

HISTORY STEPS OFF THE PAGE: THE PAST IN THE FUTURE  
A CASE STUDY OF HOW THE MORMON BATTALION  
IS MAKING HISTORY INTERACTIVE

by

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## ABSTRACT

History Steps Off the Page: The Past in the Future  
A Case Study of How the Mormon Battalion Is  
Making History Interactive

by

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This thesis addresses the presentation of the Mormon Battalion's history in three interactive forms. The Battalion served in the U.S.-Mexican War between 1846 and 1847. In 2008 a group known as Battalion Trek chose to retrace the original trail as closely as possible. The three chapters of this thesis address the reenactors who planned and completed the retrace, the blog they kept as they did so, and a program which allows those interested to learn more about the trail. Analyzing what such presentations have to offer is important as history moves into the hands of the public and as the world moves deeper into the technological realm.

(88 pages)

To my parents, Valiant Kent Jones and Lori Ransom Jones,  
who instilled in me a love of history that has added to  
my own beautiful past, present, and future.

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This thesis would have been impossible without Kevin and Denny Henson’s permission and support—little did I know how indebted I would be for our adventure.

And lastly, I give special thanks to my family, my parents Valiant and Lori Jones, who read biographies aloud and had us making home videos of historical moments before a trip to Boston when I was ten. They let my siblings (Bradley, Craig, Camilla, and Dallin) and me choose where we would go for spring break my senior year of high school. One choice was Disney World.

We chose Gettysburg, naturally.

Allyson Jones

## CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. INTIMATE HARDSHIPS .....	18
III. FROM THE LOG TO THE BLOG .....	33
IV. TRAILBLAZING FROM THE COUCH .....	54
V. CONCLUSION.....	69
REFERENCES .....	72
APPENDIX.....	80

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	Figure 1 .....	80
2	Figure 2 .....	80
3	Figure 3 .....	80
4	Figure 4 .....	80
5	Figure 5 .....	80

## INTRODUCTION

“YOUR WORK DOESN’T MEAN MUCH IF IT DOESN’T GET SEEN”:

### PASTISM, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND THE BURNS EFFECT

John Adams described General George Washington as one of the great actors of the stage, though the stage Adams referred to was not a traditional one, flanked by curtains and surrounded by paying patrons ready to be entertained (McCullough 593). According to Adams, Washington performed for his troops and for the fledgling country—he performed, as in he pretended he knew what he was doing as he played a lead in the unscripted events of the American Revolution. His acting literally made history.

Americans today still appreciate a good show.

That is not to say that all of history has been a show or an act. It was and is real—the people, the places, the events—so real that we cannot know exactly what it was like then. But that does not mean that we should not try to gain from what the past as we now know it has to offer us.

The past is fascinating in some way to nearly everyone, but there is no arguing that a good portion of society holds a heated dislike of the classic “dates and places” approach to history. More academic approaches to studying the past may be one of the reasons the public is not as engaged with history as it could be. Pulitzer Prize winner Gordon Wood states that while there were academic historians in the 1950s, such as Richard Hofstadter, Allan Nevins, Eric Goldman, Daniel Boorstin, and C. Vann Woodward, who wrote history accessible to both academic and public audiences, the same is not true today. In his opinion, “popular historians who have no academic



appointment,” including David Mc-Cullough, Walter Isaacson, Ron Chernow, Thomas Fleming, and Stacy Schiff, have “successfully moved in to fill the void left by the academic historians” who Wood sees as “preoccupied by issues of race, gender, and multiculturalism” (Wood 6). This so-called “preoccupation” would no doubt offend historians, and it is wrong on many counts—Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s renown is a good example of how women’s history brought many new readers to the field. Wood may be correct, however, in the assumption that public audiences have not followed these narrowing sub-fields. I do not believe this lack of audience is because such social issues are irrelevant or uninteresting to the public, but because of how such topics are presented. When historians narrow their focus beyond what even an educated member of the public can understand, their writing becomes inaccessible and turns readers away.

While some may fear that Americans know little about their heritage and that this ignorance endangers the national identity, “there is good evidence to show that ordinary people are more interested in and know more about their pasts than ever before, though their knowledge is no longer confined to compulsory time frames and spaces of the old national historiography” writes social historian John R. Gillis (17). While Joseph Ellis aptly coined the term “pastism” to describe the “scholarly tendency to declare the past off-limits to nonscholars,” there is no arguing that the past is moving into the hands of the masses (25). So there is no need to fear loss of national identity—only to question where that identity is drawn from, as

Americans . . . have become compulsive consumers of the past, shopping for that which best suits their particular sense of self at the moment, constructing out of a bewildering variety of materials, times, and places the multiple identities that are demanded of them in the post-national era. (Gillis 17-18)

Americans are shopping for new means of consuming the past as well—in the words of a professor who studies agritourism, “[W]e’ve moved to an experience economy” (as qtd. in Biuso F7). In a time when many encounter or experience history through an interactive history venue instead of from the printed publications of scholars,<sup>1</sup> it is important to analyze what—and from whom and where—these public consumers are learning.

The history discipline values accessibility, adapts to audiences, and strives for authenticity.<sup>2</sup> In this thesis I will seek to theorize a specific group’s history by analyzing the audience of the Mormon Battalion’s interactive history and how accessible and authentic that history is. To glean a better understanding of history in different media, I will address three unique presentations of the Mormon Battalion’s history and argue that these have a valid, valuable place in historical study, especially as the world moves away from print media.

While my use of the Battalion may appear to ask for an analysis of the group’s motives, religious ties, or experience, that is not at all my intention. I do acknowledge, however, that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members are often referred to as Mormons, is well known for its attention to the past with emphases on both its own pioneer history and the family history of each member.<sup>3</sup> Rather, while I

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<sup>1</sup> A decline in book publishing has been a concern for roughly a century, according to a *New York Times* article from 1914 entitled, “AMERICANS ARE BECOMING SMALL BUYERS OF BOOKS; Per Capita Production of Volumes Here Less Than That of Other Leading Nations --- Poor Methods of Distribution and Modern Amusements Blamed in Part” (Gilder 50). There is no question that now the internet, with its infinite “methods of distribution” and all of its “modern amusements,” has forever changed the archive.

<sup>2</sup> Because I will employ these terms repeatedly, it is important that I define them clearly. I view accessibility as ease of retrieval and comprehension. Audience is, in this discussion, those who can and do access and understand the presented materials. And authenticity is, borrowing from Merriam-Webster’s definition, the quality of being “worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact.”

acknowledge these aspects, due to the recent work done with the Battalion, specifically from 2008-2009, my analysis will serve as a case study of unique ways to present and promote history now and in the future.

“Hard has been our fare as soldiers,” wrote Mormon Battalion member Henry Standage in June of 1847 (Golder 227). Though one of the lesser-known American military groups, the Mormon Battalion was a group of 500 volunteers who marched roughly 2,000 miles, from present-day Council Bluffs, Iowa to present-day San Diego, California as part of the U.S.-Mexican War effort between July 1846 and January 1847. By the time the group reached California, the war had ended, and the only battle they had fought was with wild long-horn bulls. Over their often treacherous march, which is said to be one of the longest in U.S. military history, they did much, including carving Cooke’s Wagon Road which eventually became historic U.S. 80.

The group was drawn from the body of Mormons who had been forced to leave the state of Illinois because of religious persecution in the bitter cold of early 1846. While the government’s “offer” to pay the “volunteer” battalion might be seen as generous, it required the men to leave their families, stranded in Iowa, in the hands of fellow church members. In reality the call for volunteers was a test of loyalty (Tyler 117). Mormon poet Eliza R. Snow wrote in a poem about the Mormon Battalion:

Five hundred men were called to go  
To settle claims with Mexico  
To fight for that same Government  
From which, as fugitives we went. . . .  
Was General Kearney satisfied?

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<sup>3</sup> The Church hosts FamilySearch.org, “the largest genealogy organization in the world.” The site boasts that “For over 100 years, FamilySearch has been actively gathering, preserving, and sharing genealogical records worldwide. Patrons may freely access our resources and service online at FamilySearch.org, or through over 4,500 family history centers in 70 countries” (“About FamilySearch”).

Yes, more—for he with martial pride  
Said, “O’er the Alps Napoleon went,  
But *these men cross’d a continent*. (Tyler 107-109)

After a number of years of reenacting annually with a group of local Boy Scouts, in 2008 amateur historians Kevin and Denice (Denny) Henson, of Midland, Michigan, organized a non-profit organization titled Battalion Trek, to find, map, and retrace, to the best of their ability, the original Mormon Battalion trail. I spent from 4 July 2008 to 7 August 2008 with the Battalion Trek organization, traveling from Thayer, Iowa, to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. From that experience this project was born. This thesis will discuss three presentations of the Mormon Battalion by the Hensons: reenacting itself, the use of a blog by reenactors, and a website that allows users to share and learn about historical trails.

My style is whole-heartedly American Studies—an interdisciplinary approach, a literary voice laced with research. While I do not mean to honor or discredit either the academic or popular history argument, my goal remains to gain insight, not to demand or declare authoritative resolution; I will focus on form to a greater degree than content.

Throughout the research and the resultant evaluation I will keep in mind and motivate the words of Allan Megill, who states, “Historical experience is not the deluded and blithely arrogant conviction that we have experienced the past as people in the past experienced it. Rather, properly understood, it is the experience of a rift, a break, between what *we are* now and what *others were* then,” and I would add, what we will be (213). Historical experience is, I would argue, a liminal space—an in-between. These three presentations of history by the Hensons—reenacting, blogging, and virtual mapping—do not recreate the past; they cannot. But they do bring something to the field of history and

to the public from that threshold between the past and the present. I believe we must recognize and analyze what this is and then we must value, we must learn from what they do teach us and look forward with critical interest to other forms which will bridge the past and future. I do not seek to argue about the existence of these unique, interactive historical based forms—they exist and since it is impossible to escape them, it is necessary to analyze what and why and how they present history. Again, I will do this by addressing what they tell us about the audience, accessibility, and authenticity of history.

The history discipline cannot ignore the fact that the public accesses history in many popular forms. According to noted historian Stephen Ambrose, “More Americans get their history from Ken Burns than any other source” (“Ken Burns, About”). Popular, non-print media sources should be investigated because of the truth of statements like Ambrose’s—today Ken Burns’s signature filming of photographs is part of such video editing programs as Apple’s iMovie and Final Cut Express “as, yes, the ‘Ken Burns Effect,’” and one desktop video website begins by stating, “Let’s have a look at how you can ‘Be Like Ken’” (as qtd. in Breitbart 169). *Wikipedia*, a source I would usually scoff at but which exemplifies the infiltrating wave of new media, declares that the “Ken Burns Effect” can also be used “to refer to a person who gains an increased degree of celebrity after appearing in a Burns documentary” (Breitbart 177). As an introduction to my more focused case study, I will begin with a detailed look at famed documentary filmmaker Ken Burns to see how history, joined with popular media, is changing who accesses the past—and how. I will not only discuss the popularization of history, but also Burns’s use of photographs to represent that history.

Rocketed to celebrity status himself by the unprecedented public response to his 1990 documentary, *The Civil War*, Ken Burns is now a household name. He is perhaps one of many filmmakers to take history to the public in such a medium but is the only one to reach such popularity; he is, as Burns scholar Gary Edgerton observes, “a documentarian who reaches his largest audiences through television, not despite this fact” (“Mystic” 23).

Burns, whose anthropologist father was “an obsessive photographer” (Wadler B4) and who studied at Hampshire College with photographers Jerome Liebling and Elaine Mayes (Edgerton, “Mystic” 12), is known for his “rephotographing” technique in which he pans across photographs, creating a scene from a single image. These shots are supplemented by narration that includes interviews with academics as well as voices from the past. While this filmmaking technique is nothing new, Burns’s style has caught the public’s attention—*The Civil War* reached 14 million viewers with its first episode, and almost 40 million as the series continued, “the largest audience for a public television series ever” (Edgerton, *Ken Burns’s America* 1). Burns himself has said, “Your work doesn’t mean much if it doesn’t get seen” (qtd. in DeNitto 88). But while no one can contest that Burns’s work is seen, what does his work—and its popularity—mean?

There is no denying that without Burns’s incredible access to media outlets, namely PBS, his audience would be much smaller. He has stated that he is “in public television for two reasons. Nobody can tell me what to do. That is to say, I own my film and I control its distribution, and no sponsor can tell me what to put into it. . . . The other is, there is no commercial interruption.” It took hard work to gain access to such outlets though. James Day, author of *The Vanishing Vision: The Inside Story of Public*

*Television*, writes that Burns has learned the lesson of all independents, “that creativity alone is meaningless without the patience and skills to find the dollars to make it happen” (315). Burns’s hard work has paid off—in 1999 General Motors committed “to financing 35 percent of every documentary project Mr. Burns undertakes in the next 10 years, and to paying for 100 percent of the extensive educational projects that accompany his films.” The GM executive in charge of the arrangement said of the deal, “For General Motors, it is a chance to burnish a prestigious relationship with an established ‘cultural icon’” (Mifflin E10). Burns has such freedom and trust that even his sponsors are, in his words, “insulated from any involvement in the content of the film. General Motors does not tell me how to make films, and I do not tell them how to make cars” (qtd. in Cripps 750). The head of the public relations firm GM hired to promote Burns adds that on top of his iconic status, “I’ve never met anyone as quotable” (qtd. in Leventhal 81). But not everyone is captivated by Burns’s eloquence.

