

# **Ogden Anecdotes**

**Stories and Photos  
From Our First  
Fifty Years**

**By Irene Woodhouse**

SECOND EDITION

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Ogden, Utah

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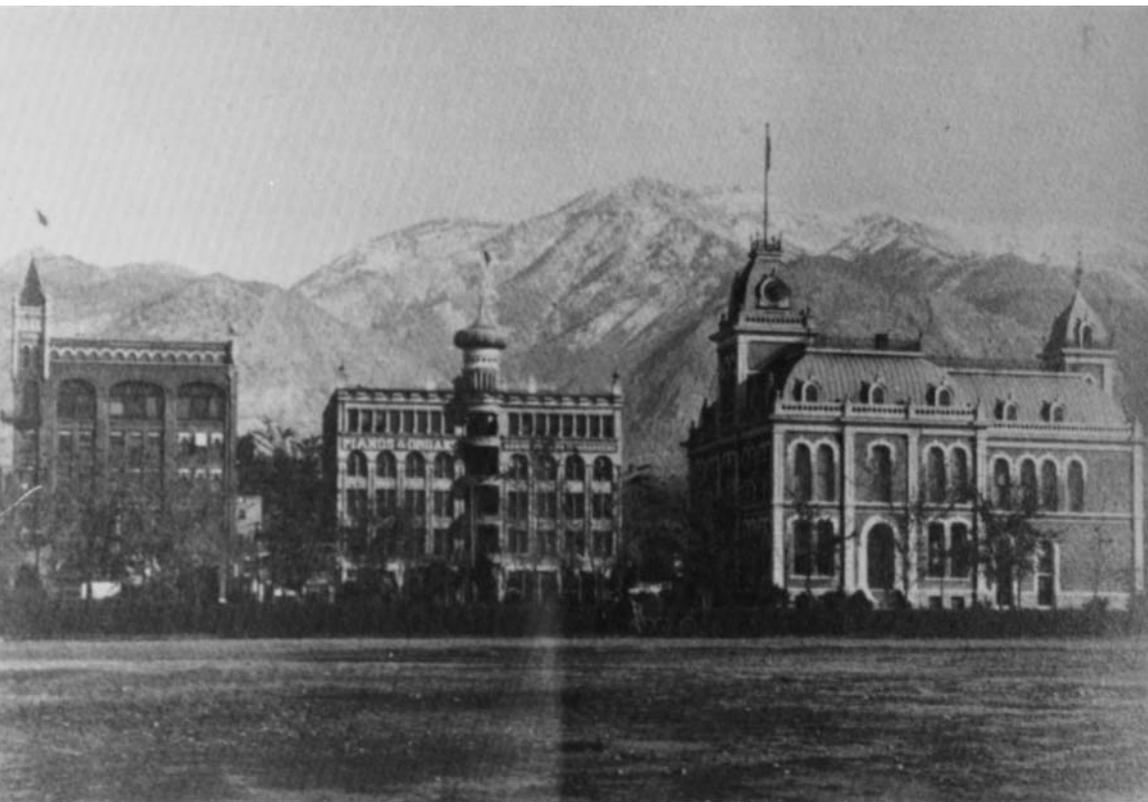
Woodhouse Publishing, Inc.

Printed 2004 in the United States of America by  
Bell Printing & Design

ISBN 0-9762253-0-1

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*Reed Hotel, Opera House, and City Hall, 1900.*

Glen Perrins Collection

*Dedicated to the people of Ogden City*

## Introduction

This is a story about the first 50 years of Ogden City. It's not your common run-of-the-mill history, however. You'll not find footnotes, nor bibliography. Nor is it a book about heroes. Ogden, Utah, has never revered the past nor enshrined flesh and blood citizens.

Frontier towns are handmade and their people are rough and sturdy as the hand-hewn timbers that make their shelters. By present standards they seem a breed apart, but their old journals tell it matter-of-factly. I have tried to recapture the personality of those people — what they ate, wore, liked, hated and put up with.

The information in the book is true. Personal interviews with men and women whose parents lived in that time have furnished insights and stories which were common but not shared. To fit these people into the proper time I have used the public records, repeating bits from city council minutes and private journals and histories.

