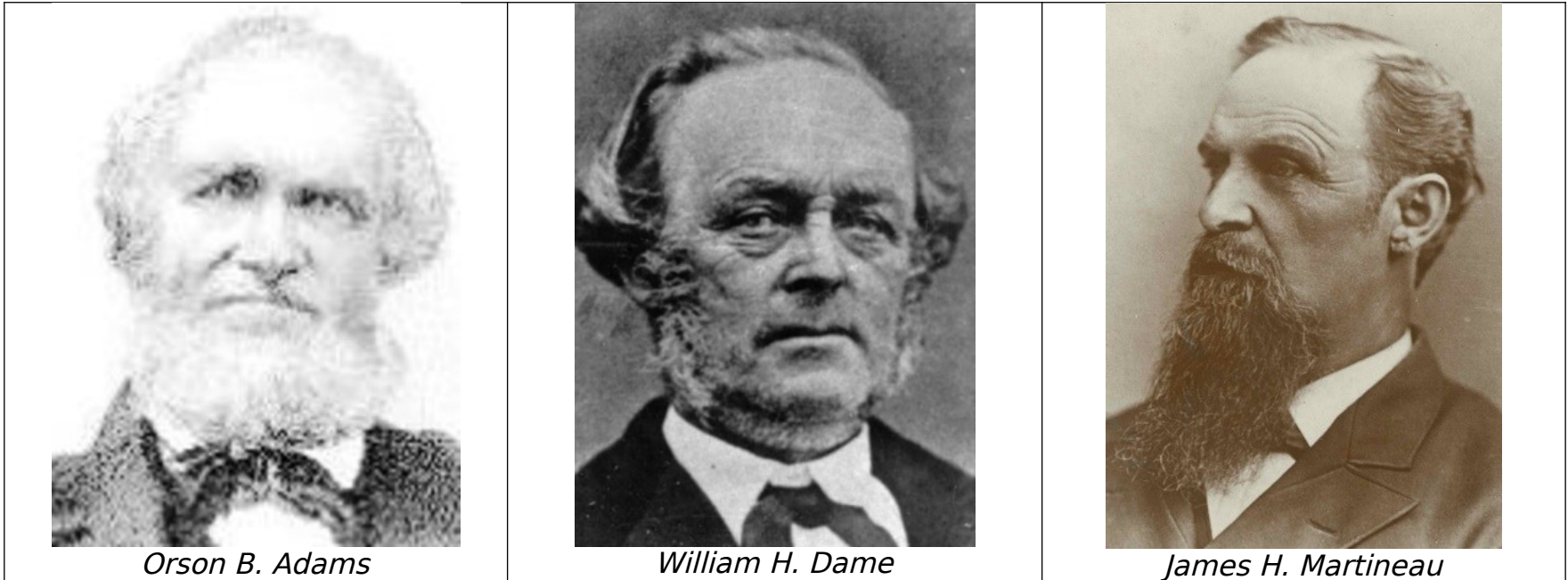


Historical Threads

Seeking a Refuge in the Desert, 1858, Part 2

by Jay M. Jones

Last week, Part 1 detailed efforts of Thomas Kane to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the Utah War. Prior to the peace settlement, Brigham Young sent two expeditions into the vast Great Basin deserts of what is now Nevada to search for possible places of refuge from the approaching U. S. troops. Men from Iron County played a large part in these explorations.



Orson B. Adams

William H. Dame

James H. Martineau

Photos from Church History Biographical Database and SUU Special Collections Library.

On instruction from Brigham Young, George W. Bean left Holden on 2 April 1858 to search the vast deserts to the west for a possible place of refuge for the people of Utah from the U. S. army.

The 2,000 federal troops had wintered at Camp Scott, some 115 miles east of Salt Lake City and were expected to soon resume their march into the capital city of the Utah Territory to squash a supposed rebellion.

The exploring expedition led by Bean consisted of 100 men from around the Utah Territory, including 28 men from Iron County. Orson B. Adams led 12 men from Parowan, while a Cedar City contingent of 16 was led by Charles Hopkins.