Burns repeatedly employs historians’ practices of researching, compiling, and writing; and yet his work reaches a much larger audience than historians’ does.

Filmmaker, writer, and photographer Eric Breitbart takes a critical look at Ken Burns (and his brother, fellow documentary maker, Eric [Ric] Burns) in his article, “The Burns Effect: Documentary as Celebrity Advertisement.” He states that the “full arc of the ‘Burns Effect’” includes:

First, the choice of a subject whose importance is beyond question; second, extensive research, leading to rarely seen archival film and photographs and quotations from original documents read aloud by well-known actors; third, interviews with unfailingly articulate historians, critics, and writers, beautifully lit and shot in flattering close-ups; fourth, a solemn, authoritative narration spoken by a friendly, authoritative

voice. . . ; fifth, a complete marketing package featuring books, CDs, and a wide variety of ancillary merchandise aimed at the home television audience and also schools and libraries; and last but not least, music. (Breitbart 170)

Sarcasm ekes from Breitbart's observation. He concludes: "If there's one thing the Burns Style abhors, it's silence. And if there's one thing it abhors more than silence, it's brevity: never say in one hour what you what you can say in four, and never say in four what you say in twelve. Think of the Burns Effect as the anti-YouTube" (Breitbart 170). And it's true—Burns's films are often epic in length—the final script of *The Civil War* was 372 pages (Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America* 13).

Burns does not apologize for his work. He describes his role with a term he has used repeatedly: "I think I'm primarily a filmmaker. That's my job. I'm an amateur historian at best, but more than anything if you wanted to find a hybridization of those two professions, then I find myself an *emotional archaeologist*." He clarifies by stating, "That is to say, there is something in the process of filmmaking that I do in the excavation of these events in the past that provokes a kind of emotion and a sympathy that remind us, for example, of why we agree against all odds as a people to cohere" (qtd. in Edgerton, "Mystic" 16, emphasis added). I find Burns's self-given title fitting because his work does mine the past to uncover and reveal the human elements; however, beyond that, Burns seems to play the part of an archeologist because his presentation interprets for the audience—the way in which he combines and presents his findings tells us what they mean. Though Burns may not be lauded or qualified by the standards of all, Edgerton reminds us that "filmmakers and professional historians alike are all amateurs



when it comes to detecting the human traces of lives once lived among the emotional resonances of the past” (*Ken Burns’s America* 217).

Though Burns does a great deal of research for each of his films, the fact that he is not a historian has garnered critique along with a great deal of praise. (He did, in fact, receive eight honorary doctorates in 1991 alone [Edgerton, *Ken Burns’s America* 6]). Burns freely admits that he puts his personal perspective on his work; of his documentary on Thomas Jefferson he said, “I go at it looking for Thomas Jefferson and the Thomas Jefferson that I found is not THE Thomas Jefferson, but my Thomas Jefferson” (qtd. in Edgerton, “Mediating”169). And in his honesty, it is clear that Burns does not pretend to be or *want* to be an objective academic historian—in fact, he stated that using new media to tell history is “breaking the stranglehold the academicians exercised over this discipline for the last hundred years” (qtd. in Edgerton, *Ken Burns’s America* 17). He also showed a fair amount of nerve in stating at the 1998 American Historical Association Conference,

That group of people out there that for the most part the academy has ignored is as sophisticated as you are. They may not be versed with the language and the nomenclature and the detailed specificity that you engage in, and that in fact is your greatest peril as well as your greatest strength, but they are finely tuned to the subtleties and nuances of history. (qtd. in Edgerton, *Ken Burns’s America* 151)

I, too, share Burns’s belief that the detail, the authenticity that academics strive for can be a strength, but it can also be grasped for at the expense of history’s accessibility; often this leads to a shrinking audience as well.

Interestingly, though what Edgerton calls the “immediacy” simulated by Burns stands “in contrast to the printed word’s propensity toward logic, detachment, and

reasoned discourse,” Burns’s work has made history accessible enough—in both viewing opportunities and ease of comprehension—to turn the public back to print (Edgerton, “Mystic” 24). According to prolific scholar, and often Burns critic, Catherine Clinton, “Burns’s historical influence has brought people back to reading (or at least buying!) more books, created a vogue in Civil War scholarship.” She goes on to say that Burns’s films have “launched numerous projects at libraries and state humanities commissions across the country. Our students, our readership, and the entire enterprise of bringing history to the people have profited.” Clinton continues, “The very volume symbolizes his impact. We must salute him, even as some may seek to bury him” (66). The public is reading and learning through newer media as well; the website created to accompany the Thomas Jefferson miniseries was more than one-thousand pages, and that was in 1997 (Edgerton, “Mediating” 173).

Eric Foner has written, “Historical truth does exist, not in the scientific sense but as a reasonable approximation of the past. But the most difficult truth for those outside the ranks of professional historians to accept is that there often exists more than one legitimate way of recounting past events” (xvii). I disagree with Foner’s categorization—in my observations it is just as much the professional historians who cannot see any value or truth in different ways of presenting the past. Even though we differ on this point, Foner has stated my argument: there is more than one legitimate and valuable way to study and share the past. Gordon Wood sums this up well in saying,

The impulse of the best historians is always to penetrate ever more deeply into the circumstances of the past and to explain the complicated context of past events. The past in the hands of expert historians becomes a different world, a complicated world that requires considerable historical imagination to recover with any degree of accuracy. (10)

Burns provides such historical imagination.

Returning to Wood's statement that historians have left a void as they have become "preoccupied by issues of race, gender, and multiculturalism," I do not mean to say that Burns is completely idealistic (6). According to Edgerton, "Burns's work is very much of the moment. His historical documentaries are generally liberal on social issues, as is evident by his abiding concern for civil rights, while concomitantly traditional in respect to core American values and the nation's institutions" ("Mystic" 22). And what better way to affect social change than to reach an audience of tens of millions?

Ken Burns has, and takes, the opportunity, articulated by Walter Benjamin, to put images into situations originally out of their reach (5). In an interview with Thomas Cripps for the *American Historical Review*, Burns states that the medium of television, while often less than intellectually stimulating, "is in fact the meeting place, I believe, where these [complicated intellectual ideas] can come together." This is the power of such media. He continues, "I think it can be helpful to the academy, because if you're merely a polemicist or jealous . . . , you miss the complexity of hearing a Southern voice next to a black voice" (764). Placing himself in the liminal space between the "scholar" and "the people," Burns appeals to both, seeking to change the future through showing us who we've been and therefore are. Many feel, however, that Burns's techniques are not showing us an authentic history.

Ken Burns responds,

We film old photographs with an energetic and exploring camera eye, sort of not content to film it at arm's length and take back merely its static presence, but to go in to look and investigate the new stories that are within the photographs, and I think more than anything, to listen to what

the old photographs have to tell us. (qtd. in Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America* 72)

But Burns's storytelling of "new stories" does not necessarily make them "true stories," and if a story about the past is not true, scholars do not want it perpetuated. Scholars would argue that Burns's statement makes him a moralist, according to Susan Sontag's observation: "What moralists are demanding from a photograph is that it do what no photograph can ever do—speak" (108). But is this wrong? Without giving the photographs words—almost always words he takes from the era or experts on the era—there would be no voice from the past for those in these images. Ignoring the fact that these were living beings with voices would deny an element of authenticity even as it tried to enforce it.

Aside from its often political and patriotic tones, Burns's approach cannot keep everyone happy due to its format. After all, as Edgerton states of Burns's work, "Narrative history is not a neutral approach, of course; and the selection of the Homeric model privileges some values, ideas, and attitudes, while suppressing others" ("Mystic" 17). Because he would like to see his work as objective, Burns seeks to "emphasize the story in history, avoiding the contentions of analysis" (qtd. in Hunt 19). However, aside from his choice of voices, I see Burns's choice of photographs as a form of analysis. Sontag states, "To photograph is to confer importance"; in Burns's case, to rephotograph is to confer importance on the images and, in turn, the person or event he is exploring (28). Like the muckrakers Sontag mentions, Burns is simply "rephotographing" to get results (64). The images are supplemented by sage voices narrating as the camera pans across the photographs and evocative music enhances emotions. Each of these parts that

come together to form the whole is chosen purposefully, after a careful and lengthy analysis. And how can the importance conferred on these images be measured? It might be calculated simply by the vast number of people that comprise the audience of Burns's films—the sheer numbers speak for themselves, as well as by the numerous places other than the films where the images may appear, such as in companion books, on soundtrack covers, and on the websites.

Why does Burns use photographs? Obviously they are accessible to him, and it seems that he believes that photographs are as close as he can get to authentically representing the past. Perhaps above all, Burns uses photographs because they evoke emotion. He himself has said, “The resonances of particular lives or events seemed to really spark powerful emotions within me that sort of demanded their exploration” (qtd. in Edgerton, “Mystic” 19). I believe I would not be alone in questioning Burns's always carefully articulated words—do these lives demand exploration, or would exploitation be a better term? Again, in Sontag's words, “One of the perennial successes of photography has been its strategy of turning living beings into things, things into living beings” (98). I believe that such transformations are an arguable “success.” On one hand I find it negative that Burns may be making those real people and places in the images he rephotographs simply “things.” But on the other hand, it seems positive that he brings the past to life through these images—I hesitate to dismiss anything that draws the public to the past.

“Burns first and foremost brings these old archival pictures alive by synesthesia, or the process by which one type of sensory stimulation enhances another” (Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America* 73). “Synesthesia” does seem to reach viewers—it is quite

different from the often narrowly-focused academic articles and books. Edgerton observes that “the present image culture features the tendency to engulf its participants in a simulated *immediacy* or ‘being there’” (“Mystic” 24). Feelings of “being there” may be produced in part by the sheer number of carefully chosen images Burns uses. “The audience is, therefore, afforded a ground-level view of the historical actors through the sheer volume and variety of different people pictured in the more than 3,000 black-and-white archival photographs used through [*The Civil War*],” writes Edgerton. He continues, “These images regularly spotlight the facial expressions of young combatants or runaway slaves or nurses tending to the wounded as each of these bottom-up participants engages the viewer with looks that command recognition and reciprocal involvement” (*Ken Burns’s America* 22). This view from the bottom up seems to echo the work of revisionist historians whose current, focused research seeks previously unheard voices and interpretations. But Burns’s findings are presented in a manner completely different from such historians.

However effective Burns’s approach, I do not believe that his audience is aware of the steps he takes to create this synesthesia, or immediacy. In discussing his breakthrough film, *The Civil War*, Burns states,

There was not one shot, not one photograph of a battle ever taken during the Civil War. There is not one moment in which a photographer exposed a frame during a battle, and yet you will swear that you saw battle photography. . . . You live inside those photographs, experiencing a world as if it was real inside those photographs. (qtd. in Edgerton, *Ken Burns’s America* 12)

This is an intriguing point which I, for one, had never considered; we think that we have seen images of battles when we have only seen the aftermath—and even that has been

staged in some cases. This is apparent in the controversy surrounding Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner who, for example, moved a corpse to pose as a Union soldier in one photograph and a Confederate soldier in another (Lester ch.1). Is this idea of living inside of photographs promoting authentic history? Burns goes to great lengths—even staging—to create the literal images, and thereafter scenes, he wants, scenes he feels promote authentic history, whether or not the images are accurate.

While making the film *Thomas Jefferson*, Burns hired Robert C. Lautman, an architectural photographer, “to take hundreds of platinum Palladium prints with a nineteenth-century view camera inside and outside Monticello and throughout the accompanying slave quarters, so he could approximate the look of old archival images, which of course do not exist as far back as Jefferson's lifetime.” He then “rephotograph[ed] Lautman’s stills, thus realizing one of his main strategies . . . of portraying Monticello as a visual analogy for Jefferson himself, while continuing one of his trademark techniques . . . turning these single images into scenes rather than just shots” (Edgerton, “Mediating” 180). What are the implications of incorporating these “staged” and “aged” modern photographs into a “Ken Burns Documentary”? It seems to me that Burns’s large, and I believe we may assume trusting, audience may feel manipulated if its members realized that they were looking at images of a “fake” past. But perhaps with the trust placed in him comes permission to take artistic license.

Burns’s mentor and often narrator, David McCullough, shares words he lives by from the nineteenth century French painter Eugene Delacroix: “What I require is accuracy for the sake of imagination.” For McCullough this means that “the accuracy has to be in the research. But the writing of history and biography is very largely an

imaginative act.” Yet, “It doesn’t mean by imagination that you are making things up. It means that you are putting two and two together and you are putting yourself into the scene and the time as an act of empathy and imagination” (“David McCullough”). We must admit that Burns’s attempt to “put two and two together” shows him to have what Sontag calls “the heroism of vision” (89); his accessible views of history reach a vast audience “shopping for that which best suits their particular sense of self at the moment, constructing out of a bewildering variety of materials, times, and places the multiple identities that are demanded of them in the post-national era” (Gillis 17-18).

My goal is to come at my case study with a critical, yet open mind as I observe three sources from which we seek our “sense of self.” As I analyze these interactive historical presentations, I want to test the truth of Ken Burns’s definition: “History . . . is an inclusion of myth as well as fact because myth tells you much more than fact about people” (Cripps 749).