The story of Ogden during the first 50 years reminds me of the old-timer who, when asked how he managed to plow the rocky hillside without destroying himself or his plow, said, "It's all in knowin' when to 'gee' and when to 'haw'." Ogdenites learned to gee and haw properly during the time they were fighting the environment and each other, knowing full well they had to get along with both.

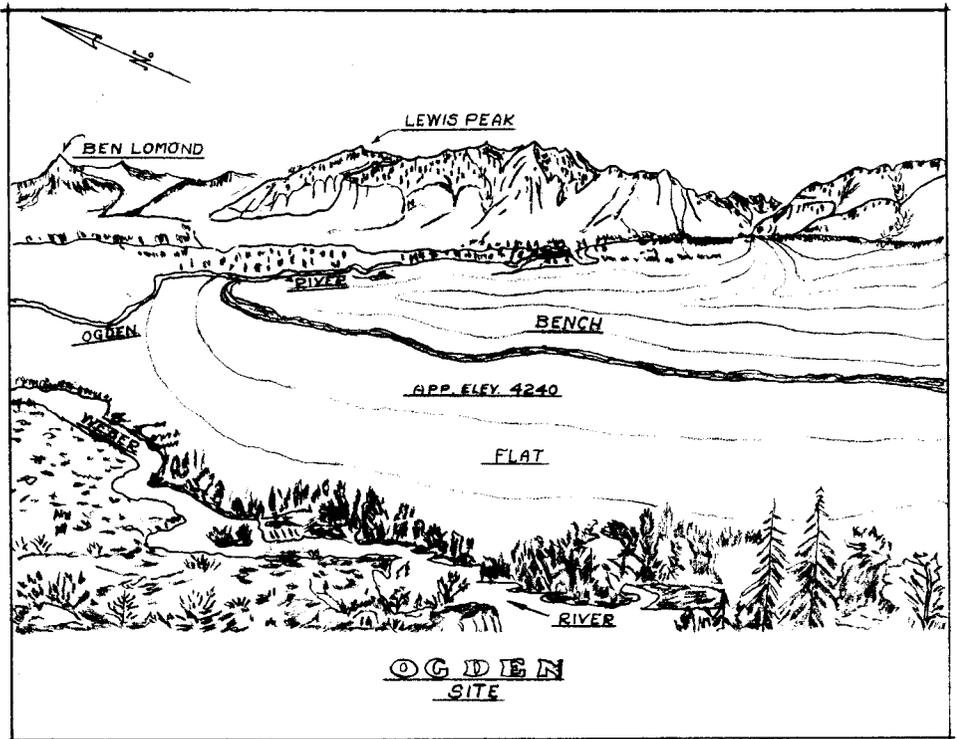
Their success was incredible. They changed the mud, rocks and sand into a decent place to raise kids, with excellent schools, and at the same time were able to build a Grand Opera House that presented the best entertainment directly from the east and west coasts.

Those days are gone forever, the following years were nothing like those first 50. But it's still a pretty good town. It's my town. I was born here.

**Irene Woodhouse**



*First Survey Camp at Ogden, 1871, vicinity of 27th and Tyler.*



*Ogden Site showing bench elevations.*

Sketch by Ted Stowe

## I — The Basics

Ogden is a town worth knowing about. Within its first 50 years it had more than its share of Utah's basic three R's — Rocks, Religion and Railroads — and even managed to add a couple of its own — Reclamation and Recreation.

Far more than a dot on the map, a column of statistics and a fight with the environment, Ogden is a place where desert land, immigrant labor and railroad capital came together with such force and purpose that the town took off on its own, becoming a maverick among Utah settlements — Mormon, without a Mormon brand.

The people were independent, proud, hardworking, fun-loving and downright practical. Although impressed with power and fascinated by pomp and ceremony, Ogdenites were never truly satisfied with the status quo. They were ever ready to hang on to what they had and reach out and grab something new.

The stories of everyday life, gleaned from private histories and public records, show that the people who built the city

could, on occasion, unite for the common good, but were always primarily concerned with their individual well-being.

To put these bits and pieces of ordinary living into perspective, it is necessary to get a good hold on the basics and to remember, always, that Ogden had to be built from the ground up. There were no high-rise pueblos to be rented from the Indians, nor any big-city contractor to do the construction.

