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Article Summary: The only known photographs of overland emigrants crossing Nebraska, in possession of the Nebraska State Historical Society, were taken by Charles R Savage. Savage is best remembered for his photographs of the driving of the golden spike at Promontory, Utah, in 1869. This article presents more information on Charles R Savage and his unique photographs of emigrants crossing the Plains.

Cataloging Information:

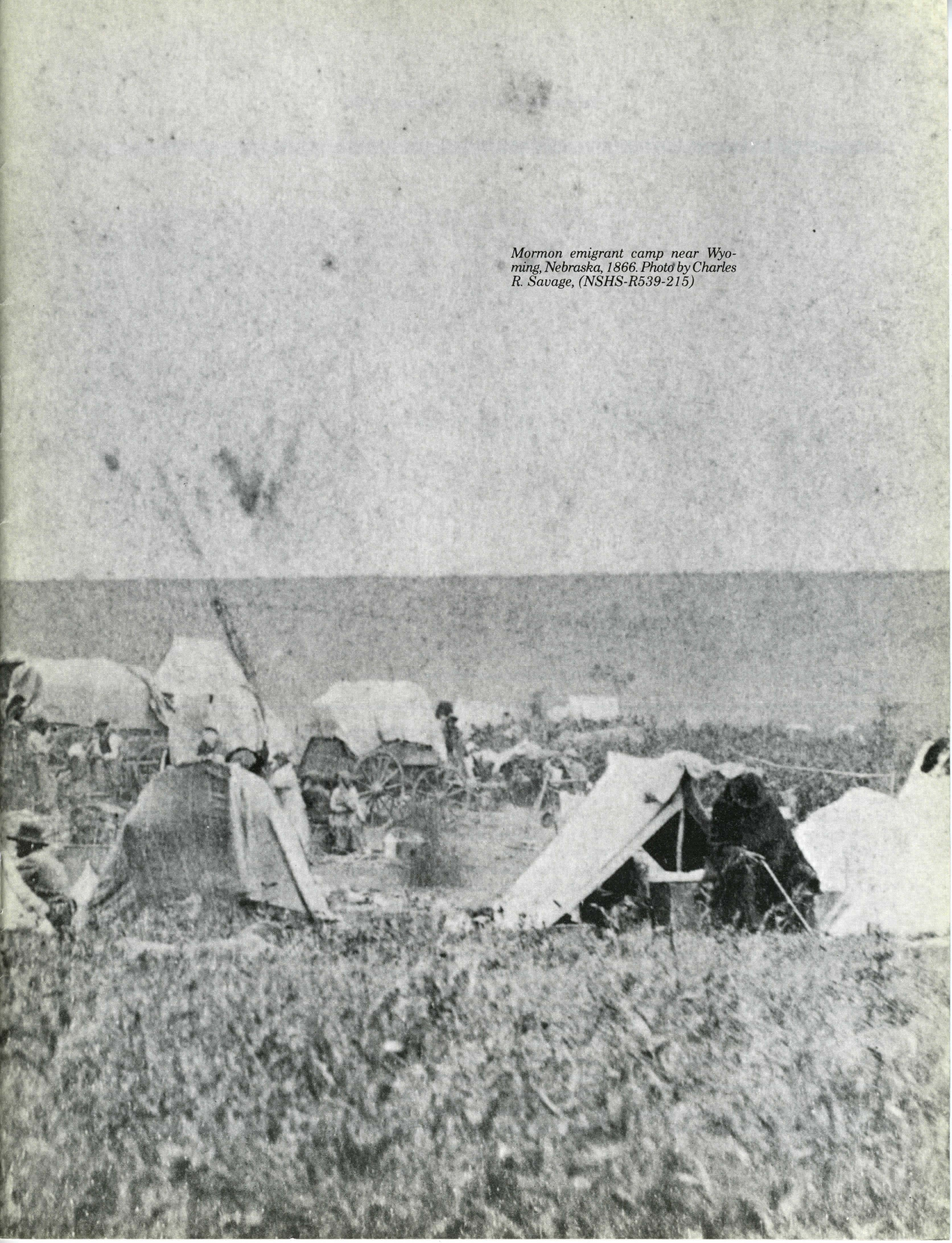
Names: Charles R Savage, William Driver, Merrill Mattes, Robert Taft, C W Carter

Place Names: Platte River, Nebraska; Fremont Springs, Nebraska; Echo Canyon, Utah; Salt Lake City, Utah

Photographs / Images: Mormon emigrant camp near Wyoming, Nebraska, 1866; Wagons fording the South Platte River at Fremont Springs, near present Hershey, Nebraska, 1866; Charles R Savage; Savage's advertising card; Wagon train in Echo Canyon, Utah; Wagon train halted in coral fifty miles east of Salt Lake City