CHAPTER I  
INTIMATE HARDSHIPS: KNOWING AND APPRECIATING  
HISTORY BY LIVING IT

If it is true that reenacting is “[a]llegedly, the fastest growing pastime in the United States,” living history joins the ranks of problematic national pursuits (Gwaltney 493).<sup>1</sup> While it may not be as potentially harmful as staring at a television screen or as unproductive as checking Facebook, what is the purpose of living history? Yes, it is both active and productive. But to what end? What does a reenactor get from reenacting? What does the public get? Can historians gain something as well? Just as Ken Burns’s films satisfy the need for history to be accessible, to adapt to audiences, and to strive for authenticity, reenacting is also a valid and valuable presentation of history.

History has left the hands of the academy (Moss 37-38). Some feel that this can only be a negative transition. Perhaps Diane Britton is correct in stating that “[w]ithout an understanding of the relationships between memory, identity, and history, . . . public interpretation of the past is at best sentimental, and at worst useless” (22). However, Britton cannot claim that all public interpretation lacks this understanding, and many argue that this transition is “democratizing” history, or moving it into the hands of the masses, from whom the history actually comes. On the other hand, in “Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship,” John Gillis argues that in reality this may just mean privatizing it, making it even less authentic and accessible. He warns, “Today

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, while Burns’s film *The Civil War* is his best known work, Civil War reenactors are probably the most recognized among the general American public. According to links on a reenacting group’s self-made website, there are Civil War reenactors in not only the U.S., but Canada, France, Australia, Germany, and England (“Reenacting”).

packaged forms of both memory and history have proved so profitable that we must be wary of the results of commodification and commercialization as much as the consequences of political manipulation” (19-20). The untrained public and even some reenactors may sacrifice authenticity for this packaged memory and history. As William Gwaltney observes in his study of Mountain Man reenactors and their rendezvous,

Mostly recreational in nature, the modern rendezvous emphasizes enjoyment rather than teaching or learning history. . . . No one sees the need to confuse the love of history with the knowledge of history. Loving the West as it was, *or as it should have been*, is enough. (496, emphasis added)

But is misunderstanding and believing in this nostalgic view of history really enough?

This chapter addresses the use and production of historical sources by and through historical reenacting, or living history. It specifically considers sources that were used by, discovered by, or created by, the Battalion Trek organization, and what these sources bring to the historical canon and to the discussion of historical authenticity.

Why would anyone choose to reenact the Mormon Battalion march, which did not produce any notable victories? In an interview with Kevin Henson, the man who founded Battalion Trek and hiked the majority of the trail himself, he admitted that he was asked that question frequently.<sup>2</sup> He simply felt the re-hike needed to be done, and he was willing to try. “I felt I could contribute a little something from the historical standpoint, but I’ve always felt that there’s other ramifications and other reasons that I’ll probably be

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin and his wife, Denny, were the only two people who made the entire trek, though neither of them walked it all. They were joined by hikers anywhere from a day to weeks at a time. There were also usually a couple of members of support staff (for the first month this included Denny’s father and me) taking care of the RV, laundry, groceries, etc. The entourage included an RV pulled by a suburban and a former Penske truck (solid yellow), pulling a small trailer holding a turquoise port-a-potty and a tarp-covered ATV.

Why did I participate? At one point I was going to go along and work for the Hensons, though in the end I volunteered my time and energy in exchange for research opportunities and experience.

blind to my entire life” (Transcript 15, edited for clarity). What could Henson, a man with a background in the sciences, contribute? Perhaps he did not have the ability to make a contribution *from* the historical standpoint, as it is impossible to wholly recreate and speak from the past, but he showed through his preparation, journey, and reflection that he had something to contribute *to* the historical standpoint as he reached for and lived some of the intimate and often harsh aspects of the Mormon Battalion’s experience.

Living historians and reenactors build upon the research done by writers as they not only read but participate in a form of first-hand research themselves, seeking to gain knowledge and understanding available only through experience. To explain the necessity of this first-hand research to his or her audience, to make history accessible, a living historian or reenactor begins with the question, “Have you ever tried to explain to someone how to turn on a light switch?” He or she then proceeds to explain that using flint and steel was as common to the nation’s forbearers as flipping on a light is for members of today’s society. Of course, no one wrote down how to do it. This omission leaves living historians to discover the method by trial and error, and in the end, better understand the past (Maron). They, like Burns, earn, in a sense, a sort of unwritten authorship and authority as they attempt to create the past in the present.

Having spent a month during the summer of 2008 with the Battalion Trek group, I found some interesting parallels between reenacting and historical writing. To begin, I want to differentiate a couple of terms. According to Dave Maron, a Lewis and Clark reenactor and living historian, reenacting and living history are two different terms,

though they are often used interchangeably.<sup>3</sup> The general definition of a reenactment is a recreation of a moment in time while living history is an interpretation of a time period. The first seeks perfect accuracy, the second attempts to engage in the “spirit” of an era.

These goals are similar to concepts found in literature, where one finds various levels of “authenticity,” ranging from historical fiction, to counter-factual history, or even “fictive non-fiction.” Why do authors write in these different genres? They often write so that they and their readers may better understand the past. Living historians share this motivation. Lewis and Clark reenactor Dwight Peters articulated his three motivations for spending so much time at living history events, incentives echoed by his colleagues. They are: education (promoting fact over the myths taught by Hollywood), preservation (of skills), and gratification. Learning these skills as well as how to share them with the public requires a good deal of unique effort, but in the end reenactors hope that they have made authentic history more accessible to a wide audience.

In an interview, Dave Hinckley, a living historian who has won numerous awards for his frontier cooking, articulated a progression of awareness in reenactors. First they discover reenacting as hobby. They read a couple of books and think that they know a lot. Eventually they will realize their illiteracy and their own portrayal of inaccuracies. This leads them to do primary research and preparation, such as hand sewing. They reach the next level when they realize that some books are incorrect; at this point they are no longer illiterate. From there reenactors reach such a level that they are truly unaware of their level of competence—they know more than they realize and have transcended a number

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<sup>3</sup> I must admit to using the terms interchangeably in my work, as Battalion Trek worked to recreate in many ways (location, timeline, etc.) the original Battalion’s experience while acknowledging that the “spirit” of the era was all they could profess to achieve.

of borders, such as those created by the supposed authority of texts, and, in some cases, even borders created by academic degrees.

To use literature as a metaphor for reenacting, the reenactor is the author who seeks to connect with the audience in various ways. Just as a talented author can pre-identify questions that his or her readers may have and answer those questions within the text, reenactors must also decipher and answer their audience's inquiries. One living historian pointed out that he has had at least one person approach and ask, pointing to the fire pit, "Is that a real fire?" Now one's first impulse may be to sarcastically reply, "No, it's a fake fire," and move on. However, in order to reach the audience, to bridge the gap, it is better to take a moment to ponder and then answer the question he or she was endeavoring to ask, which is, "Is that similar to a fire they would have made?" (Maron). Knowing these questions comes with dedicated time and effort.

As to his historical knowledge and preparation, Henson obviously read a good deal in laying the groundwork for his journey. He read—and continues to read—any Battalion members' journals he can find. He also read such works as the biography of Philip St. George Cooke, the Army cavalry officer who led the Battalion to California, as well as contemporaries and precursors who were also making their way west in the same time period. Henson read these sources in detail and followed any directional guidance they provided as he mapped out the path that he would hike.

One such Battalion journalist was a man named Levi Hancock, whose journal displays the importance the Battalion placed on their records. Henson said that he'd grown to appreciate Hancock, who had at first been "a very difficult journalist for [him] to read and empathize with" (Transcript 22). Henson's statement does not make it clear

exactly why Hancock was difficult to read, but it does seem to imply that his approach or content does not endear his personality to the reader. Henson continues, “But his journal is certainly one of the best of the journals. And I’ve grown to appreciate the accuracy of what he recorded” (Transcript 22). Henson’s next statement is interesting following those prior. He states that Hancock “doesn’t whine a lot but he, every once in awhile you do catch it where he says, ‘Oh, you know, my feet hurt really bad,’ or, ‘I had a terrible blister,’ or, ‘So and so did what they promised they were going to do to make it easier for me to come, or possible for me to come’” (Transcript 22). Such phrases prompt the reader to wonder whether Henson values Hancock’s work so highly because it is accurate in recording what happened or because it records the difficulty of what the Battalion was experiencing. Perhaps it is both—Hancock’s detailed words capture the degree to which the group suffered. Either way, it is obvious that Henson is grateful to what appears to be fellow Battalion members who took on some of Hancock’s army responsibilities to allow him time to make such a detailed record, complete with sketches, some of which have enabled Henson to determine locations (Transcript 22).

Henson related one such “difficulty” he read about the time that the Battalion was entering California.

They were so short on mules that could carry the wagons, which is where they normally threw their packs. It finally got to the point where Colonel Cooke had to tell them, “Hey, you’re going to shoulder your pack. If you’re going to have a pack, you’re going to carry it.” And the guys threw away the packs. And one guy threw away his blankets. And he recorded in his journal to the effect that, “Ooo. I may have made a mistake there. It’s warm enough during the day, but it gets so cold bout two or three o’clock in the morning I have to get up and go back over by the fire and I rub myself and roll myself to try to get some heat. And I have to keep doing that all the way till morning. (Henson, Transcript 23, edited for clarity)

He concluded, “And...I’m glad they put those kind of comments in” (Transcript 23). He also mentions portions of the original journals where transcribed versions state, “Seventeen lines have been crossed out.” He continued, “I’m interested in what was blacked out from what it will tell us about not just the person themselves, but also their later experiences” (Henson, Transcript 24). Seeming to recant his previous opinion, Henson clarifies that negativity should be included, but as perspective. He makes a fair point: “If you just deal with all the negative all the time,” as with hypochondriacs, “You just don’t listen to ’em” (Transcript 23). And Henson wanted people to listen.

While numerous sources of information and insight are disappearing, are lost, or are inaccessible, the public does not realize what it’s missing and losing. The majority of the general public does not know of, or have an interest in, the existence of such sources—at least few would follow Henson in attending small-town historical society meetings along his route in the hopes of finding even one helpful resource, or would trace possible routes alluded to in journals through Google Earth. When reenactors are willing and strive to collect and work from accurate records and information, reenacting is beneficial to the actors, the public, and possibly to historians—not a sentimental or useless act as Britton fears.

Battalion Trek did try to hike approximately the same schedule as the original Battalion, which allowed them to experience similar weather. An example of such a similarity happened upon the group’s arrival in Santa Fe at the same time as a storm. Henson said, “Sure enough, just about the same place that they said they saw snow on the mountains for the first time, we looked up after the storm cleared out and there was snow up on the mountains, and in the same general area” (Transcript 8-9). He also often saw

animals and plants the original Battalion journalists had mentioned in the same areas. (Henson said that the journals are so detailed that they are even read by the Bureau of Land Management as they try to preserve and protect the land [Transcript 9].)

Through their literal legwork, the Hensons were able to make connections with and uncover many sources in the generous property owners they encountered. In one area of New Mexico, Henson described to one owner some of the conditions for a spring that he thought should fall on this man's property. (For example, "it was at such a location in terms of the relationship to the mountains. It had this much water flowing out of it" [Henson, Transcript 20, edited for clarity].) But he withheld a couple of details. From the given description, the owner told Henson of a spring that fit the criteria and how to get to it. After looking at the location, Henson was nearly certain that it is the location of the spring he had read about and described; it even fit the undisclosed criteria.

According to Henson's blog entry from Diamond Springs, Kansas, these property owners are people who value what they know and have. One such man, a Mr. Ritter, said, "I love being a farmer. I'm a small town boy that married right. . . . After 30 years of bumping across those Santa Fe Trail ruts, I still get goosebumps when I think about what their lives must have been like" ("Blog" 21 August 2008). In continuing to review Henson's work, it appears possible that he has found a way to keep many of these perspectives from being lost by creating new sources that contribute *to* the historical perspective, such as his blog, described in the next chapter.

As Henson put it, "The local property owners, these ranchers have got a long memory. You know, it's their great-grandparents who settled the property, and they know the children and the descendants of so and so who settled the next farm over in the next



canyon” (Transcript 21, edited for clarity). They are valuable sources because they know their area’s history so well. However, Henson makes the point that these resources will not be around forever: “We’re losing those last generations that were in touch with the original settlers there. Not only are we losing the memories, we are losing the land. It’s being lost and plowed under.” From his own experience while on the trek, he testifies that “it’s something to sit with somebody telling the story of his property. And he’s got the greatest, prettiest [wagon] ruts in this area. And he said, ‘Yeah, there were some better ones over a few miles away, but the farmer over there plowed ’em under last year’” (Transcript 21, edited for clarity).

Though he was concentrating on the Battalion’s writings and route, Henson “found that there’s more out there than we ever dreamed was available” (Transcript 19, edited for clarity). He states that he has between 12 and 15 thousand pages of sources, ancillary, secondary, and tertiary, “on extremely diverse topics—everything from the kinds of blankets that were manufactured at the time to the kind of different foods that they ate. And it’s a smorgasbord of, of bizarre things that again, [aid] my efforts to try to broaden, deepen understanding” (Transcript 19, edited for clarity). While creating an arguably privatized and perhaps even commodified viewpoint, it is clear that Henson’s approach is not founded on any simple nostalgic beliefs or an idea of the Mormon Battalion “as it should have been” (Gwaltney 496).