The Mormons had entered the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 and a settlement, which would become Ogden City, was established by the church the following year. But early efforts to colonize Ogden, some 30 miles to the north of Salt Lake City, failed. The Mormon Church in 1847 was less than 30 years old and had been on the move for much of that time. The fine tuning of ecclesiastical organization was still years away.

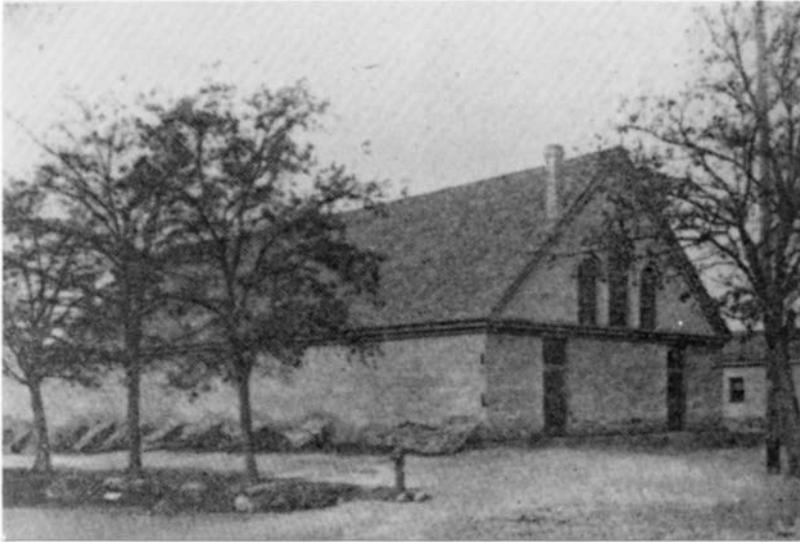
Even the practice of polygamy, which gave rise to hundreds of lurid stories, had its adversaries within the religious community. Mormon settlements were organized within the general guidelines of the church organization. Earlier customs and necessities shaped the behavior of the



Early street scene; Square building on right is Weber County Court House. Clix Swaner collection

citizens. In general, they were a people united by a need for security and survival, who were bound together by a controversial religion.

In 1851 Ogden became a paperwork entity which gave a



*Mormon Tabernacle, first important public building.*

Clix Swaner collection



*The same Mormon Tabernacle, after remodeling.*

Clix Swaner collection

vague promise of happy people living neat, orderly lives.

The land itself gave no such promise — only fight.

The area was a piece of hill-and-gully real estate located between the Weber and Ogden rivers, complete with swamps (sloughs), clay bluffs, sandhills, sagebrush, cheat grass and a wind that was hell-bent on reshaping the landscape daily.

In the hot, dry days of summer, that wind whipped up dust devils and sent them spinning and twisting through cottonwoods, kinnikinnick (red dogwood) and box elder, knocking over anything that wasn't anchored down.

Those winds heralded thunderstorms with torrents of rain that cut deep gullies into the sun-baked dirt and triggered mud-rock floods.

Winter snows drifted in the hollows and gave rise to the spring floods on both rivers. When the water receded it left mudholes and water-pockets that spawned flies and mosquitos and attracted the usual desert life. Grasshoppers and crickets summered in Ogden.

There is a story that Brigham Young, president of the Mormon Church, said after visiting the place that a town should be laid on the south side of Ogden's Fork at a point on the benchland, so that water from the Weber River and Ogden's Fork could be taken out for irrigation and other purposes.

As he came down from the sandhill he overheard Ezra Chase say that the land was certainly fertile and could yield "a hundred bushels of crickets to the acre and fifty bushels of mosquitos."

Undaunted, Young made a map, and in February 1851, the Legislature approved the area that would become Ogden City. Young counseled to the people to move onto city lots, build good homes, schoolhouses, meeting houses and other public buildings. They were also to plant gardens and fruit trees so that Ogden would be a permanent city. All gardens were to be fenced by the property owners.

The city was a mile square, including the area that lies between what is now 21st and 28th streets, from Wall to Quincy avenues. Like other Mormon towns it conformed to the pattern of earlier cities in Missouri and Illinois outlined by Joseph Smith. Wide streets divided the area into 10-acre blocks with a central city square.