After finding what seemed likely to be the fabled "White Mountain" (Wheeler Peak), Bean and his men explored the Snake Valley area. Orson Adams and the Iron County men were then sent to the northwest for further exploration. They found ample water in what later became known as the Steptoe Valley (Ely, Nevada), but with high elevation and frost every night, the area was not considered suitable for farming. Adams made a map of the areas explored throughout the expedition.

Three weeks after Bean left Holden, a second exploring party started into the desert expanse. An expedition of 60 men led by Colonel William Dame of the Iron County militia left Iron Springs west of Cedar City on April 26.

Traveling west into what is now Nevada, James Martineau wrote that their mission was to find "a place of refuge; some valley which should be surrounded by a desert requiring a five-day's march to cross."

One of the members of the Dame expedition was Asahel Bennett, who with his family traveled through the area in late 1849 with a party of 49ers seeking a shortcut to the California gold fields.

The 49ers were part of a wagon train led by Jefferson Hunt who was on his way to Los Angeles and had previously traveled the Old Spanish Trail.

Bennett was with a group that left Hunt and the main trail and took what they thought would be a shorter way to the gold. Unfortunately, the shortcut went through Death Valley and several 49ers perished in that harsh environment.

Bennett and his family survived the ordeal. After eight years in California and after the death of his wife, Bennett found his way to Cedar City in 1857. He was recruited to join the Dame expedition.

Bennett helped Dame avoid the obstacle of the Beaver Dam Wash by steering to the north. The Dame explorers followed the old 49er trail until Dry Lake Valley, where the old trail turned southwest and the Dame expedition went northwest.

Bennett enjoyed telling tales around the campfire of his experiences with the Death Valley 49ers, and James Martineau wrote that these stories were still vivid in his memory more than thirty years after hearing them.

Finding water was always a challenge. Martineau tells of camping without water, but finding a local Paiute the next day who let them know that water could be found by digging holes in the sand in a nearby gulch.

Holes, about two feet deep, were dug and water slowly trickled in. A man was stationed at each hole to scoop the water into a spoon, which would then fill a cup, and then a pail. It took until noon the next day for everyone to get a drink and to water the horses, and then it didn't seem enough.

Martineau explains that Brigham Young's strategy to locate settlements across a wide desert, with only small and isolated water sources would make it very difficult for a large army to get through - the larger the army, the more difficult.

Martineau tells of another encounter: "One day we saw an Indian at a little distance with an antelope upon his shoulders, which he had snared." The men of the expedition had been without water for 36 hours and figured the Indian would know where to find some. They approached him, "but he fled as soon as he saw us, still carrying his antelope. Three horsemen gave chase and pursued him a mile before he dropped his burden, and still another mile before he was surrounded."

Terrified and probably expecting death, he was given some food and asked where water could be found. "He turned, beckoning our men to follow him down into a plain apparently perfectly devoid of water; but after going about a mile they suddenly came to a little brook about two feet wide and six inches deep, flowing in a channel five or six feet deep, and so narrow that its presence would be unsuspected a little distance away."

Martineau continues: "This incident shows the great speed and endurance of these Indians on foot. It has been said they can run down and tire out a deer or antelope when once upon its trail, and from what the writer has himself seen, he would not say it is impossible."

If a time warp were possible, it could be said that Coach Houle at SUU might have a place for such a runner on his cross country team.

Martineau describes another search for water where a native led them to a nearby mountain. Expecting to find a spring at the base of the mountain, the men were disappointed.

The native continued to point up the mountain. The further up they went the more doubtful the prospects for water seemed. Finally at the top, the Indian removed some large flat rocks covering natural tanks of water accumulated from rains and snows. After the men filled their canteens, the native carefully covered the water holes with the rocks to preserve them for future use.

Crops were planted at Snake Valley (Baker, Nevada) by the Bean expedition and Meadow Valley (Panaca, Nevada) by Dame's men. Although the crops looked promising at first, they withered later in the season due to large amounts of alkali in the soil.

The Utah War was brought to a peaceful conclusion in June 1858, and it did not become necessary for Utah residents to migrate into the desert lands of Nevada at that time.

Some of the men of the two "White Mountain" expeditions were away from home for four months. Their dedication to a mission that later appeared to be unnecessary and is now largely forgotten is part of a legacy of peaceful interactions with the natives and enduring with hope through difficult times.