PHOTOGRAPHING ACROSS THE PLAINS: CHARLES R. SAVAGE IN 1866

By John E. Carter



Mormon emigrant camp near Wyoming, Nebraska, 1866. Photo by Charles R. Savage, (NSHS-R539-215)

Wagons fording the South Platte River at Fremont Springs, near present Hershey, Nebraska, 1866. Photo by Charles R. Savage. (NSHS-E54-32)

While the invention of photography came along just in time to record most of Nebraska's history, there are some elements of that history conspicuously absent from the photographic record. One of the most notable is photographs of emigrants traveling the overland trails during the Great Migration, 1841-66. There are a number of very good reasons for the lack of photographs from this dramatic era. Foremost was the fact that the technology of making photographs was cumbersome at best, for these were the days of the wet-plate process. The photographer not only had to transport bulky view cameras and lenses, but also all of the chemicals and glass plates required to make and develop the negatives.

To make a photograph, the photographer needed a darkroom, where the light-sensitive chemicals could be mixed and coated on a glass plate. The plate then would be loaded in the camera, exposed, and developed — all before the mixture dried. Fifteen to thirty minutes might be spent making one picture.

A photographer bent on accompanying an emigrant party on an overland journey to Oregon, California, or Utah, not only would need three or four months to make the trek, but a wagon outfitted with a darkroom and a large supply of glass plates and chemicals as well. For most, such a trip was impractical, since there was no market for the photographs that would justify the investment.

Nevertheless at the very end of the covered wagon migration era, one photographer made such a trip. Recently the Nebraska State Historical Society acquired two of his cartes de visites (calling-card-sized photographs popular in the mid-nineteenth century) showing a wagon train of Mormons en route to Utah in 1866. Both images are Nebraska scenes, one taken at the emigrant camp near Wyoming, Nebraska, as the train was about to start, and the other showing wagons fording the South Platte River at Fremont Springs (near present Hershey, Nebraska). They are the only known photographs of overland emigrants crossing Nebraska.

The photographer, Charles R. Savage, is best remembered for his photographs of the driving of the golden spike at Promontory, Utah, in 1869. Born in England August 16, 1832, the son of a gardener, Savage had an impoverished childhood.[1] As a young man he converted to Mormonism and traveled as a missionary until 1857, when he arrived in the United States. He lived for a short time in New York

John E. Carter is curator of photographs at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

City — long enough to take training as a photographer.[2]

In 1859 Savage moved to the frontier town of Florence, Nebraska Territory, where he opened his first studio consisting of an old gray blanket suspended as a backdrop for portraits and a darkroom made from a converted tea chest. After a brief stay in Council Bluffs, Iowa, he embarked June 7, 1860, for Utah and the promised land. He settled in Salt Lake City and opened a studio.[3] Early in 1866 Savage traveled by stagecoach to San Francisco. From there he sailed to Panama City, crossed the isthmus by rail, and took a steamship to New York City.[4]

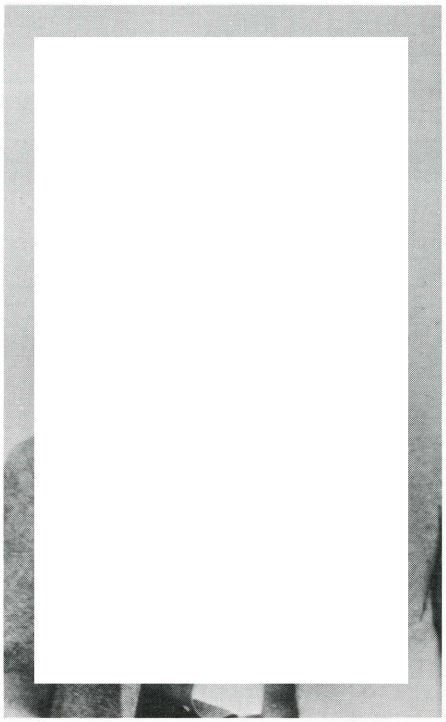
As Savage later reported in an article he wrote for the *Philadelphia Photographer,* a popular photographic journal of the day: "One of the objects of my visit eastward was to obtain a wagon suitable for taking a series of views on the overland route."[5] He planned to retrace his earlier overland trip — this time with a camera.