In the interview Henson discussed issues that come with any written record, old or new—writers self-filter, and they forget. In responding to an allegation made earlier that he has at times “cleaned up” his history, Henson said, “No, you can’t tell the whole story” (Transcript 22-23). His reasons for this filtered presentation? “It’s not that I’m

trying to put a happy face on it,” he stated—in fact it seems that he was trying to do quite the opposite, putting a living, breathing, sweaty, tired, hairy face on the story.<sup>4</sup> He continued that it’s frustrating to just read complaints. “I want to know what you learned, what you experienced. And to a point, I guess, the derogatory and negative things are part of that, and I’m glad there were journalists who recorded the difficulties that they had” (Transcript 23, edited for clarity).

As many problems as Henson confronted, from equipment issues to fearsome dogs, he could not write as Clarinda Bartholomew McCullough, whose husband left her while he served in the Battalion. He only acted the original part—he could not possibly experience her desperation, though he had numerous real frustrations of his own.

McCullough wrote in a letter to her “Dear Companion”:

The Lord has spared our lives although my trials are great and it seems sometimes as though I cannot live. . . . It is cold and your help is very much needed. I think that duty calls for you here if you are in the land of the living. . . . It is but a short time since I received your letter and have had no chance to get anything from you. I do not want you to send anymore. If you want me to have anything more comfortable you must come and bring it. . . . We all want to see you very much. . . . Thank the Lord, but I can scarcely see my line. Oh, if you were here I think I could talk all night. I must bid you goodbye my dear husband . . .

Clarinda died on 12 July 1847 from consumption without ever seeing her husband again (Maynes 334). Of course such lonely suffering is an example of something the modern Battalion did not *want* to experience.

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<sup>4</sup> Henson did not shave from his departure from Council Bluffs to his arrival in San Diego where the “cutting of the beard” event met with unexpected popularity. He even quipped that “Val Halford, one of the major reenactors from [Salt Lake City], said I’d done reenactors a service by showing how big a beard gets in seven months. Easy research, eh?” (Henson, “Blog” 31 January 2009).

The problem arises when reenactors are convinced that they have experienced or appreciate *exactly* what those they represent went through—when what they experience becomes, to them, an authentic primary historical source. Reenactors have a few terms to refer to their moments of seemingly transcendent experience, such as “moments of being,” or for some Civil War reenactors, “‘time warps’—moments when the ‘as if’ of reenacting becomes ‘this is,’” writes Rory Turner. “No one ever experiences exactly the same thing, but the transient perfection of the Civil War world in reenacting allows participants to occasionally be in the same position as those who fought long ago” (Turner 126).

Reenacting crosses numerous borders created by the passage of time. Language evolves, styles change, technology progresses, and so forth. Beyond negotiating the borders between past and present, reenactors, specifically first-person reenactors (those who take on the character of an individual from the past), have to create a border in their minds between the entirety of their knowledge and the knowledge their persona would have had. Reenactors hold each other to a high standard on this issue—Hinckley stated that any compromises one made for comfort, down to forgoing authentic undergarments, depreciate what those before went through. On the other hand, he admits that there is only so much that a reenactor can do to recreate the past. These conflicting notions create a liminal space in which living historians and reenactors reside. While neither in the past nor the present, neither wholly portraying their own identity nor that of a long-dead personality, reenactors reach moments when, in their words, they “become.”

Henson experienced numerous moments in which he felt out of his element, if not in a “time warp.” As he was hiking one day, he walked into a pack of javelinas, or wild

boars. Though he was nervous about his safety, he also paused and thought, “How many people ever stumble into a pack of javelinas without the intent of shooting one?” When he was no longer in the situation, he said he looked back and thought, “What was that all about?” He observed,

I think as you read the journals of the Battalion members or of anybody who was involved in any of these great migrations, if they’re in a reflective mood later in life as they look at this, they try to assign some meaning to it. They try to find some deeper purpose than what they began with.

But, as he went on to say, that is a normal human thought process. “I think that’s a reflective aspect of humanity, that we want it to mean something. And frequently it does. Or at least I sure hope it does. It may not be grand and glorious but hopefully it at least means something to you, if not to anyone else” (Transcript 16, edited for clarity). And that is his point: history is not necessarily grand and glorious, but it is real and it can and should have meaning in lives today. To achieve this purpose, history must reach people.

However, as Gerald Herman points out in his *Public Historian* article, “Chemical and Electronic Media in the Public History Movement,” “Combining [mass] media with perhaps dimly or imprecisely remembered bits of history often lends legitimacy to new ideas or underlines pre-existing attitudes in people’s minds that closer historical scrutiny might confirm, temper, or belie” (112). Henson would argue for this debatable authenticity. He stated, “Academics will read it in the book. They may go to the location and they may make some connections, but living it, or attempting to live it to the best of your ability, really does something different” (Transcript 5). To explain this, he used the following example:

We, we got to the Rio Grande Valley and a strong cold front moved through and we were hiking the next morning and there was a very strong northwest wind blowing, and my right ear, as I'm hiking south along the valley, my right ear just gets so cold, it just starts aching. You know, it just felt like someone was taking a knife and was stabbing it into my ear. And they didn't, these people did not leave Santa Fe, I don't believe, with the thought they were going to have to protect their ears from a cold no'erwester. And yet there it is. (Transcript 5, edited for clarity)

“And yet there it is.” Henson’s phrase speaks to the reality of the issues that he faced, issues that are much more real in-person than on paper. “What do you do? Well, you’re going to get frostbite. You’ve got to protect your ears. You’ve got to wrap a piece of fabric around. Well what kind of fabric do you have in your small pack that you can pull out and put around it?” He continues to ask, “Do you cut off a sleeve of your shirt? What do you do if your slouch hat won’t fit over and cover it? Do you tie the side brim of your hat down over your ears?” (Henson, Transcript 5, edited for clarity). Henson concluded, “And so, it’s called living history or reenacting so that you gain an appreciation of how those people had to make those choices and how they fared” (Transcript 6). Though it is impossible to know exactly “how it was,” it is possible for people today to understand the gravity of choice, which is still a part of life, and the strength and weakness, pain and fatigue that accompany physical exertion. Identifying on these levels forms a curiosity about and connection between peoples past and present. Henson strives for authenticity, and that makes what he is doing authentic.

Henson appears to dwell on the term and idea of appreciation, which itself holds deep and varied meanings. According to Merriam-Webster, the first definition of the transitive verb *appreciate* is “to grasp the nature, worth, quality, or significance of.” Second, it is “to value or admire highly.” Third, to appreciate is “to judge with

heightened perception or understanding, to be fully aware of.” And fourth, it is “to recognize with gratitude.” With these detailed definitions, appreciation of history does seem to be what Henson is endeavoring to achieve. His hike allowed both him and his companions (some of them “virtual” as I’ll discuss in later chapters) to better grasp the significance of what the Battalion did and to gain heightened perception and understanding of—and gratitude for—what they lived.

While reenacting and using the Internet to spread one’s experience may not be the traditional historical venues, isn’t the goal of historians to push boundaries and to think about history in unique and insightful ways? Perhaps most telling of all the definitions of *appreciate* is that as an intransitive verb: to appreciate is “to increase the value of” (“Appreciate”). If Henson’s goal for authentic reenacting work, accessed by a large audience along his path, increases how much the public values and seeks to understand the history of the Mormon Battalion, isn’t it a success, not simply “sentimental” and “useless,” as Britton said (22)?

Perhaps the offering of living history is that it proves that not everything was recorded; neither the public, nor reenactors, nor historians know it all. But living history teaches us to celebrate what we do know and, above all, to *appreciate* the past, to increase its value by learning more of it, better protecting it, and letting it have meaning in our lives.

Kevin Henson was well-aware of his unique and liminal situation. He wrote on 25 August 2008:

Every so often there have been experiences on Trek that make me feel “unstuck in time” to use Kurt Vonnegut’s phrase. For instance: I’m walking along, watching the ridgeline off to my left for evidence of wagon

ruts, thinking 1846 thoughts and my cell phone rings. Not strange because we get lots of phone calls. The phone number shows as “000” for the area code—and that is a little strange. The caller identifies himself as Elder Follett, a Battalion descendant. It’s always nice to hear from the descendants, so we chat for a few minutes before he mentions that he’s calling from EASTER ISLAND in the south Pacific. I have a strange moment of time & space disconnection. Can you imagine what the Battalion members would think about that? It made me shake my head. (Henson, “Blog”)

The borders between past and present were blurred at times during the re hike, as I learned first-hand. I experienced a situation in which I was approached by a farmer carrying a gun. Though I was not threatened with it, the fact that it was there, on a country road in the middle of Iowa, transported me back to the 1840s more than any other aspect of my month among reenactors. Yet though I felt a brush with the past, I am aware that my reaction was rather far from authentic for the mid-nineteenth century, a time when guns were a part of everyone’s lives in the West, serving as tools as much as weapons. Recreating or relocating the physical context of a time cannot change emotional or psychological contexts that differ greatly due to era and individuality. However, that does not make reenacting worthless; it is an accessible presentation of history, which effectively adapts to its many audiences, and strives for authenticity as it does so. Reenacting is not fully resurrecting the past, but rediscovering it in a very human form.

As Henson poignantly states of reenacting,

It’s not for everyone. It could be. Think about it. We are living the history that people will be reenacting one hundred years from now. So every person that’s alive right now is playing the part that someone else wants to represent in the future. The mundane things of our lives—the things we think nothing about because they’re so pedestrian—those will be the things we’ll omit from our personal histories. And those will be the very things that will drive our historians crazy. Someone in the future will be fascinated by your life. Fascinated. Not intrigued. Fascinated. (Personal interview)

CHAPTER II  
FROM THE LOG TO THE BLOG: NEGOTIATING HISTORY  
IN TIME AND (CYBER)SPACE

Percival Lowe, who spent five years as a U.S. dragoon in the mid-nineteenth century, wrote:

If the reader has never been similarly situated, has never lived for six months at a time on bread, rice, beans . . . and coffee . . . and such game as could be killed he has not the slightest conception of the excellence of . . . potatoes baked in the ashes by the campfire, eaten with salt. . . . Of all the army of today probably not one ever had our experience and never will have. (94)

Every individual has had experiences which others have “not the slightest conception of,” but through written records modern readers are able to learn from and identify with some of these.

A logbook is a place to record information, the facts, about a journey—the weather, the time, the landmarks, the borders crossed. It is, in a sense, the literature of a journey. A log does not always contain all of the details of events, decisions, and other happenings surrounding a journey. Journals, letters, and artifacts serve to flesh out the facts and add to the written witness. Historians, authors, actors, readers—people of every kind—turn to this literature as they seek to better understand the past and how it relates to their own humanity.

With this literature as a reference, living historians and reenactors seek to transcend history. This chapter explores the written record of Kevin Henson, the amateur historian who rehiked the Mormon Battalion trail. The Trek blog, Kevin Henson’s



written record, allows readers to participate virtually, generating a unique, but valuable text which not only seeks for authenticity, but is accessible to an Internet-wide audience.

Whereas the original battalion documented its progress in logs and journals, the modern group crossed a virtual frontier with its use of a blog, accessible on the group's website. The idea of a daily log is not a new one. A blog is simply a modern version of this form of record—one that anyone can produce and that is accessible to a larger audience than ever before. According to *Wired* magazine, “Blogs have come a long way since Dec. 17, 1997, when Jorn Barger coined the term ‘weblog’ to describe the list of links on his Robot Wisdom website that ‘logged’ his internet wanderings” (Wortham).

“Blogs, in the broadest sense, derive from the human urge to give voice to our ideas; to have our ideas understood, acted on, and remembered; and to engage in the quest for knowledge and understanding interactively and collaboratively,” writes Dan Burstein in *Blog!: How the newest media revolution is changing politics, business, and culture*. “Our biocultural DNA contains instructions that cause us to want to announce our ideas and denounce others, that make us want to interact, comment, converse, . . . argue, criticize—and to do all of this with other members of our tribe across the boundaries of time and space” (xvi-xvii). In keeping their blog, the Battalion Trek group was on a quest to inform and to interact while seeking validation of the event and its purpose, which Henson articulated not as hiking but as “obtaining a better understanding of the original route and the areas through which [the original Battalion] traveled” (“Blog” 1 November 2008).

Henson made all of the daily entries. He said, “The blog becomes a tool to compare history and also set down your own experiences” (Transcript 22). His blog

provides an interesting array of thoughts, feelings, and observations. Topics range from weather and RV issues to research findings and chance meetings. Throughout the blog lies a not-so-subtle message: Henson is aware of his forerunner's history, and he is hyper-aware of his audience, an audience at his fingertips as never before.

Henson's blog has the ability to reach far more people than have ever read, or will ever read, the original Battalion journals, the secondary and tertiary sources, and the maps, both printed and virtual. "Technology opens up the opportunity for people to experience in near real time what's going on" (Transcript 24, edited for clarity). By bringing history into modern life, the internet-savvy public is able to better understand where it comes from, where it stands, and where it is headed.

