

FIRST DRAFT

Utah pioneers refuse to give up during Hole in Rock Expedition

More states may extend Medicaid for new mothers

BY MATT VOLZ
Kaiser Health News

At Christmas, 1879, 250 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were on a mission to establish a settlement along the San Juan River in southeastern Utah.

But their way was blocked by the towering sandstone cliffs at the Colorado River. They were 60 miles from the nearest settlement, and they were already well behind schedule.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

Supplies were low, and winter had arrived.

So they danced. And sang. And praised God.

On Christmas Eve, mission members "danced on the not-too-smooth sandstone rocks to the tune of the company's violins," wrote historian David E. Miller. "It must have been a strange new sound that wafted over the desert country; violin music, singing, joyful voices, laughter."

They were in the midst of a remarkable journey. They had already spent two months on what was supposed to be a six-week trek, and the worst was yet to come. It would take them another three months — and incredible struggles — to reach their destination.

I've written previously about the Hole in the Rock Expedition, officially known as the San Juan Mission.

But until I visited the area, saw the actual Hole in the Rock and traveled the troublesome road to get there, I couldn't begin to understand how difficult the journey had been.

Judy and I made the trip in September with friends, Mike and Sandy Perry. We drove the 60 miles from Escalante, Utah, to Hole in the Rock in a modern four-wheel-drive truck. It took us 3½ hours, one way.

To reach the Hole in the Rock, you drive east five miles from Escalante on paved Utah Highway 12 to the Hole-in-the-Rock Road. From there, it's all dirt road, much of it impassable in wet weather.

The first 40 miles aren't bad — lots of washboard and a few arroyos to cross. It's mostly sandy desert with salt brush, a smattering of sagebrush and other plants. The Escalante River lies to the north, flowing to the Colorado. To the south is Fifty-Mile Mountain, a long escarpment that parallels the road.

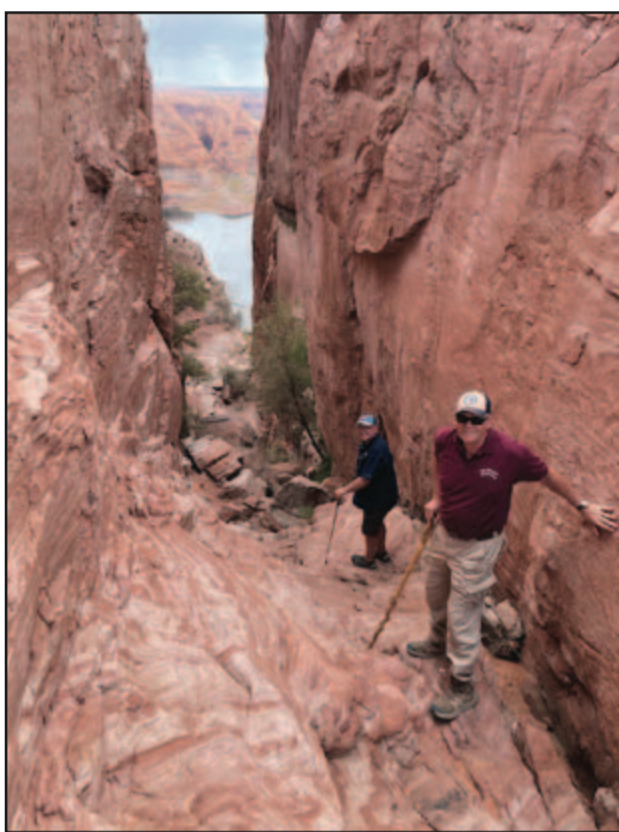
Eventually, you reach Forty-mile Spring, where the pioneers spent three weeks in November and early December preparing for the rest of the journey. Forty-mile Spring had good water and meager grazing for the expedition's livestock.

A mile and a half away, Dance Hall Rock rises dramatically out of the desert. Its walls provided great acoustics for the musicians, and it had a relatively flat sandstone surface for dancing. Mission members held dances and probably church services there.

By Christmas, however, they were dancing elsewhere — either at Fifty-mile Spring or at the edge of Hole in the Rock. In these two camps, about five miles apart, they waited while the mission's engineers blasted and chiseled a path through the cliff wide



Judy and Bob Silbernagel test their rusty dance skills at Dance Hall Rock on the road to Hole in the Rock. MIKE PERRY/Special to the Sentinel



Mike Perry and Bob Silbernagel, right, begin their descent of the upper portion of the Hole in the Rock wagon road, which was originally a 1,200-foot descent to the Colorado River. Lake Powell, in the background, has flooded the lower portion of the trail. JUDY SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

enough for wagons. It's 15 miles from Forty-mile Spring to Hole in the Rock, and it's the worst part of the road from Escalante. In places, vehicles must crawl over foot-high rocks. There are deep arroyos, narrow ledges and tight switchbacks.