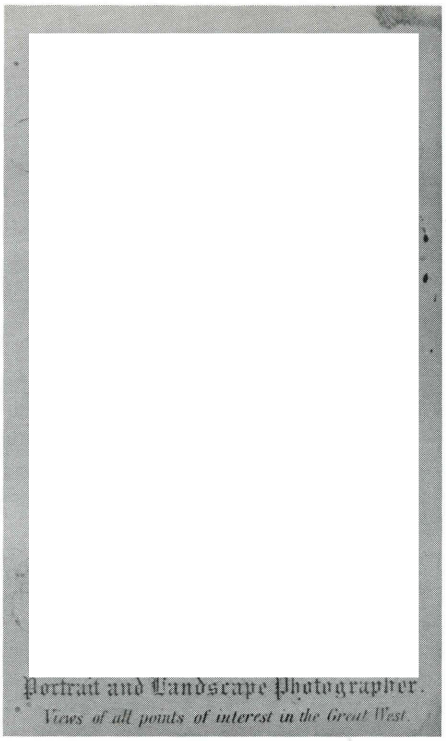
Because the wet-plate process required that all the photographic materials be close at hand, the design of the wagon was critical. Savage describes it:

> It is about nine feet long and six feet high in the darkroom, leaving three feet of space in front for carrying a seat and provisions. The sides are filled with grooved drawers, for the different sized negatives,[6] and proper receptacles for the different cameras, chemicals, &c, forming a very complete outdoor darkroom.[7]

He noted several problems with the wagon's design. For one, the vehicle was too heavy. Another was that the wagon got extremely hot in the summer — the sides were made of sheet iron! If the photographic chemicals became overheated, they often failed to work.

Savage set out with his new wagon for Philadelphia. From there he had it shipped by rail to St. Joseph, Missouri, loaded on a Missouri River steamboat, and sent upriver to Nebraska City, Nebraska Territory.[8] At Nebraska City Savage joined a large group of English Mormons camped at the nearby settlement of Wyoming. The Mormons were organizing several wagon trains for the journey to Salt Lake City. The *Nebraska City News* of June 30, 1866, reported that their number was nearing 1,200, with another 490 Mormons scheduled to arrive by steamboat that day.





Charles R. Savage . . . . (Below) Savage's advertising card. Both courtesy of Utah State Historical Society.

The Mormons divided into several groups for the overland crossing and left Wyoming at intervals from late June through mid-July.[9] The train Savage was with left about July 8, following the direct route from Nebraska City to Fort Kearny (often called the "Steam Wagon Road"). "As the Mormon trains are all well armed and completely organized," Savage noted, "I found it a great advantage rather than attempt the trip alone, which, by the way, our kind Uncle will not allow anyone to do beyond Fort Kearny."[10] He referred to a prudent military policy dictated by Indian unrest on the plains. The army did not allow small or poorly armed groups to proceed beyond the protection of the fort.[11]

Savage's party passed Fort Kearny on August 3. He tried to photograph the post in spite of gale-force winds but reported his success as "indifferent."[12]

Travel became arduous after the emigrants left the fort:

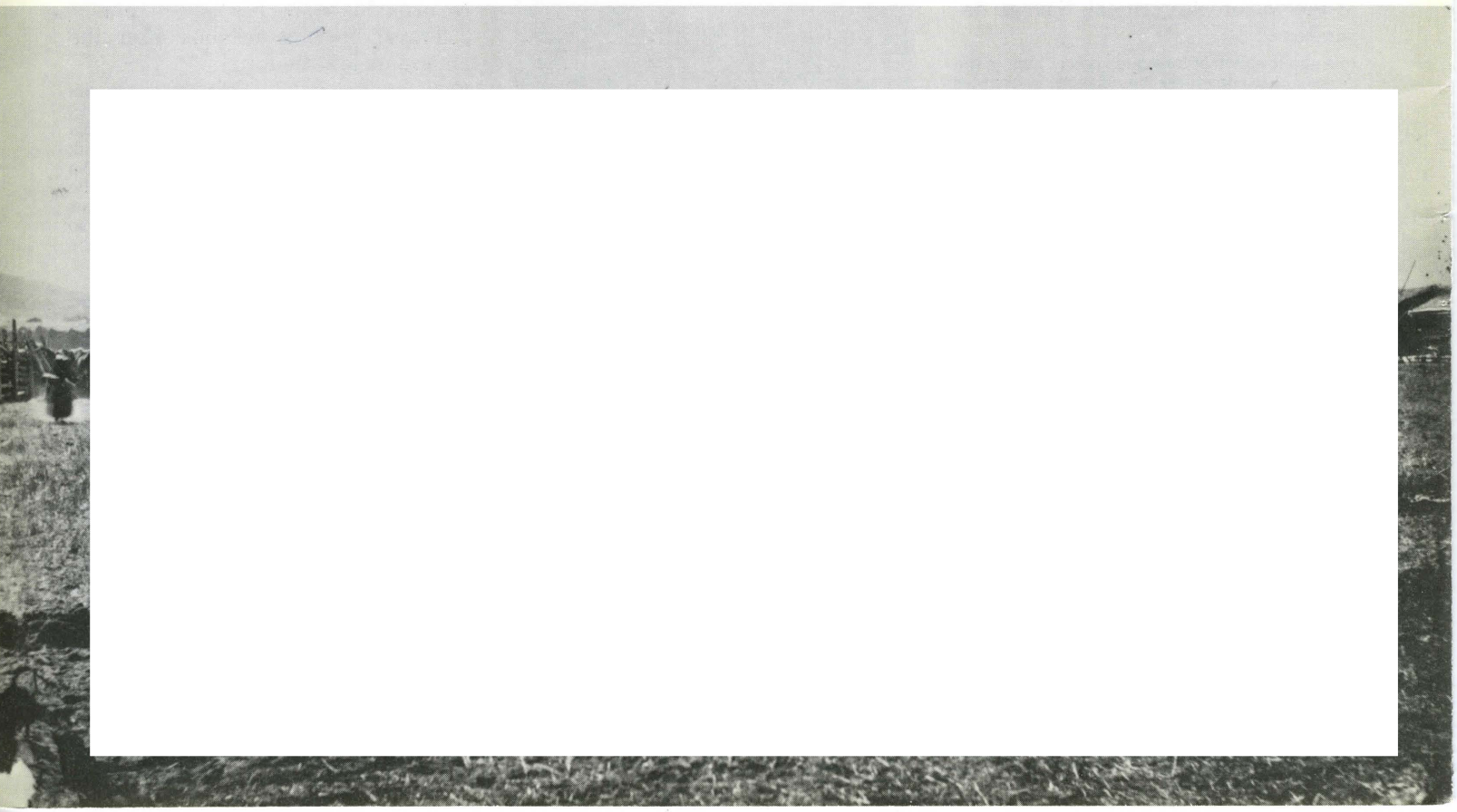
> From Fort Kearney on to the crossing of the South Platte near the present terminus of the U. P. R. R. the road follows the Platte Valley, and a more uninteresting road can hardly be found. Very few trees to be seen and, what with the swarms of green flies and mosquitos, and the strong wind that blows regularly every day, your photographic enthusiasm gets cooled down so much that you see nothing worth taking under the circumstances of such a trip.[13]