From Wall to Washington avenues the land was somewhat level, but east of that it was all uphill. So steep were the clay

bluffs that later, as settlers moved to the benchlands, channels had to be cut into the hills so people could get home after storms. As the city grew, most of the population was west of Washington, so that for all practical purposes, the City Square was the eastern boundary.

It was desert country with a few trees near the rivers, but mostly sagebrush on the benchlands. Timber couldn't be spared for the fences Young advised. Cobblestones were used in some places and wire in others, but the frontier standard that a fence should be "horse high, bull strong and pig tight" was an ideal to be realized only after the desert was blooming like a rose. Live fences, such as trees, hedges and berry bushes, and natural barriers like irrigation ditches, sloughs and roadways were commonly used. In those pre-railroad days, material was in short supply and so was manpower.

The streets were not named, officially, but referred to by ownership, or use. Phrases such as "the first street north of the mayor's house," "south of the adobe yard," "Tithing Yard Street," and "behind the blacksmith's shop" are locations frequently referred to in the early Ogden City records.

Not until 1870 did the council bother to name the streets, and then those names lasted for only about 20 years. There was a time, however, when Ogden streets were named as follows: The first street north of the mayor's house became First Street, and going southward the other streets were named accordingly through Tenth Street. The Avenues, beginning with Wall, proceeded east — Franklin, Young, Main, Spring, Smith, Pearl, Green and East. A provision was made that avenues further east would have numerical designations — First East, Second East, etc.

That was the lay of the land in the very early days.

Another factor to be considered in Ogden's development is the status of the United States in those pre-Civil War days. When Brigham Young brought his followers to the Valley in 1847, the land belonged to Mexico. The United States and Mexico fought over the land and the Treaty of 1850 led to the recognition of California and Texas as states, and created the Utah and Nevada territories. (In 1867 Young complained that these boundaries were in effect for six months before he was told.)

It was the practice of the U.S. in those days to require the

inhabitants to evidence their fitness for self-government before joining the union as states.

Before that treaty, Young had located more than 400 settlements and towns and set up a provisional government, "The State of Deseret," whose boundaries embraced the Great Basin States and part of the southwest enclosed by the Colorado River drainage system, and also included a Pacific seaport. He was governor of the territory as well as president of the Mormon Church.

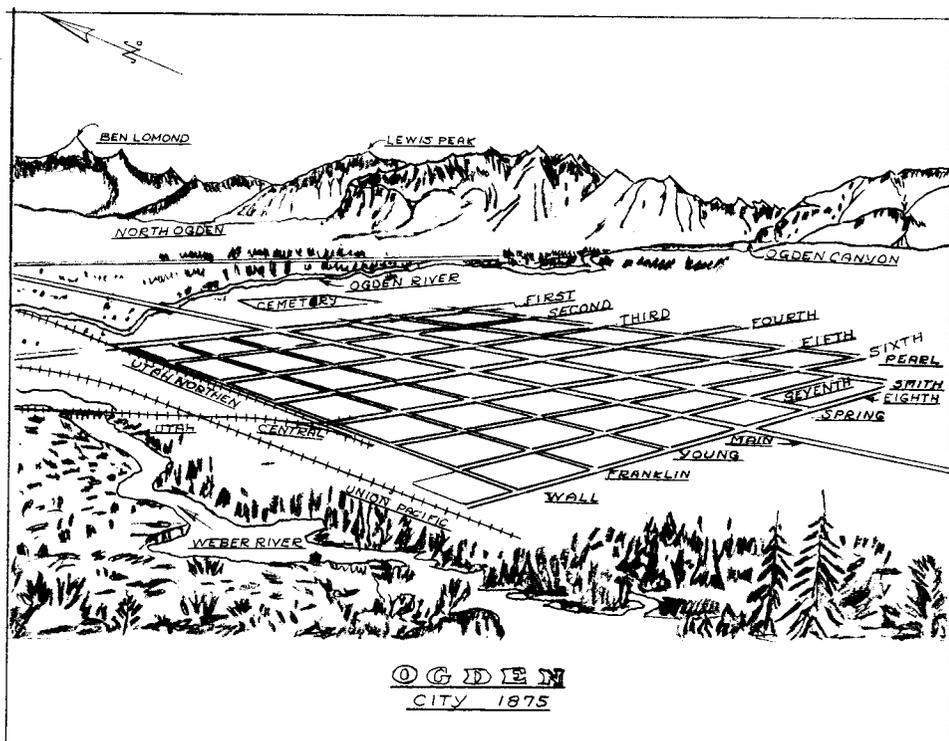
The territorial government, created by the treaty, cut off much of the land Young wanted, and although he remained governor for about seven years, the entire business caused a lot of strife between Mormons and miners, trappers, traders and finally the railroaders.