In 1963, seven Boy Scouts and six adults from Provo, Utah, were killed at one switchback. Riding in the back of a pickup that stalled going up the steep grade, they were crushed as the truck's brakes failed and it plunged backward over the embankment.

Nothing like that happened to the 1879 pioneers, however. Their trip to Fifty-mile Spring occurred without serious injury, but not without difficulty.

Platte D. Lyman, second in command of the mission, described this section as "the roughest country I ever saw a wagon go over."

In early December, Lyman was ready to abandon the route. After trekking to the Colorado River, he returned to the Forty-mile camp on Dec. 1, 1879, and wrote in his journal: "It is certainly the worst country I ever saw ... most of us are satisfied that there is no use of this company undertaking to get through to San Juan this way."

A few days later, however, he had a change of heart, after urging from the mission's captain,

Silas S. Smith. On Dec. 3, Lyman wrote: "All present expressed themselves willing to spend 3 or 4 months if necessary working the road in order to get through."

Of three routes available, the middle one was taken. The distance from Cedar City to the San Juan River was much shorter than the alternatives.

Furthermore, scouts who had explored the southern route earlier in 1879 had encountered unfriendly Navajos, and they'd had difficulty finding adequate water and grass.

The northern alternative was the best known and safest route. It was essentially the Old Spanish Trail. But the distance, about 450 miles, was more than twice that of the middle route.

On Dec. 4, a meeting of all mission members was held, and "it was unanimously resolved to go to work on the road," through Hole in the Rock, Lyman wrote.

That meant blasting the narrow crevasse in the cliff wide enough for wagons to enter and slide down the first 300 feet toward the river. After that, wooden trestles for a shelf road were built to allow wagons to gradually descend the remaining 900 feet.

A large raft was built to ferry the wagons and most people across the river, while livestock

and their herders had to swim.

Finally, another rough pathway was hewn out of the 250-foot cliffs on the opposite side of the river, so the wagons could climb to the plateau there.

The work was completed by the last week of January, 1880. Then the 83 wagons were pushed through the Hole. Panicked horse teams harnessed to wagons skidded and slipped to their knees. Logs were tied to rear wheels, and dozens of men strained at ropes to slow the wagons on the 45-degree descent.

Amazingly, all of them made it without a severe wreck. Nobody was killed, and all the scraped and bruised horses survived.

Today, fallen rocks have made the Hole in the Rock trail impassable for all but the most sure-footed pedestrians, and Lake Powell has buried the bottom portion of the trail.

But for a year after it was opened, members of the San Juan Mission used the Hole trail to go back and forth to Escalante for supplies.

In early February, 1880, after crossing the Colorado River, the Mormon pioneers were still 100 miles from the San Juan River.

They still had to cross land that mission member Elizabeth Morris Decker described as "nothing ... but rocks and holes, hills and hollows."

Difficult road building remained, across canyons and streams and up steep hillsides. Finally, in the first week of April, 1880, the pioneers struggled into the valley where the town of Bluff would soon be built. They began to create farms, homes and irrigation systems.

One member reported that as the exhausted Mormons rolled their wagons the last few miles into the valley, they began to sing. Perhaps, after surviving their exhausting journey, they also danced.

Sources: "Hole in the Rock: An Epic in the Colonization of the Great American West," by David E. Miller; Hole in the Rock exhibition, Escalante Heritage Center, Escalante, Utah; "A Guide to Southern Utah's Hole-in-the-Rock Trail," by Stewart Aitchison; plaques along the trail provided by the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service.

Bob Silbernagel's email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.

All contents copyright © 2022 The Daily Sentinel. All republication rights are reserved. Material in this publication may not be published, broadcast, rewritten for broadcast or publication or redistributed directly or indirectly in any medium.

Pick 3 Midday Sunday: **No drawings on Christmas**
Evening Sunday: **No drawings on Christmas**
Cash 5 Sunday: **No drawings on Christmas**
For information, go to www.coloradolottery.com.