Henson is not the only one addressing history on a blog. One website boasts a list of "100 Awesome Blogs for History Junkies" which range from a blog where the letters of an English World War I soldier are posted exactly 90 years after he wrote them, to a blog of "The Order of Civil War Obsessively Compulsed" where "Informed Amateurs Blog the American Civil War." One writer blogs specifically about how Lincoln would handle issues of today's world and another posts solely about who was executed, and why, on this day in history. Writers on this list range from an elementary teacher to George Mason University's official History News Network (Wilkins). TwHistory is another unique history-related site "based on the idea that historical reenactments can take place online and have positive effects for all involved." According to the site, "Twitter provides all the necessary elements for a recreating a historical event: actors, communication, relationships, and a timeline. Followers . . . get updates in real-time as the characters of a particular historical event . . . 'tweet' about what is happening."

Interestingly, the site does state, “In any historical reenactment it is often the actors who get the most benefit, and this is no different with Twitter. And just like traditional reenactments, TwHistory projects have the potential to draw a large audience” (“Get Answers”).

Of his own blog Henson said, “I kept it more, I suppose, out of a sense of duty, in hopes that it might be interesting to people” (Transcript 22). But people did find it interesting—one comment mentioned that a reader was “really enjoying ‘traveling’ with you on this trek” (Henson, “Blog” 27 July 2008), while another said he and his family would be “watching you” (6 July 2008). At least one reader felt free to contribute his own advice, telling Henson that he should visit the Pony Express museum while in St. Joseph, Missouri. (He even went on to explain ties between the Pony Express and the Mormon Church, mentioning a man named Ephriam Hanks, whom he refers to as, “kind of the Forrest Gump of his time as he shows up at all sorts of important events in Mormon and western History, the Battalion march, the Pony Express, and the rescue of the Handcart companies”) (Henson, “Blog” 22 July 2008, edited for clarity). It seems almost humorous to assume that Henson would not know about this connection already, but with such a forum available to his audience, the way is open and the interaction is welcomed.

Henson himself was not afraid to use the blog for more than just sharing his experience—it provided an opportunity to request aid. He blogged on 5 March 2008, four months before the re hike began,

A rhetorical question: If the Battalion were being formed today, would you be willing to volunteer? Would the call have to come from the highest authority or would you volunteer on your own? In that same vein, may we ask that you consider helping us by volunteering to arrange a Trek campsite? (Henson, “Blog”)

This request was a fair appeal for a non-profit—after all, theoretically Henson might have “met” or provoked interest in more people online than in person. Many days the group met only a handful of people and even some formal presentations were small—on 25 July 2008, Henson and his group stopped to do a presentation in Corning, Missouri. He noted on the blog that “Corning has a population of 21 and we had 12 people present.”

At times, though, Henson’s blog seemed to become an arena for him to get on his soapbox, but not in a confrontational or offensive way. When he found some historical fragments that had been washed down along a modern dirt road, he wrote of the importance of not removing them, telling readers, “One should NEVER remove possible historic artifacts from an area. It’s OUR history – not YOURS” (“Blog” 10 July 2008). Sometimes he did more finger shaking than lesson giving, as when he observed, more than once, that historic monuments were not being well taken care of and he wrote, “Shame on us if we can’t do this simple thing” (“Blog” 15 October 2008) and further down the trail he observed, “As a society, we have ‘loved’ some sections of our county nearly to death. . . . A 25-mile stretch of our route in December has been closed because some ATV riders have been indiscriminate in how and where they’ve gone off road – destroying OUR common history” (“Blog” 26 November 2008).

Though Henson had space for whatever he chose to share, he spent much of his time on the blog comparing the modern group’s experience to that of the original Battalion. He said that “we weren’t consciously trying to make our experiences the same, but you couldn’t help but notice, oh gee, look, this is what happened at that location” (Transcript 8, edited for clarity). And while there were aspects he tried to replicate,

Henson did it while “recognizing there are severe limitations on that based upon how the land has changed and culture’s changed.” (He added, again emphasizing the physical aspect, “I could not get past five days without a shower. And typically in two or three days I had to change my clothes”) (Transcript 10, edited for clarity).

Having rigorously read Battalion journals in preparation for his trek, Henson was aware of his ties to the past and tried to make connections for his readers. While the Battalion never fought an actual battle, it did need to fire its guns once, when it ran into a stampede of long-horn bulls. This scuffle, though in reality dangerous, is somewhat humorously referred to as “The Battle of the Bulls.” Myth and reality merged when Henson caused a commotion among some cattle in Iowa; he titled the experience the “Battle of the Cows.” And while Henson was not accompanied by period transportation or animals, he made statements such as “[t]he horses are fed (gasoline),” meaning that the support truck was refueled (“Blog” 18 July 2008).

Henson made one of these comparisons near McPherson, Kansas.

We pass through the Maxwell Buffalo Preserve on the way back to Canton to start the day’s hike. A number of bulls, cows and calves are visible as silhouettes on the sunrise ridge. We also spot a magnificent bull and cow elk in the early light. In 1846, the Battalion also mentions lots of antelope in the area. (“Blog” 26 August 2008)

When Henson articulates this image and its similarity to what the original Battalion had seen he allows readers to access a clearer perspective of the group’s experience.

Sometimes this perspective came from Henson’s thoughts. On 5 September, he recorded that it had occurred to him that there was more than one reason that wagon trains preferred to travel on ridgelines—it allowed them to see into multiple watersheds, increasing their chances of detecting watering holes, and also allowed them to see anyone

approaching. “Smart they were,” Henson wrote. “I’m learning lots by just walking and thinking about what it was like” (“Blog” 5 September 2008). Other times his entries revealed the perspective of hindsight like when he wrote, “In the words of some of our 1846 predecessors, ‘Nothing of importance happened today.’ Which, of course, isn’t correct. We just fail to realize the importance of what happens at the time” (“Blog” 7 August 2008). And then there were times when he gleaned perspective from those around him. While traveling with a group of young adults in Arizona, he wrote of listening to their lively interactions,

It’s times like this that provide me a direct insight into the workings of the 1846 Battalion – the things they talked about, how they acted, what their hopes were, their fears. The discussions ranged over a wide variety of topics – something I’m sure the “Battalion boys” did as they hiked along. (“Blog” 27 December 2008)

A few times the reader literally saw Henson embrace similarities as they came into view and try to make them his own. In October, he faced a thunderstorm that brought hail. He had read Henry Bigler’s original Battalion account of 9 October 1846, which stated, “Late in the afternoon of the 9th we arrived in Santa Fe, in the midst of a storm of rain and hail . . . .” After providing the original excerpt, Henson blogged, “It was too good an opportunity to pass up – to get pelted by a hail storm like they did in Santa Fe, so I run from the building out to get the camera and a solid pelting I did take. Pea-sized hail was sheeting down in a 30 mph wind. . . . Woo-hoo!” (“Blog” 11 October 2008, edited for clarity).

When Henson did open up about his personal experience beyond comparisons, he still couched it in relation to the Battalion. On 4 December, five months into the re hike,

he wrote of how he was “more impressed than ever with Cooke’s leadership and stamina.” He mentioned a lengthy list of Cooke’s responsibilities and pressures,

and above all, worry - worrying about your command, worrying about your men, their animals, their food stores, their failing condition, worrying about your wife and children back home and finally, staying up until late hours documenting the day in your official journal, confiding your fears to no one else but posterity because you can’t let the men know your inner demons.

He then admits, “You may also infer from these comments that the Trek is starting to take its toll on us – and that is true. Denny [my wife] is much stronger – but then, the women usually are. She keeps going while I’m just about ready to lie down and die” (“Blog” 4 December 2008).

To make it more real, Henson sometimes presented facts in a question and answer format. He wrote,

Consider this: A fully loaded Army supply wagon could carry about one ton - 2,000 pounds – of cargo. Question – If the flour ration was one pound per man per day and if the full Battalion – 500 men - were actually eating that amount, how many days would it take to empty a wagon carrying only flour?

The answer followed: four days. “That means the Colonel could have gotten rid of a wagon every four days had he been so inclined. He wasn’t. You spread around the weight to even the loads. It requires constant packing, repacking and consolidating supplies. . . . It was a logistical nightmare for him” (Henson, “Blog” 23 December 2008). On 3 January 2009, with not quite a month until the end of the rehike, Henson shared on the blog the quote that “actually scared” him. Worried about how much food the original Battalion had left, Colonel Cooke ordered an inventory. Some of the men, curious about their own weight, had, according to journalist Nathaniel Jones, “a weighting frolic.” Jones wrote, “I

weighed 128; weight when I enlisted, 198.” Henson did the math for readers: “This man has lost more than one-third of his adult body weight – and he still has the worst part of the journey ahead of him” (“Blog”). It was a different world, as Henson knows—a world from which glimpses of authenticity are fleeting, but valuable.

As he camped on private property in August, Henson got to fulfill a “secret wish” for the re hike—the property owners had turned some of their land into a conservation area to preserve native grasslands, and he got to hike through “REAL prairie grass.” He wrote, “The grass is over six feet tall. I wade into the field a little ways and am quickly lost to sight for the others. It’s a shame there aren’t more places like this for people to experience ‘the REAL west’ of the early 1800’s” (Henson, “Blog” 14 August 2008). The realities of the present West included the fact that it was too dangerous for Henson to hike the original Battalion’s path into Sonoro, Mexico, so he was not able to fulfill that dream. While, ironically, almost all of the land the original Battalion hiked through was technically Mexico at the time, more than the nationality has changed.<sup>1</sup> The route Battalion Trek traveled in California on 16 January required permission from two sources; the first area was an active Navy bombing range, and the second was an “inactive portion” of the bombing range. Even after receiving the rarely-given permission, the way was not easy. In the heat the hikers ran out of water. “The ground is so light colored it hurts the eyes. . . . There are gypsum (selenite) crystals all over the ground, reflecting light like thousands of broken glass shards,” Henson recorded (“Blog”

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<sup>1</sup> It is also ironic that the Battalion’s journey was battle-free (if one doesn’t count the scuffle with bulls) and the larger dangers were lack of water, loss of animals, etc. Today much of the land has been “civilized” and conveniences such as vehicles and easily transportable water dissipate such issues. Now the real dangers lie in other issues, like poverty and politics.



16 January 2009). And the original Battalion did not have the sunglasses that Henson was so grateful for.<sup>2</sup>

Henson used modern technology to help him interpret the sources he had access to. On 5 December he recorded on his blog, “I reread the journals for a couple days before the Battle of the Bulls and a couple days after in case I’d missed something.” His intense, repeated readings paid off. Though he’d read through the journal entries about the San Pedro area numerous times, a passage from Levi Hancock stuck out at him when he read it once again.

[Hancock] said that on the morning of the Battle after leaving camp, they hiked two miles, descended a short, steep ridge into the bottoms – but the detail I REALLY missed was that both sides of the ridge were very steep – so much so that Levi said it was the worst section of trail they’d seen in the past three weeks. (“Blog” 5 December 2008)

With this minor detail Henson went to a tool fairly new to historical research, Google Earth. He searched the area in the hope of finding ridges that might match the description, but to no avail. Until he noticed another small detail. “We know the hunters are out ‘in front’ of the Battalion looking for food and somehow their actions funnel the bulls into the column of men. There’s a dry wash to the west that could furnish a natural path to concentrate the animals as they make for the river to escape the hunters.” From that simple detail, using combinations of the varied resources at his fingertips, Henson believes he “ignorantly nailed” a previously unknown portion of the Battalion’s route (5 December 2008). This is quite a feat, as the journal entries rarely align. “On any given day, one journalist will claim they hiked eighteen miles; another claims only twelve. Who

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<sup>2</sup> The original Battalion also did not have the spectators that Battalion Trek did—Henson met one lady whose neighbor had told her, “in a scandalized voice,” “There are *gypsies* in town. They even have a portable toilet on their trailer” (“Blog” 8 September 2008).

is right? Or, are they both right? Or, are they both wrong?” Henson makes a good point that “[i]n some cases, the journalists are really penning life histories and are relying on their memory twenty, thirty or forty years later – or taking the word of someone else’s journal or distance calculations” (“Blog” 4 November 2008). It is also difficult to know to what degree readers should take Henson’s word.

Mark Tremayne writes, “A primary criticism of the blogosphere (from traditional media and defenders of it) is that the information within it lacks credibility.” However, a 2004 study by Johnson and Kay found that blog readers disagree. According to the study, seventy-four percent

considered the information to be moderately or very credible, but that many also acknowledge that blogs are not fair. Johnson and Kaye explained the apparent contradiction this way: Some blog users see a virtue in up-front bias. They know the information is one sided, but they agree with that side and appreciate the frankness of the writer. (Tremayne 264)

And frankly, Henson presented himself fairly honestly.

The use of technology was not the only anachronistic issue—and Henson knew it. He wrote early on, “My writing style is inconsistent and I know it. I slip back and forth from present to past tense without much regard for proper style. I hope it isn’t too disturbing to you, Dear Reader” (“Blog” 20 July 2008). The night before the re hike began officially, he stated, “Tomorrow evening, I shall change into my pioneer garb, step back in time and officially begin the Trek” (“Blog” 3 July 2008). But it is impossible to step back in time.

