Zion’s Camp March from Ohio to Missouri, 1834
By Stanley B. Kimball

When Zion’s Camp marched nearly 900 miles through Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, the Mormons had their first practical experience moving large groups of people and materials over long distances and were better prepared for the vast exodus of 1846–48. Their purpose was to help reinstate the Missouri Saints on the Jackson County lands from which mobs had driven them.

Several independent bands left Kirtland around the first of May, 1834, for New Portage, now part of Akron near Norton, fifty miles south. At this rendezvous Joseph Smith organized the 130 men and twenty baggage wagons into proper marching order.

The march itself began at New Portage on May 9 and proceeded without incident for several days. Near Bucyrus in Crawford County Joseph Smith told his men a bit of local history: Colonel William Crawford had been burned at the stake in 1782 by several Indian tribes not far away.

A few days later in Wyandot County, they passed some Wyandot Indian settlements where, in 1830, Parley P. Pratt and four companions had preached en route to western Missouri. Stanley B. Kimball, “Zion’s Camp March from Ohio to Missouri, 1834,” Ensign, Apr. 1979, 46. They crossed the Indian line May 17, just east of Richmond, where they picked up the famous National Road, the superhighway of its day, and followed it beyond Indianapolis to the junction of today’s Highways 40 and 240. From Mansfield to Clinton the old road passes through some of the loveliest country to be seen along the route. Parke County is famous for its thirty-nine covered bridges, all built after 1834; but the road is most complicated—a county map and frequent stops to ask directions will help. An easier way to Clinton is via Rockville. At Clinton, Zion’s Camp crossed the Wabash by ferry and entered Illinois a few miles to the west on May 24.

Just west of the Embarras River some of the men wanted to kill three rattlesnakes, but Joseph said, “Let them alone—don’t hurt them! How will the serpent ever lose his venom, while the servants of God possess the same disposition, and continue to make war upon it?” (History of the Church, 2:71.)

Near Decatur, they fought a sham battle to test their military preparedness. Between Mechanicsburg and Springfield an old road passes through a short stretch of unspoiled country. (Ask locally for directions.)

West of Exeter is Valley City where the early Saints crossed the Illinois River by ferry. Modern travelers must follow routes 100 and 36. The country road from Detroit to Valley City is scenic, but one must ask locally for directions. Going via Highway 107 is longer but simpler.

One mile south of Valley City on the bluffs of the Illinois River is the storied “Zelph Mound,” now on private property so tourism is not encouraged. Here, on June 3, Joseph and a few others climbed the bluffs and dug into a mound, unearthing a skeleton. Joseph is reported to have identified the remains as those of Zelph, a righteous Lamanite warrior killed in battle (see History of the Church, 2:79, 80n). About half a mile north of Zelph Mound, back towards Valley City, is a very rough road cutting west up through the bluffs. This is Church Hollow Road, apparently the only original portion of trail left on the entire Zion’s Camp route. After two and one-half miles the road improves, coming out on the prairie and leading to Pittsfield. (Ask locally for directions.)

Just east of Pittsfield on Highway 36 is a sign marking the site of Mormon Town, where
some Saints found refuge following the expulsion from Missouri in 1838–39.

West of Pittsfield is Atlas, one of the oldest communities in central Illinois, founded in 1836. During the Missouri expulsion, the families of Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball lived here for seven weeks. The Young family, including Brigham, lived in the storehouse still standing on the northeast corner of the intersection of Highways 54 and 96; the Kimballs roomed in the Colonel Ross home now in ruins on the east side of Highway 96, about one hundred yards north of this same intersection.

West of Atlas, on June 5 and 6, the Mormons crossed the Mississippi River on a ferry to Louisiana, Missouri. This community was an established ferry crossing which many of the Missouri Saints used when later driven from that state. It was also an outfitting center for many other westering Americans.

Between Louisiana and Perry, the county roads are scenic and pass old graveyards and communities. Travelers are advised to have county maps and ask locally for directions. The easy route is via New London.

Immediately east of Paris, was a small Mormon community called the Salt River settlement where, on June 8, Joseph’s company met his brother Hyrum’s company which had come from Michigan. Combined, the small army now numbered 205 men, eleven women, seven children, and 25 baggage wagons. The route west approximated highway 24 through Moberly, Keyetsville, and Brunswick to De Witt.

The community of De Witt did not exist in 1834. Missouri Mormons would establish it four years later as a river port city for northern Missouri during the summer. They were, however, driven out in October. In the center of town, a bronze marker near a flagpole tells this story. Most of the road west to Richmond follows the flat flood plain of the Missouri.

There is much Latter-day Saint history associated with Richmond. Oliver Cowdery is buried just north of town, near the Three Witnesses Monument, and the grave of David Whitmer is west of town in the City Cemetery on Highway 10. Also, a small LDS exhibit is in the Ray County Museum, located in the main building of the old Poor Farm.

Just west of Excelsior Springs, at one time a famous health resort, the road crosses several branches of Fishing River. It was while the army was camped on the flat, unprotected flood plain between the two main branches that Jackson County Missourians attacked on June 19, only to be driven off by a violent hailstorm. Several days later Joseph received the “Fishing River revelation” recorded in section 105 commanding the Saints not to pursue the “redemption of Zion” further at that time. From there, the camp moved to Rush Creek near Liberty where they suffered from cholera attacks and finally disbanded June 25.

Although Zion’s Camp did not “redress wrongs,” it provided the new Church with tested men who became its future leaders. All of the first Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, for example, were selected from this body.

When the main body of Mormons left Ohio for Missouri in 1837, they followed no special route. Some used the Zion’s Camp road; others went south to Wellsville in Ohio and took various river boats on the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri rivers to Lexington, Missouri, then continued by wagons. Likewise, when the Saints were driven from northern Missouri in 1838–39, some followed the Zion’s Camp road back to the ferry at Louisiana, Missouri; others cut up to another ferry at Quincy, Illinois, the largest city on the upper Mississippi; some fled to Iowa, and still others went to Lexington and took river boats to Quincy via Saint Louis.
Zion's Camp Trail, 1834 Indiana

Zion's Camp Trail, 1834 Illinois, pt. 1
Zion’s Camp Trail, 1834 Missouri, pt. 2