How to reach us: 242-5050. Business hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday, excluding holidays. Circulation phones are closed Saturday and open 7-11 a.m. on Sundays

| | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| CIRCULATION Subscription and delivery questions: 242-1919 or (800) 332-5833 | ADVERTISING Retail advertising..... 256-4289 Classified advertising..... 242-1313 | NEWSROOM Managing editor 256-4252 City desk..... 256-4226 | Features and entertainment..... 256-4224 Sports..... 256-4203 Commentary 256-4236 |
|--|--|--|---|

Lawmakers in several conservative-led states — including Montana, Wyoming, Missouri, and Mississippi — are expected to consider proposals to provide a year of continuous health coverage to new mothers enrolled in Medicaid.

Medicaid beneficiaries nationwide are guaranteed continuous postpartum coverage during the ongoing covid-19 public health emergency. But momentum has been building for states to extend the default 60-day required coverage period ahead of the emergency's eventual end.

Approximately 42% of births nationwide are covered under Medicaid, the federal-state health insurance program for low-income people, and extending postpartum coverage aims to reduce the risk of pregnancy-related deaths and illnesses by ensuring that new mothers' medical care isn't interrupted.

The push comes as a provision in the American Rescue Plan Act makes extending postpartum Medicaid coverage easier because states no longer need to apply for a waiver.

A renewed focus on maternal health amid high U.S. maternal mortality rates also is driving the proposals, as is the expectation that more women will need postpartum care as state abortion bans proliferate in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to eliminate federal protections.

Thirty-five states and Washington, D.C., have already extended, or plan to extend, postpartum eligibility in their Medicaid programs. That number includes Texas and Wisconsin, which did not implement the ARPA provision but have proposed limited extensions of six months and 90 days, respectively.

The 15 states that limit postpartum Medicaid eligibility to 60 days are predominantly a swath of Republican-led states that stretch from the Mountain West to the South. But that could change when legislative sessions start in the new year.

In Montana, Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte and Department of Public Health and Human

Services Director Charlie Brereton included 12-month postpartum eligibility in the governor's proposed state budget.

It would cost \$9.2 million in federal and state funding over the next two years, according to the proposal, with the federal government covering nearly 70%.

A 2021 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report estimated about 2,000 women in Montana would benefit from the change. State health department spokesperson Jon Ebel said state officials' estimate is half that number. The reason for the disparity was not immediately clear.

Brereton considers the "extension of coverage for new mothers to be a pro-life, pro-family reform," Ebel said.

To become law, the proposal must be approved by state lawmakers once the legislative session begins in January.

It has already received enthusiastic support from the senior Democrat on the committee that oversees the health department's budget. "Continuous eligibility for women after they have a baby is really important," said state Rep. Mary Caferro during the Children's Legislative Forum in Helena on Nov. 30.

The top Republican on the committee, state Rep. Bob Keenan, said he hasn't dug in on the governor's budget proposal but added that he plans to survey his fellow lawmakers and health care providers on the postpartum extension.

"I wouldn't dare venture a guess as to its acceptance," he said.

Nationwide, more than 1 in 5 mothers whose pregnancies were covered by Medicaid lose their insurance within six months of giving birth, and 1 in 3 pregnancy-related deaths happen between a week and a year after a birth occurs, according to federal health officials.

The U.S. had the highest overall maternal mortality rate, by far, among wealthy nations in 2020, at 23.8 deaths per 100,000 births, according to a report by the Commonwealth Fund.

The Daily Sentinel (ISSN 1445-8962)
Printed editions published Wednesday thru Sunday, electronic editions published every morning at 734 S. Seventh Street, Grand Junction, CO 81501.
Periodical Postage paid at Grand Junction, CO.
Hybrid home delivery prices: 13 weeks - \$81.90, 26 weeks - \$163.80, 52 weeks - \$327.60.
Weekend delivery packages: Wednesday thru Sunday - \$260.00, Friday thru Sunday - \$197.60, Saturday & Sunday - \$163.80, Sunday only - \$163.80.
Weekend "print only" delivery includes the following date in 2022: 11/24/2022. If you are an e-edition subscriber for 11/24/2022, you will not receive a printed paper.
Single Copy: \$1.00 daily and \$2.00 Sunday.
Mail (USPS): \$30.00 per week, \$1,560 per year. *POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: The Daily Sentinel, 734 S. Seventh Street, Grand Junction, CO 81501.*



Ride with
1073
The Outlaw
WESTERN COLORADO'S
OUTLAW COUNTRY



Listen Live Now!
[At 1073theoutlaw.com](http://1073theoutlaw.com)