### They Marched for You

After this trip to San Diego, my thoughts about the Mormon Battalion changed. When I think of the battalion now, I see a small boy who loved his father so much he marched across the country rather than say good-bye, a lonely woman whose tears smeared the last letter her husband would ever write her, a lost soldier willing to do his duty in the face of death, and hundreds of others who remained faithful through that difficult time.



President Brigham Young declared: "The Mormon Battalion will be held in honorable remembrance to the latest generation; and I will prophesy that the children of those who have been in the army, in defense of their country, will grow up and bless their fathers for what they did at that time."<sup>1</sup>

The Mormon Battalion marched for all of us. And we honor them best by following in the footsteps of faith and commitment they left behind. **NE**

### NOTE

1. Daniel Tyler, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War, 1846–1847*, (n.d.), 354.