Henson's entries show the contrast of eras.<sup>3</sup> On 27 September 2008 he recorded, "We move the RV trailer, unhook the [affectionately named] Jed Clampett Memorial Port-a-potty Trailer and head off into the wilds. During the day we see at least one hundred antelope," and on a wet day he acknowledged, after a cup of hot chocolate, that he was grateful not to have to stay in his wet clothes overnight or sleep under a wet blanket on wet ground (Henson, "Blog" October 14 2008). It is also a given that along the route, things have changed in the years between the groups. Though both groups passed cactus, the original Battalion did not have the opportunity to stop for a "World Famous Cactus Burger" in Gila Bend, Arizona, and in 1846 it wasn't yet a possibility to be woken (in an RV park) by trains passing every twenty minutes (Henson, "Blog" 30 December 2008). It was also unnecessary to take a break to take care of year-end tax accounting; then again, Henson reminded readers that the original Battalion had very little notice (most less than two weeks, some less than 24 hours) before leaving everything in the hands of others ("Blog" 16 December 2008).

In one case, Henson found something that hasn't changed—cow pies. He and his hiking companion were camping alone in a pasture, their U.S. flag flapping outside the period tent, when he decided to "experiment." Since Kansas he'd wanted to cook with a cow pie and gathered accordingly. He recorded that while he feels no need to go back to the "old ways," "I always marvel at the simple answers that exist for most of our needs." While the original Battalion would have used buffalo chips, "The cow pies... burn hot and

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<sup>3</sup> A note on logistics—to maintain his health (both physical and mental) Henson did not strive for complete accuracy beyond the trail he followed. Most nights, except those at special events, he slept in the RV, and the core group (the Hensons and any support staff) often ate out or heated food in the RV microwave if there were no visiting participants with them.

make short work of cooking. They were faster than charcoal. I'd intellectually expected them to work, but I'm surprised they work so well" (Henson, "Blog" 21 January 2009).

Henson even came near a timeless issue—death. He was almost struck by a truck on the curve of a hill, "[w]hich . . . makes one think about all the times the Battalion men were pulling wagons up and down hills, river banks, across rock-strewn areas and all the other dangerous locations. Not to mention that . . . animals . . . all have a mind all their own." He continues,

It is rather amazing that of the 500-man Battalion, only 21 of the men died during their year of enlistment. That is less than a 5% mortality rate among the Mormon Battalion. Among the rest of the Mexican War Army volunteers, a 10% to 15% death rate was typical according to references I've seen. ("Blog" 23 January 2009)

Henson took advantage of his single-sided forum as he endorsed people or places the group visited. According to him, the living history museum Rancho de las Golondrinas in Santa Fe, New Mexico is such a must-see ("Blog" 5 October 2008). On the other hand, he "refuse[ed] to give free publicity to a [San Antonio, New Mexico] restaurant that serves below average hamburgers that are overpriced – even if they have fancy-schmancy chili pepper sauce" ("Blog" 28 October 2008). Henson's 11 September 2008 entry focused on "this *New* Memorial Day" and stated, "Even as other memorials were held, we held a short memorial service for Alva Phelps who died here on this lonely stretch of river in 1846," before sharing his gratitude for those currently bearing the cost of freedom. In one entry, Henson endorsed, in a way, a friend who also does voluntary research on the Battalion—he called him "quite the gentleman" and said "he's doing a great service for the Battalion" ("Blog" 7 January 2009). For the Battalion? The Battalion was—and is—very much present in Henson's mind. And perhaps rightly so, as he

followed their path for so long. His familiarity with the group draws in the reader, who would likely have never picked up a book about the group.

While it was impossible for Henson to feel what the Battalion felt (as Percival Lowe said it, it is impossible to have the “slightest conception of” another’s experience [94]), he did experience emotions which he recorded on his blog as original Battalion members did in their journals. His entry on 31 August 2008 echoes their loneliness: “No moon. It’s a dark night alone without my Phoebe [his wife’s character name]. I don’t sleep well.” Music has stirred emotions throughout time, and one 1846 reenactor who joined the re hike for a day actually specializes in singing a period song, “The Girl I Left Behind Me,” “adding a nice touch,” Henson recorded (“Blog” 29 January 2009).

And while Henson could not be with the original Battalion or feel exactly what they felt, he could be in the same places it had been. In November 2008, Henson began looking for a campsite the Battalion mentioned. He knew from the journals that he was looking for an arroyo with ruins of an old house. One of the owners of the ranch Battalion Trek was passing through told Henson of a place his father remembered that seemed to fit the description. He took them there, and in Henson’s words, “Here we find a set of stones laid out in a square almost exactly 36 feet by 36 feet square. It’s kind of exciting to stand exactly where Battalion members stood, to contemplate the purposes of this ruin and to know we’ve located their camping area. Kind of cool” (“Blog” 11 November 2008).

Some areas, on the other hand, were much less accessible to Henson. In order to cross the San Felipe tribal lands in New Mexico, he and his fellow hikers stopped at the Tribal Government office to meet with the Governor and tribal leaders and explain their purpose. Henson observed,

They are seeking to preserve their old language and customs – things that are important not to lose. After all, we are reenactors and recognize the loss of many things from just five generations ago. Imagine a culture thousands of years old based upon oral traditions to share its history. Such things are easily lost. . . . Governor Tenorio explained our responsibilities to their people while on tribal lands: We are asked to not photograph or sketch the tribal lands in order to preserve their religious importance to their people. Trespassing into areas outside our planned route along the highway is not permitted. Of course, we agree to these conditions and express our appreciation for their hospitality.<sup>4</sup> (Henson, “Blog” 16 October 2008)

Henson’s blog is, above all things, personal and sincere, and in a way all human thoughts and feelings are authentic as much as they are irreplaceable and unrepeatable. But he said himself that so many things cannot be appreciated until they are seen; that is the reason he did the re hike, but it is not something he can replicate for his readers. He wrote,

Using the Google Earth virtual trail we’ve developed, we attempt to put “place” and “event” into a visual context. I really enjoy the opportunity to share stories while showing WHERE they happened. Frequently the “place” has a strong influence on “what” happens. Terrain is the “opposition” for so much of the Battalion’s story. Think about it this way: Box Canyon is important BECAUSE they were between a rock and a hard place. Without the challenge, there wouldn’t be a story there. Their suffering in the waterless deserts becomes a story because the geologic terrain doesn’t trap water. The reproduction military backpack issued to Battalion members is another aspect I like to share. The pack’s small size precluded the men from taking very much; a few personal items, perhaps some extra clothes and a journal, but not much else. Until you SEE the pack, you really can’t comprehend just how limited the men’s existence was. (“Blog” 24 January 2009, edited for clarity)

When he did have the opportunity to *show* his audience visuals, Henson took the chance. For example, one evening he took a group of visiting Boy Scouts into a period tent where he’d placed two blankets. He asked the Scouts how many men slept in such a tent, and

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<sup>4</sup> The original Battalion crossed numerous tribal lands and met many Indians as they headed west. Their journals first mention Indians on 6 July 1846, only days into their journey (Larson 7).

they responded, two. “When told that the other three men haven’t placed their blankets in position yet, it dawns on them that FIVE fully grown men are going to sleep in that small tent and the Scouts begin to get an appreciation for how close it was” (Henson, “Blog” 10 December 2008).

Aside from what he felt, Henson could give an accurate portrayal of what he saw along the way. He mentioned numerous animals—white-tailed deer and red-tailed hawks (“Blog” 22 July 2008), a pack of javelinas (“Blog” 15 November 2008), not to mention innumerable dogs and cows. The scenery changed as Henson walked across the country, and he mentioned these images from the landscape: oil being pumped in Kansas (“Blog” 26 August 2008), “prickley” plants (mesquite, creosote, etc.), dusty soil versus clay (“Blog” 21 November 2008), basalt lava fields, and sand dunes (“Blog” 29 December 2008).

One day in Arizona, Henson made note of the following:

Old animal trails, native tribal trails, Cooke’s Wagon Road, the Emigrant Trail, the Butterfield Stage Coach trail, the early railroad routes, an early automotive road, a later automobile road, the current Interstate carrying both passenger and commerce, a modern railroad bed being expanded, railroad service roads, aircraft routes overhead, satellites in Low Earth Orbit (LEO) and high above us, geostationary satellites, old “smoke signal” fire sites, the earliest transcontinental telegraph route, telephone lines, microwave phone towers, cell phone towers, fiber optic cable lines, radio and television towers, natural gas pipelines and petroleum pipelines. It is a very crowded corridor between Picacho Peak and Newman Peak to the north.

Lest you think I’m being dramatic or stretching the importance of what is in this narrow corridor, remember that Colonel Cooke wrote to Commandant Comodurian at Tucson that he (Cooke) hoped that the wagon road the Battalion was building would be of great value to both the United States and to the Republic of Mexico – a wish that has come true. (Henson, “Blog” 16 December 2008)

Again, telling is not the same as seeing. In describing Cooke's Canyon in New Mexico, Henson called it "almost unbelievable. The pass is deep up, down and sideways." He continues, "Photography can do a lot of things, but we cannot easily reproduce for others the 3-D spatial relationships that are seen with the human eyes. In short, we cannot do justice to this place. You have to see it to believe it." "To see this area," Henson concludes, "is to begin to appreciate the magnitude of their building the wagon road. Perhaps someday we can create a virtual reality that can match this place, but it won't be anytime soon"<sup>5</sup> (Henson, "Blog" 13 November 2008).

While the goal of the blog is to give readers a realistic view of the group's experience, there is no question that the true experience is edited by the inability to articulate each and every aspect and is consciously censored to portray most of the event in a positive light. For example, on 9 August, Henson's post describes his hike with a group of eleven-year-old scouts into Fort Leavenworth in Leavenworth, Kansas. He wrote,

Once we were safely on the Kansas side of the [Missouri] river, we hiked up to the Main Parade square on post. There we outfitted the Scouts with our 1846 packs, belts and replica muskets. Reenactor Val John Halford of Utah gave some instruction, then he hiked us to the Frontier Army Museum where we were saluted by cannon fire. The Leavenworth reenactors had made us dinner and the Scouts departed the field for home. (Henson, "Blog" 9 August 2008)

That is what happened. But it is not all that happened. Since I was part of the group waiting at the fort for the Scouts to arrive, I can add a detail that changes readers' understanding of that particular day. My modification of the entry would include this sentence: ". . . then he hiked us to the Frontier Army Museum [where we arrived four

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<sup>5</sup> This is an issue I address to a degree in chapter three.



hours later than originally planned].” But then rarely does anyone write the whole truth or provide a complete context, perhaps because it is impossible.

Aside from telling the whole story, few records are made during or immediately after events. According to Henson, “Even if it’s just a few hours you start thinking about things a little bit differently. It gets self-edited to some extent and cleaned up to some extent, depending upon the viewpoint and the personality, the personality of the person” (Transcript 25, edited for clarity). Interestingly Henson’s own writings and the experiences he shares focus a good deal on the difficulties. His experience seemed to show that for him, at least, those were the moments when he gained insights into and appreciation for what the Mormon Battalion had physically endured. His work is a history of hardship, not an objective, traditional view of the political or military implications of the Battalion.

Though Henson could not have the same experience as the original Battalion, and though he may not have told the “whole truth” about all of his experiences, he did something unique, something that enthralls readers. Having met people who “followed” via the blog, I now look at the trek as a simulacrum for modern “virtual travelers.” To this audience, the re hike was more real than the original, as they were able to identify with a modern walker by accessing a modern means of communication.

While the blog made Henson’s experience accessible to an audience who would not have had any connection with the re hike, nothing replaces literal, personal interaction. At a picnic with a church congregation in Great Bend, Kansas, a couple of Scouts asked Henson,

“How did they do it?” - meaning the original Battalion’s march. My reply is that they just got up every morning, put their pants and boots on and started out again. There really wasn’t much choice for them, was there? It was keep going or die. Most of our decisions don’t have that immediate consequence, so it seems harder for us to imagine that kind of life. (“Blog” 1 September 2008).

In this interaction, in this honest question, is a meeting of audience, accessibility, and authenticity—and that might just be the goal.

In Henson’s last blog entry, made on 31 January 2009, he wrote, “Getting people to participate [to experience, I would add] is key to getting people interested in history – their history – whether their actual or adopted history doesn’t matter much. It’s where we came from and how we got to where we are today – and it’s important to understanding today.” This interactive presentation of the Mormon Battalion’s history allows such participation.

After a long day of hiking “somewhere out there,” Henson recorded that three hikers had “attempted to cram four Battalion hiking days into eight hours. We did not see all we had hoped to see, nor did we hike all the places we desired, but what we did was sufficient to better appreciate the 1846 experience” (“Blog” 26 November 2008). And if Battalion Trek’s goal was really to inform and to interact while seeking validation of the event and its purpose, this entry sums up the group’s successful achievement.

Henson’s view toward the end of his hike was much different than that of the original Battalion, though both were overjoyed by what they saw. As the Battalion Trek group entered the Imperial Valley agricultural zone, Henson observed,

All around us are fields of produce; lettuce of many varieties, broccoli, cauliflower and other winter crops. Alfalfa is being cut. Bales of hay are stacked – hundreds of feet long. Dairy farms and some small cattle feed lots are nearby. The canals deliver water to the crops which transpire it

into the air raising the local humidity and carrying scents of the land and crops. The smells today are incredible. Fresh air – clean and crisp, slightly humid, then as we walk, these various smells, subtle but seemingly strong because of their novelty to us after so long in the remote areas, makes us aware of just how far from a normal existence we've been for weeks at a time. It has been a good day to be alive. (Henson, "Blog" 14 January 2009)

Again, the past cannot be recreated. Henson could not feel exactly what Henry G. Boyle expressed in his journal as the Battalion came within miles of their destination in 1847:

We proceeded on our way passing San Luis Rey & ascending a hill when the calm unruffled bosom of the ocean presented itself to our view. I never shall be able to express my feelings at this enraptured moment. When our columns were halted every eye was turned toward its placid surface every heart beat with muttered pleasure every soul was full of thankfulness, every tongue was silenced, we all felt too full to give shape to our feelings by any expression. It has been many a weary day, and we have traveled many a long mile since our eyes have been permitted to gaze upon as lovely a scene. [*sic*] (Larson 382)

Though their experiences were not the same, Henson, too, gazed breathlessly on scenes of beauty, felt gratitude beyond words, and was overwhelmed by physical and emotional exhaustion. What both men felt was real.