But by the time Ogden began to show signs of taking hold, the legal framework for territorial behavior was in place, and Ogden began as "part of America."

One phase of the Mormon ideal was that the people should be self-sufficient, and under Young's State of Deseret they might possibly have been. The new boundaries limited the scope of business the settlers might engage in, but they were still determined to provide for themselves and their children. They were willing to forego many of life's little pleasures and comforts for the security that the desert, in its isolation, could give them.

They were not ignorant, nor unskilled. Many had owned fine homes and good furniture in the east. Those who had not possessed those niceties knew they existed. The dream of the Utah settlements, including Ogden, was to have all of those things for themselves.

The earliest Weber County census reveals just how competent the settlers were. In a total county-wide population of 1,141 individuals, 20 were blacksmiths and 19 were carpenters. Among other trades were tailor, mason, school teacher, cooper, shoemaker, sailor, merchant, saddler, millwright, yeomen (gentlemen who hired their work done for them), wagon maker, tender, gardener, clerk, tanner, currier, potter, machinest, engineer, woodcarver, dentist, cabinet maker, soapmaker, dairyman, wheelwright, printer, peddler, bookbinder, baker, artist, chair maker, tinner, draper, butcher, soldier, sailmaker, stonemason and saddle-tree maker.



*Ogden City street map, 1875.*

Sketch by Ted Stowe

Everyone was a farmer of sorts, but the land was so poor that few could be termed successful. Those who wanted to farm so they could produce enough to sell (really trade, since money was scarce) continued to live within the town limits and farm property near the river.

Besides that, all able-bodied men belonged to the militia and were frequently called upon to leave town.

Young encouraged women to do those jobs which didn't require great physical strength so that men might be freed to use their strength and abilities in more arduous work. Also, many men served on church missions and were often absent from their families for long periods of time.

For about 10 years the people in Ogden struggled along as a religious community. Converts were welcomed; outsiders were not.

The Mormons used the word "gentile" which at that time meant a non-Jew, to describe all of those who weren't Mormons, Jews included.

Most Mormons had a genuine fear of strangers. William Coleman told of emigrants parked along the main street in covered wagons.

“People were afraid of them,” he wrote. “Grocers would hide their money in coffee cans and anyone who had valuables would keep them out of sight.”

According to Coleman, after a short period Will Brown, the sheriff, would gather a posse and drive down the street, firing several shots. That was the signal for the emigrant train to pack up and travel on.

Year after year settlers fought grasshoppers, crickets, bad weather and fires. They tried to follow Young’s counsel to



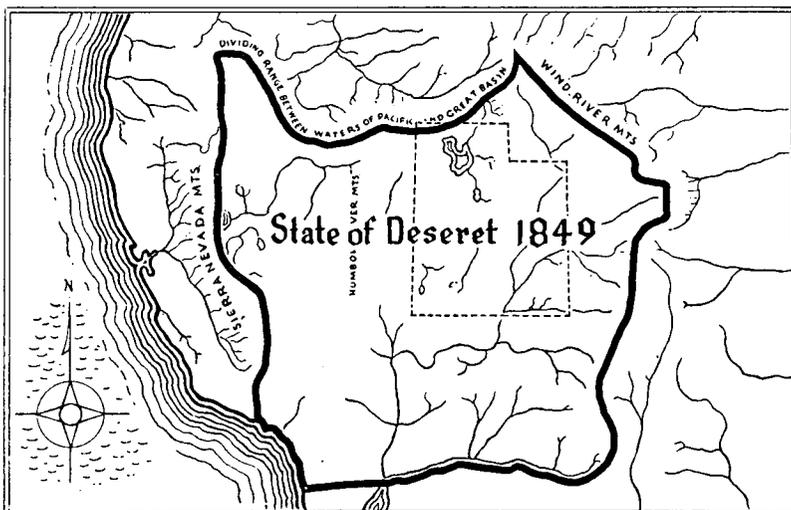
*Tithing Yard Street. Tithing Yard is at right.*

Clix Swaner collection

make Ogden a proper city, but the place was so isolated that results were slow in coming.

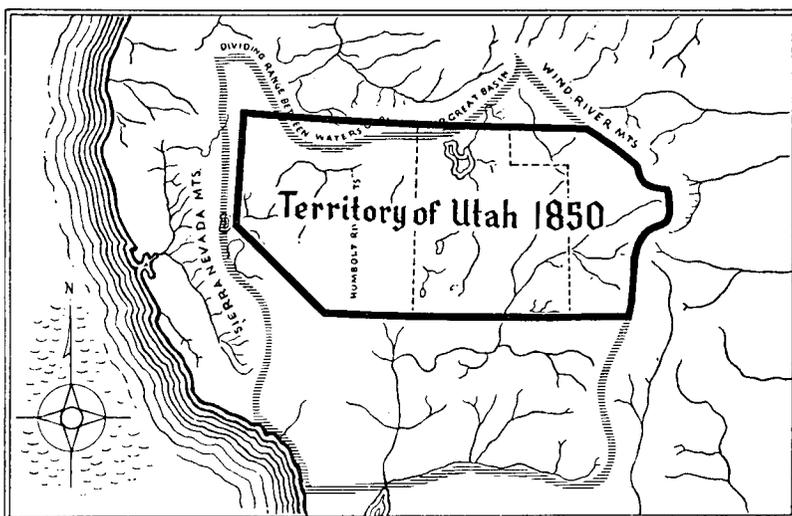
The Weber and Ogden rivers were not easy to cross. There were frequent reports of drowning and loss of possessions and livestock. The water was wild, tearing the earth from bridge pilings, so that bridges washed away almost as soon as they were in place. Many old-timers recall crossing the rivers in wagons. Often the water was so high it would seep into the wagon bed. Passengers took off their shoes — and stockings if they were wearing them — rolled up their pants or gathered their skirts above their knees to keep dry.

If a wagon broke a wheel, or worse still, an axle, trying to go over a boulder in the river, the passengers got to shore as best they could and continued their journey, wet and on foot.



*Original boundaries for State of Deseret.*

Ogden LDS Genealogy Library



*Territory of Utah, 1850.*

Ogden LDS Genealogy Library

It was truly unusual if a repair could be made the same day. The best one could hope for was that the wagon could be pulled out before the river sent it spinning and crashing against other boulders. Even a wagon with a broken wheel was better than a pile of wet boards.

In those times tools were homemade to meet the requirements of the jobs. They were small enough to be used by children, who always helped, and not a bit fancy. Without

any standardization of parts, or national supply houses, it was “make do, or do without.”

Many ads for labor included the stipulation that the applicant must bring his own tools.

This excerpt from the autobiography of Richard Thomas Berrett shows what tools and equipment were like in 1857. He writes:

“In the spring of 1857 the North Ogden Canal was made from Ogden River to Cold Water Creek. I worked on it about 30 days, sometimes with a shovel, at others with a scraper — not a wheel scraper — but a homemade one consisting of a large slab about six feet long from a saw log with a large hole bored in each end to put a chain through — the oxen hooked to the center of the chain to pull it — two large holes bored near the center — a strong stick put in each and a man to hold each one down and a man to drive the oxen.

“The ground was plowed — the scraper put on the upper side — the men got on the sticks or handles while the scraper full of dirt was pulled out of the canal. When they let go or got off the handles it would unload, then the same thing (was done) over until they got (it) as deep as they wanted.”

The canal south of the Ogden River to be taken out of Ogden’s Fork was a bit tricky. There were many false starts.

The area outside Ogden proper had been settled before Ogden and as a result water rights as well as water had to be considered seriously. As early as 1851 the city council minutes refer to the construction of the canal — called the “bench canal” because it would follow the bench line. But it wasn’t until 1857, five years after the canal from the Weber River was completed, that the canal from the Ogden River was completed.

Much of the delay came from a long period of haggling over water rights, since each man who worked on the canal was to receive, in lieu of cash, water shares. These rules couldn’t work and finally other compensations were made.