Four months before the retrace began, Henson wrote that, when over, "the 2008 Trek will be over and have become another part of Battalion history" ("Blog" 4 March 2008), a history of which their commander, Phillip St. George Cooke wrote, "History may be searched in vain for an equal march of infantry" (Larson 389). And the blog is now part of that history. According to Henson, "It's just another tool to get history accessible to people who are interested" (Transcript 27).

If you want to have people involved, if you want people to appreciate history, if you want them to be excited about not just their ancestor's life, but bring it into their own life and say, 'This is what it means to me,' then

the more immediate, the more accessible, the more interesting you make it, the more I think it helps and assists in bringing history into our modern life. (Transcript 24)

The blog, accessible to a world-wide audience is a valuable historical presentation for this very reason.

On 29 September 2008, east of Springer, New Mexico, Henson wrote a moving entry that echoes personal writing of all ages. He begins,

It's very quiet here. It's very lonely – but not a morose lonely. It's the kind of solitude that either makes you crazy because you aren't able to be alone with yourself or is comforting because there aren't many distractions. Just to wander the trail, looking for animals, checking the sky, listening to sounds is a kind of lonely the mountain men must have enjoyed. I know I do.

He continues, "It's starting to feel like fall and there's a definite chill to the night air. We sleep in the 1846 tent, set up on the edge of the Santa Fe Trail ruts and pull the buffalo robe over us to keep warm" ("Blog"). For a moment we modern readers take loneliness, a feeling that we know well, and our experience with crisp fall nights, and feel a connection to this place and to the past.

## CHAPTER III

## TRAILBLAZING FROM THE COUCH: HISTORY ON THE VIRTUAL FRONTIER

In an age when the computer store has been called the new church (Cox 2), media is changing not only the present and the future, but the past as well. Digitized documents and images are expanding the definition of the archive, disseminating information faster than ever before, and with that information “unique problems of authenticity, interpretability, guidance, and contextuality—or rather, lack thereof” (Kalay 6). It is helpful to consider what Yehuda Kalay calls the metaphorical paradigm of the “horseless carriage,” a “practice of transportation . . . described through the lens of a previous technology, not realizing that travel had been dramatically changed” (9). With this idea in mind, I turn to an analysis of the new historically-based website, *Virtual Trails.net*, to question how it disseminates and changes the history it contains.

“Virtually Stake Your Claim on a Piece of History,” announces the homepage.

It’s as easy as . . . Step 1) Pick a location, Step 2) Stake your claim, Step 3) Begin your adventure. . . . Here you can: view trails of old in amazing detail, as they were then and are now, immerse yourself in the richness of U.S. history . . . , [and] stake your claim on a trail segment to preserve and share that history—today and for generations to come. And, thanks to the wonders of modern technology, you can do it all without leaving home!

The page footer adds an important, if not noticeable, annotation, “Claims made on VIRTUAL TRAILS are to a virtual trail only. . . . Staking a claim does not entitle Travelers to rights, ownership, or access to any public or privately-owned real property” (*Virtual Trails*).

This chapter will describe what *Virtual Trails* is, how it may be useful for educational and public use, and what its implications, both positive and negative, are for

its audience—the users, the creators, and the generations of the future. Is *Virtual Trails* simply a remake of the classic first-person pioneer role-playing computer game, *Oregon Trail*, for an older generation? Are purchasers actually buying anything when they register, and if they are, should they be doing so? More specifically, I address issues including the intangibility of virtual tourism, the authenticity of an unfiltered, public domain virtual museum, and the ethics and nostalgia brought forth by the venture. I seek to prove that such a site is valuable because it seeks authenticity as it offers an accessible experience with history to a large audience.

I begin with a short history of virtual tourism, which surprisingly did not begin with the computer age. In its original form, virtual tourism was often what historian Erika Bsumek calls, “journey[ing] through . . . consumption of . . . artifacts, the ethnographic details associated with their origin[s], and the experiences one might have to go through in order to acquire them” (119). Though it arguably began even earlier, this late nineteenth century practice allowed middle- and upper-class women, specifically, to distance themselves from actual encounters and experiences while still obtaining unique objects and the resulting pride. It is important to note, however, that many of these women would not have been able to travel to the distant and often primitive places where such goods could be found, had they had any desire to do so. Bsumek continues, “Buying a ‘secondhand’ experience allowed them to consume the trappings of adventure and style without sacrificing the authenticity of the items they purchased for their personal comfort and status” (135). Even though the purchasers did not travel to obtain their artifacts or the attendant experience, someone did. In Bsumek’s example, it was Grace Nicholson who collected and sold Southwestern Indian artifacts to the interested and well-to-do, making

their “hobby of home decoration a transcendent adventure” (120). Today this middle-man or woman is unnecessary and we can boldly go . . . where no one goes any longer.

With the birth of the computer, followed by the ever-growing Internet, the world was forever changed. As Kristen Nelson puts it, “The United States became a digitized country competing in a digitized world—and there is no turning back” (xiii). Although he could not have known the changes that would come when he wrote the following in the introduction to *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville hoped his book would serve as a warning as “society changes its forms, humanity its condition, and . . . new destinies are impending” (lxiii). With such modern technology as the Internet pointing the world towards impending new destinies, with the changes of society’s forms and humanity’s condition, where does the past fit? According to Neil Postman, it has a place in the future, for “[i]maged futures have always been more about where we have been than where we are going” (5). But where and how does the Internet show us where we have been?

*Virtual Trails* is a website created by Kevin and Denny Henson, self-described “teachers, technical gurus, history and genealogy buffs.” The site states that it

provides an innovative link between past and present by: tracing the historic trails that helped define a nation, hosting a Virtual Museum to share, showcase and preserve artifacts for future generations, promoting research and education to expand understanding of historic events, [and] connecting family members through shared perspectives on historic sites and events. (*Virtual Trails*)

This is done “by joining the extensive *Virtual Trails* database with the geotechnical capabilities of Google Earth to map the historic trails of the United States.” Through this fairly new technology, the site “present[s] valuable, high-quality content—

facts, journal entries, photos, video and audio files—encapsulated in ‘bubbles’ attached to related locations along the trails” (*Virtual Trails*). The *Virtual Trails* logo is, fittingly, an outline of the United States with historic trails traced on it, circled—perhaps, in the frontier spirit, one could say even lassoed—by a computer mouse (Figure 1).

Because it is still in the early stages of development, currently the site has only the Mormon Battalion trail available for claims. Claims are one mile segments of the historical trail, mapped on the modern terrain shown through Google Earth. Plans are underway to include routes such as the Oregon, Mormon, and Pony Express trails on *Virtual Trails*, but no release dates have yet been announced. Knowing the site’s creators, reenactors Kevin and Denny Henson, I understand the motives of beginning with a trail that is presently at the forefront of their minds and research;<sup>1</sup> however, I think the site is cutting itself off from a more positive reception from a larger audience who would be interested in better-known historical trails that do not have any type of religious affiliation.

Why does this site exist? The site states that “*Virtual Trails* is born of a love for ‘we, the people’ of the United States—yesterday, today and tomorrow.”

With deepest respect for and pride in our history and heritage, we emphasize conservation, preservation and protection. Thus, *Virtual Trails* is proud of its commitment to: educate—using modern technologies to breathe new life into the legendary events and stories of another day, honor—forging the connections that instill a sense of pride and ownership in our history and heritage, [and] share—ensuring that the trails and the stories behind them remain available and accessible to people everywhere, today and for generations to come. (*Virtual Trails*)

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<sup>1</sup> *Virtual Trails* is a for-profit endeavor. The Hensons would like to see the program used for educational purposes, but they would also like to see a profit help fund their Battalion Trek retrace.



With the creation of an infinite online world, it seems that future generations will inherit this and countless other forms of information. But, I pause to ask, to what purpose?

The quick expansion and rapid development of technology is changing today's new generations and how they learn, as well as changing the resources teachers have at their disposal. With rapid access to infinite information, anyone searching the Internet gets more than they want or know what to do with. The resulting problem is how to turn information into knowledge (Nelson 80).

Virtual field trips are one technologically-enhanced educational tool growing in popularity. Students can visit locations across the world without leaving their classrooms. What about visiting locations from the past? Places and eras that no longer exist? According to panelists at the 2001 conference on Virtual Reality, Archeology, and Cultural Heritage, "In the future, the technology presented [in such tools] will redeem the age-long nostalgia to meet the spirits of the past at their very field of activity in the form of moving figures, gliding in space directly in the real scenery of a ruin or landscape" (Kretschmer et al. 141). *Virtual Trails*, hand in hand with Google Earth, can make this possible in a sense—classes can glide through the actual landscape of a trail, see pictures of artifacts, and read stories and journal entries of those who traveled the path.

Virtual field trips, museums, and environments are not limited to K-12 education.

In fact, many museums are turning to the Internet for various reasons which include:

to overcome the limitations of available exhibition space, . . . to enliven exhibit presentation, . . . [to] produc[e] . . . a multisensory experience, . . . to create a simulation of important heritage objects or environments [and] to provide visualizations of hazardous or remote sites. . . . The online museum experience does focus more on education than on aesthetics. (Charitos et al. 284)

However, the educational tone is subtle, not overpowering, in its new (and therefore still exciting) technologically enhanced form.

Peers of my generation perk up at the name *Oregon Trail*, a virtual computer game allowing first-person participation in the pioneers' trek west. Popular among elementary and middle school students, first available in 1985, the game is now in its eighth version ("Gaming"). The game made terms such as fording, cholera, and dysentery familiar to those in my generation. In fact, the game has had such an impact that a 2005 American Studies course at the College of William and Mary created a webpage entitled, "Gaming Our Way Through History: *The Oregon Trail*: Education, Nostalgia, and Memory" to showcase the game's place in American culture and recollection. Included on the page are memories of the game from students at the school. Their responses imply that the game made a deep impression (a fact also evidenced by the game's current fan base on Facebook.com). Karmen, a senior, reflected bluntly, but honestly, "You had to learn responsibility on the Trail or else you would die." Sean, a junior, replied, "The Game made me feel like a man. It was kind of slow going. But I imagine that's what it was like on the actual trail." A game that makes a boy "feel like a man"—a timeless desire fulfilled through a virtual experience. Mike, a graduate student, stated, "I played the *Oregon Trail* in the second grade. I didn't feel like I was learning, but I was learning. It's a common shared experience for my generation" ("Gaming"). It's also an experience that has not been forgotten by the generation; this fact may, in time, lead now grown *Oregon Trail* fans to show an interest in such programs as Virtual Trails.

Though *Virtual Trails* is only a couple of months old, not yet old enough to analyze its popularity, there is or potentially could be an obvious public appeal. For as De Tocqueville stated,

There is one sort of patriotic attachment which principally arises from that instinctive, disinterested, and undefinable feeling which connects the affections of man with his birthplace. This natural fondness is united with a taste for ancient customs and a reverence for traditions of the past; those who cherish it love their country as they love the mansion of their fathers. (241-42)

*Virtual Trails'* purpose is to connect participants with the past of their nation, a noble endeavor. Yet is this site a positive development?

According to Neil Postman, “The most obvious question to be asked about any new technology—for example, interactive television, virtual reality, the Internet . . . —is, What is the problem to which this technology is the solution? . . . What new problems might be created because we have solved this problem?” (42, 48). First I consider what problem *Virtual Trails* solves.

The physical trails which are a part of the site virtually are for the most part undeveloped and even overgrown; there is little physically at the trail locations to represent the past or the future. The site seeks to combat this issue. As the webpage states, the *Virtual Trails* “Virtual Museum” is “a place for our travelers to preserve, retain and share prized heirlooms with the rest of America. Most pioneers were humble folk who regarded their possessions as pretty small potatoes and their lives as uneventful.” The site continues that in their focus on survival, they did not consider the significance of their journeys,

Consequently, the rare journal entries and artifacts that survived the trek across the plains are carefully guarded and treasured bits of history today.

When you upload photographs and audio and video files related to your claim, we will preserve these links to the past in the Virtual Museum, where they will inspire future travelers. (*Virtual Trails*)

So the site provides the world access to remote locations as well as a shared storage space for isolated historical records and objects, if those who possess such artifacts are willing and able to share—and if they do so honestly.

The site is also “committed to the preservation and protection of all historic locations worldwide.” Allowing people to visit virtually protects the physical land and any artifacts that may be there today. To aid this endeavor, the site notes, “Locations of a sensitive nature or of great archeological importance may be mis-registered [on the Google Earth map] as to protect, conserve, and preserve the location” (*Virtual Trails*). So though the site attempts to avoid some issues, *Virtual Trails* creates accuracy problems as well—but all histories face this issue.