The important thing to keep in mind is that even though the settlers knew from their own experience and training what a city needed — water supply, roads, etc. — there was still the business of day-to-day living. One had to know where he was going to sleep that night and where his next meal was coming from. In fact, there was so much going on

all the time that no one item stands out as being the “project of the year.”

The opening of Ogden Canyon, however, did have an effect on the lives of all Ogdenites, no matter which section of town they lived in.

Ogden was isolated as perhaps few frontier towns were in the very beginning.

On the south, the Weber River came out of the mountains, traveled west, then turned north and eventually joined the Ogden River. Entry into the city from the south or the west meant crossing a river.

While old journals told of wagon trains and travelers passing through Ogden, there were items in the *Deseret News* in 1867 advocating skirting the rivers and entering town from the northwest by way of Plain City, founded as a Mormon settlement in 1859. Since the small towns surrounding Ogden had better farming ground, they showed signs of permanence before Ogden did, so it is entirely possible that few people came into Ogden after getting as far as Plain City.

Entry from the north was just as troublesome. The Ogden River charged out of the canyon and headed west, taking part of the landscape with it and finally meeting the Weber River.

To the east, Ogden was literally rocked-in by mountains. Those mountains were not the green rolling hills of pastoral poetry. They were — and still are — mean, craggy alps where the land slipped; rocks tumbled and avalanches swept down with amazing frequency.

Beyond the mountains was no Shangri-la — or even decent civilization — to make a roadway desirable. But timber and water made them downright seductive, and many stories are written of the risks and derring-do men subjected themselves to in order to possess those resources.

Ogden Canyon did offer some promise, although trappers, traders and even Indians called it impassable. It was. The canyon was so narrow that one had to river-hike a good part of the way. Almost seven miles east, through the twisting river path, was natural pastureland with plenty of grasses and abundant water.

From the 1850s settlers had taken their herds to this summer pasture by going to North Ogden, then east over the

divide and down into what was to become in 1892 the settlement of Liberty.

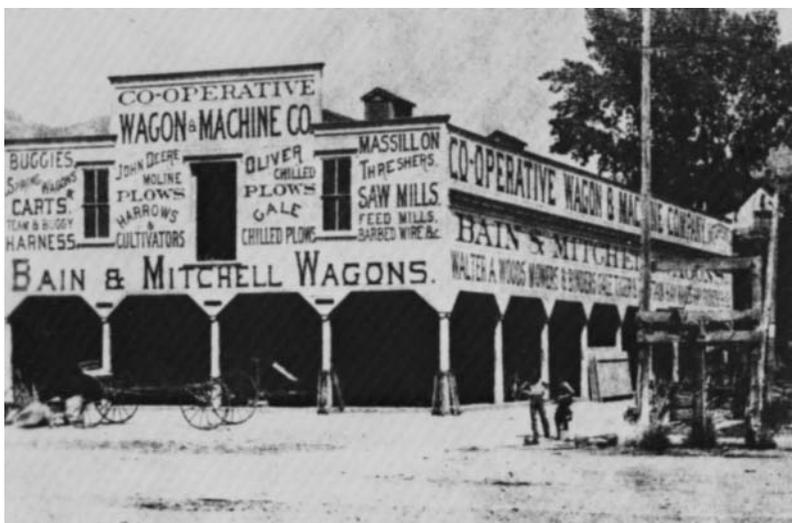
A good road through the canyon would make the trip to Bear River 50 miles shorter.

Around 1857 Lorin Farr and Isaac Goodale surveyed a route through the canyon, and even though land continued to slide down and rocks tumbled and bounced onto the road, the canyon was more or less opened to the public in about 1860. It was a toll road and charges were one dollar for a loaded wagon, 50 cents for an empty wagon, and 25 cents for a horse and rider.

Those short of cash paid with lumber, hay or produce. Some men, especially those loggers who needed the road open, worked on the road when it was closed, and thereby were allowed to travel free.

When the canyon was finally opened, Ogdenites moved in, and even though vacationing meant taking the family cow and chickens, many lived in tents during the summer in the mountains.