I return here to Kalay’s “horseless carriage” paradigm and her concern that it is impossible to describe the past through a future form (9). Can traveling a trail once fraught with hunger, fatigue, and death from the comfort of one’s couch, without taking even a single step, give modern “travelers” any kind of understanding of what the trail represents? It cannot. Is it a hopeless anachronism? I feel that to get a more realistic understanding of what those who blazed the trails experienced, the least an interested party can do is leave the familiarity of his or her home. To me, physical movement is a simple but direct link with those who went before, but this is not required by the site.

In *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future*, Postman writes, “The late 17<sup>th</sup> century and 18<sup>th</sup> century . . . concept of ‘information’ was different from what it is today. Information was not thought of as a commodity to be

bought and sold. It had no separate existence, as it does in this age” (85-6). And he’s right: today information is a commodity with its own existence. After all, on *Virtual Trails* you can buy a virtual portion of a historical trail; a two-year basic membership for \$30, a two year V.I.P. membership for \$60. This new commodity can be a problem, in more ways than one. Besides raising intellectual property issues, our new view of information separates people and places as much as or more than it unites them.

In his social study, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam observes the individualizing impact of technology on the nation. “No longer must we coordinate our tastes and timing with others in order to enjoy the rarest culture or the most esoteric information. . . . [E]lectronic technology allows us to consume this hand-tailored entertainment in private, even utterly alone” (217-18). Hal Rothman agrees in *The Culture of Tourism, the Tourism of Culture*: “It’s a spectator culture, one where you watch and change channels if you’re dissatisfied with what you see, where you put a value on your ability to choose and to experience without effort” (9). There is infinite information—often conflicting information—available everywhere, whether or not it’s useful. *Virtual Trails* perpetuates this problem. The site requires users to upload information to their claim before they can enter into the community of trails and see others’ claims. To put it clearly, one must enter some form of information—information that is not necessarily well researched or well documented—to be able to access the information already available from others. No one can register just to learn from what other users have posted, as I tried to do; he or she must add *something* to the mounting data.

As the Internet in general creates “virtual” social connectedness and engagement, it also causes a loss of face-to-face interaction. (After all, “You can do it all without leaving home!”) Beyond that separation, *Virtual Trails* distances participants from the person-to-land interaction as it removes the need to physically travel to a site, let alone move at all. If De Tocqueville is correct in stating that “True information is mainly derived from experience” (318), the question is: “[D]oes commodified [or virtual] experience . . . count as experience?” (LaCapra 46). This question may be answered more clearly with a deeper look at tourism.

According to Rothman, “Tourism, in which people acquire intangibles—experience, cachet, proximity with celebrity—[has] bec[o]me the successor to industrial capitalism, the endpoint in a process that transcend[s] consumption and ma[kes] living a function of accouterments” (111). Interestingly, when visitors to *Virtual Trails* first pull up the homepage, they are greeted by a short “Fly through demo” that takes them on a roller-coaster like ride to a few points on the trail through Google Earth (Figure 2). This clip, which gives the feeling of having traveled a fair distance in a short amount of time, is followed by another, entitled, “Take a Trip in History.” It begins showing parents and three children driving in a minivan. “Live an American Adventure . . .,” text proclaims (Figure 3). And the image is classic American—a family traveling together down a scenic tree-lined road. The image changes subtly and the same family has not shifted position, but they are now in pioneer era attire. The text now states, “. . . climb on our virtual vehicle . . .” (Figure 4). And finally, viewers behold a more drastic shift—the family, still in the same positions and the same pioneer attire, now sits in a covered wagon. A horse and an endless stretch of plains (not at all realistic looking) appear out the front, and the

text concludes, “. . . and let your journey begin!” (Figure 5) (*Virtual Trails*). This clip seems to support Rothman’s concern that tourism has become a function of accouterments, or accessories, as it conveys that the wagon and the pioneer clothes make the experience, that those items are all the things one needs for an adventure in the past. Even in their unique appearance, perhaps this family is not so different from American tourists mocked worldwide, who think they’ve got “it” down—“it” being dependent upon the culture in which they find themselves (and into which they usually do not fit).

The word “tourist” today seems to call to mind images of men in Hawaiian shirts, socks, and sandals with cameras hanging from their necks and women in sun visors with heaps of coordinated, yet useless, luggage. These images evoke the feelings of naturalist John Muir in the 1870s when he “lamented that most tourists in the national parks ‘are content with what they can see from [railway] car windows or the verandas of hotels, and in going from place to place cling to their precious trains and stages like wrecked sailors to rafts’” (qtd. in Wrobel 3). But what of virtual tourists? Do they acquire anything, tangible or not? Are *Virtual Trails* users simply “going from place to place cling[ing] to their precious [laptops] like wrecked sailors to rafts,” to paraphrase and update Muir? Perhaps they are simply putting on the period clothes, metaphorically speaking, and placing themselves before a virtually simulated frontier with little understanding of what lies behind or before them.

Merriam-Webster defines a tourist as “one that makes a tour for pleasure or culture,” while tourism is considered “the practice of traveling for recreation.” Is a *Virtual Trails* user actually touring? Perhaps a more fitting description is articulated by David Wrobel: “Touristic representations need only invoke a semblance, or a

‘simulation,’ of an imaginary past to be effective” (19). According to Baudrillard, “To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have. . . . simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ (3). Even if they cannot see the trail as it was or meet those who walked it, *Virtual Trails* users are experiencing a simulation of the past; they are gaining experience, but not the “true” or “real” experience they think they are. This is, in part, due to the difficulty of controlling what is posted on the site.

Here I turn to *Wikipedia*, a popular website that faces some of the same issues. This reference site is also a site “by the people and for the people.” Its non-encyclopedic entry about itself states, “Visitors do not need specialized qualifications to contribute, since their primary role is to write articles that cover existing knowledge. This means that people of all ages and cultural and social backgrounds can write Wikipedia articles.” This approach is very democratic, but allows for gross inaccuracies, especially considering the speed at which the information is multiplying—the site has attracted an audience of more than 684 million visitors each year. Over 75,000 contributors are writing over 10,000,000 articles in an excess of 260 languages (“Wikipedia: About”). The site continues,

Users need not worry about accidentally damaging Wikipedia when adding or improving information, as other editors are always around to advise or correct obvious errors. . . . Wikipedia is continually updated, with the creation or updating of articles on topical events within seconds, minutes, or hours, rather than months or years for printed encyclopedias. (“Wikipedia: About”)

While the options for this site and concept seem limitless, I believe it is important to note an entry entitled “Wikipedia: What Wikipedia is not.” In this article, official *Wikipedia* policy states, “Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia and, as a means to that



end, an online community of people interested in building a high-quality encyclopedia in a spirit of mutual respect. Therefore, there are certain things that **Wikipedia is not.**” These include: a paper encyclopedia; a dictionary; a publisher of original thought, a soapbox; a mirror or repository of links, images, or media files; a blog, webspace provider, social networking, or memorial site; a directory; a manual, guidebook, or textbook; a crystal ball; an indiscriminate collection of information; censored; a democracy; governed by a statute; a bureaucracy; a battleground; an anarchy; your web host. While these things are what *Wikipedia* is not, they are stated in the official policy because at some point they have been seen as such by someone. Unforeseen uses and issues arise; such is the nature of all such new and collaborative endeavors. Here I return to *Virtual Trails*.

Beyond the fact that history is often ambiguous and difficult to pin down, one of the most obvious concerns surrounding *Virtual Trails* is that it is basically a public domain site, and therefore inaccuracy can be a problem. While the organizers do their best to portray true information, they admit that though “we mine many diverse sources in our research—original documents, history experts, local researchers, federal studies—we find they don’t always agree” (*Virtual Trails*). Such is the nature of history. The guidelines for those uploading their own information to *Virtual Trails* state: “All contributed content should be trail related. This could be historical in nature, family history related, or any other type of content that promotes educational information surrounding the Battalion’s experience or the locations they passed through” (*Virtual Trails*). However there is no way to gauge the authenticity and relevancy of every object, image, or tale.

Though *Virtual Trails* is not nearly as overwhelmingly open as *Wikipedia*, its creators have taken a lot upon themselves. Before a trail is opened for claims, the Hensons must plot the old trail on the current terrain. In the case of the Mormon Battalion trail, few markers were left behind and much of the plotting involves reading journals and looking for remaining landmarks via Google Earth. Plotting can also involve finding old maps to overlay on top of the present geography. After spending a good deal of time, and therefore money, to prepare each trail, they must read and approve each claim uploaded by users. Obviously they feel that this effort is worth it and will make a difference.

While I too feel a need to preserve and teach history, I struggle to let go of the importance of *going* to a historic location. But as Keith Basso reminds us in *Wisdom Sits in Places*, “It is well to keep in mind that interpreting the past can be readily accomplished—and is every day—without recourse to documentary archives, photographic files, and early sound recordings.” However, he argues that the past cannot be interpreted without reference to place, which aids in remembering and imagining the past. He concludes,

In modern landscapes everywhere, people persist in asking, ‘What happened here?’ The answers they supply, though perhaps distinctly foreign, should not be taken lightly, for what people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the earth, and while the two activities may be separable in principle, they are deeply joined in practice. If place-making is a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of *doing* human history, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities. We *are*, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine. (Basso 7)

So, perhaps this intangibility, this simulation, this almost liminal quality, is also one of the site’s strengths: *Virtual Trails* has the capacity to tell more than one story. Neil

Postman would appreciate the ability, as he “always thought [history] courses ought to be called ‘histories’ so that our youth would understand that what once happened has been seen from different points of view, by different people, each with a different story to tell” (173). If *Virtual Trails* teaches this lesson, the program has worth.

Though *Virtual Trails* is not one-hundred percent accurate, it is a site “by the people and for the people.” And because of this, the site has merit. Jeff Malpas states,

There can be no doubt that the importance of cultural heritage lies in the way in which it shows us something about ourselves and about the world to which we belong—in this respect even that which we do not take as part of our own heritage can nevertheless be significant to us just by virtue of being part of the heritage of those others with whom we share the same world, so that the heritage of theirs is also part of our own heritage. (20)

The historical trails of the U.S. and the ever-expanding Internet, journals of ancestors and *Oregon Trail*—they are all a part of our heritage and have the ability to show us something about ourselves and our world. *Virtual Trails* allows us to access these, and it also teaches us of our responsibility to the world, as one of the conditions for *Virtual Trails*’ use states: “Traveler understands and acknowledges that the historic trail belongs to all the citizens of the United States and the world, and therefore agrees to do his/her part to preserve, protect and honor that heritage” (*Virtual Trails*). Whether or not we claim land, virtual or real, we are claiming stories of the land, its people, and its past, present, and future.

## CONCLUSION

### THE PAST IN THE FUTURE

In the small, historically rich town of Lewis, Iowa, I sat on the steps of an old ferry house with three members of the local historical society. One of them mentioned her attempts to get a hold of a copy of a book written over one hundred years before about the region. Her efforts included a visit to a library, where she was told she could not get a photocopy of the book, as doing so might damage the text. The historian in me was able to sympathize with the need for preservation. But the reader and writer in me saw it differently, for books are only valuable when we get things *out* of them. If it matters whether or not modern readers study the “original” history or the history that has been prepared and presented to them is a complicated question I have tried to address. But what does matter is that we are aware of our past and our present, the borders that separate us, and the effect we as writers and as human beings, living our daily lives, can have on the future.

In fact, in most cases, modern readers consume history that has been “translated” from its original language and location to a more comfortable form; the renown of the popular history genre exemplified by David McCullough is an example of this, as is the popularity of historical fiction. Historian Stephen Ambrose states in the preface of his memoir, *To America*, “One week in early 2002, I noted that four of the top six books on the *New York Times Book Review* nonfiction bestseller list were about American history.” He attributes this to the fact that today “our students know that they live in the richest and freest nation that ever was and they want to know how that happened. . . . They want to

know who those people were who made it [‘so supremely special’], what they did, with what consequences” (xiv). Ambrose goes on in his book to describe his own first piece of historical writing, a twelve-page biography of an obscure congressman who served two terms just before the Civil War. He reflected, “I knew more about Charles A. Billingham than anyone else alive! Then I realized that was because no one else wished to know. But then I further realized that if I could tell his story right, I could make them want to know” (149). Therein lies the goal for all educators from living historians to academics—they become experts, studying their fields and interests with passion. They rediscover the past and want to share their findings, for they believe that just as their findings have changed them, they have the potential to change how others look at themselves and the world. And we owe it to the past, remembering, in Rebecca Solnit’s words, “We see much they did not, and can never see as they did” (Solnit 21). We also owe it to the future to seek for the true past, and according to Eric Foner, “The public seems to be more open-minded, more willing to learn, than those who desire a purely celebratory public history are prepared to believe” (22).

As Gordon Wood observes, this is what we need. “We Americans have such a thin and meager sense of history that we cannot get too much of it. What we need more than anything is a deeper and fuller sense of the historical process, a sense of where we have come from and how we have become what we are” (Wood 16). It is true—we cannot get too much of it, and to reach this deeper, fuller sense, there must be a meeting of audience, accessibility, and authenticity. If the goal of historians is to push boundaries and to think about history in unique and insightful ways, these various approaches—reenacting, blogging, and virtual mapping—are valid approaches that increase the value

of history. Even as today's generation can go through college without checking out one book from the library, such unique presentations of history guarantee that the past will not be lost.

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## APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Figures



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5