Since travel was so very slow, those Ogdenites who traveled east to Eden (founded in 1859) and Liberty always planned to stop for a rest once through the canyon. It was only natural that this area would become the playground for the town and within the next few years, hotels, saloons and restaurants as well as an amusement park would flourish.



*Co-operative Wagon and Machine Co.*

Albert S. Wheelwright collection



*George A. Lowe Co. and Ogden Mill Co.*

Albert S. Wheelwright collection

One usually went into the valley for a short time and returned, however, so for all practical purposes Ogden remained a fortress or a prison — depending on whether you wanted to get in or out.

The other event that changed forever the personality of Ogden was the Town Site Act of 1867.

Since Ogden was originally part of the Mexican Territory, when the land was purchased from Miles Goodyear he reportedly turned over a deed, or “Mexican Grant.” There is no record of that paper, and the treaty of 1850 just took the land for the U.S.

Under the procedures then in effect, homesteaders were given public land free of charge, provided they established residences and improved and cultivated the property they filed on.

In the middle 1850s the Mormon Church began to establish stronger ties within the communities and between the communities and Salt Lake City. During the so-called Mormon Reformation of this time, many devout members deeded their land to Brigham Young as a trustee-in-trust. Part of this was to prevent “outsiders” from being able to settle the land.

The Town Site act made it lawful for settlements — occupied as towns, not farming communities — to be incorporated for the benefit of the occupants and thereby not be subject to agricultural preemption by homesteaders.

In order for the land to be secured from the federal

government for a town, a verified map showing lots, blocks, streets and public squares and city boundaries, based on population, had to be given to the land officers. The entry fee was \$1.25 per acre.

A town could file on the land according to the population, as follows:

“When the inhabitants number 100 and less than 200, the entry not to embrace more than 320 acres. When the number of inhabitants is over 200, but less than 1,000, the entry not to exceed 640 acres. When the inhabitants number 1,000 and not over 2,000, the entry not to exceed 1,280. For each additional 1,000 inhabitants not exceeding 5,000, a further area of 320 may be added.

“Under this act, titles to lots in towns and cities upon the public domain may be acquired without awaiting the progress of the public survey.”

Almost immediately the Ogden City Council borrowed \$1,000 from Weber County and did the necessary paperwork to make itself an incorporated town. All property owners were asked to bring in their deeds for “verification.” (They also were to pay a minimal fee to help pay back the loan.) The deeds were certified as accurate and legal, showing change of title from the United States to the individual. The town held title to the unoccupied lots for the benefit and good of the city.

As new settlers came in they were encouraged to purchase land, and the prices were \$1 to \$5, depending on the ability to pay, and the size of the lot. It was more important for the city to have people establishing permanent homes than it was to be too picayunish about regulation-size lots. People didn’t line up to get their deeds verified, but over a period of years the deeds were recognized as accurate and legal.

From this point on Ogdenites seemed to have regarded their town not as part of the Utah Territory but a proper American town. They felt no obligation to follow the plans of Brigham Young unless they saw some benefit to the town.

In 1896 when Utah became a state, Ogden still clung to the national image. There were many instances in council minutes where the mayor called attention to the fact that action on the part of the council would be contrary to some recently passed state legislation. Almost without exception in these cases, the council huddled, thought in terms of the city, then voted to do what they wanted. Surprisingly there



*Entrance to Ogden Canyon.*

Clix Swaner collection

did not seem to be great objection, if any, by the Legislature to this kind of urbane behavior.

By 1869, when the railroads began regular trips from the east to west coasts, Ogden was ready. The railroads not only brought into Ogden tourists with money to spend, and materials to make life easier, they also brought a new population that began to build a proper city for their families.

That these new people were not Mormon and that they continued to maintain their close ties with friends and relatives in the world outside the Utah Territory gave Ogden a sturdy base to build on.

Additionally, these people were wage earners. They could pay in cash and therefore could make choices. No longer was most of the commerce carried on through bartering.

The land that was too poor for farming was well-suited to shops, restaurants, hotels, and resorts.

Ogdenites were not averse to asking for help from other states. There are frequent mentions of aid received from other organizations outside of Utah to help build decent facilities — and even push through ideas — that didn't find too much support locally.

That's how things stood by 1870, when Ogdenites began to understand the difference between the tourist and the native, and make headway in satisfying them both.



*Winter scene, Snowbasin area.*