Savage's use of the phrase "cooled down" is touched with irony. William Driver, a member of another of the 1866 Mormon wagon trains, recorded in his diary that temperatures during this stretch of the journey were consistently above 100 degrees Fahrenheit.[14]

Savage's account explains why so few photographs of the overland trail experience exist:

> Now to photograph successfully on the Plains, you must be perfectly safe from Indians, as on two or three occasions in our efforts to secure some views, we found ourselves alone several miles from the train and run one or two risks of

Wagon Train in Echo Canyon, Utah. (NSHS-E54-32) . . . . (Below) A wagon train's midday halt in corral fifty miles east of Salt Lake City. Courtesy of Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



being "gobbled up" by a few stray rascals who are always on the look-out for a weak party and generally manage to pounce down upon a few defenseless wagons that happen to be passing. The fate of your former correspondent, Mr. Glover, shows how uncertain is life in such a place, and the wisdom of keeping a good look-out.[15] The necessary conditions for success under such circumstances are, that you must have plenty of time at your disposal, a strong party well armed with good Henry rifles, and good animals.[16]

Savage's train crossed the South Platte River at Fremont's Springs (known as the Lower Ford), and followed the North Platte River past Ash Hollow to Fort Laramie. Along the way Savage reported photographing Chimney Rock and Castle Rock, but he was unable to photograph Scotts Bluff. The emigrant party arrived there at midday and his chemicals had become overheated. Sadly, Savage's photographs of Chimney Rock and Castle Rock are not known to exist.[17]

There are a number of photographs of wagon trains in Echo Canyon, Utah, variously dated 1866-67, that appear on mounts bearing the name "C. W. Carter, S. L. City." These images show sizeable trains in and around the canyon, a narrow defile between Fort Bridger and Salt Lake City, and give rise to speculation about whether Carter really took them. Carter worked for Savage for a time, and it is possible that these photographs were made by Savage on the 1866 trip and later printed and sold by Carter.

The evidence for this is circumstantial but suggestive. Merrill Mattes notes that 1866 is the last year that large numbers of wagon trains followed the Platte Valley route. The trains pictured in the Carter prints certainly are substantial and not consistent with declining wagon travel after 1866.[18]

There has been confusion over the year Savage actually made his second overland trip. His account in the *Philadelphia Photographer* is dated August 1867. This, as Robert Taft clearly shows, is a misprint.[19] Since contemporary accounts are in error about the date of Savage's trip, it is possible that similar errors have been made in dating the Echo Canyon photographs.

There is also the question of how Carter happened to be in the right place at just the right time with all his cumbersome equipment to make the several Echo Canyon photographs. To have made the Echo Canyon negatives, Carter would have had to know when the wagon trains were going to pass through the narrow canyon so that he could be there with his equipment. With overland travel on the decline during the mid-1860s, he would have needed precise information about the arrival of the train in Echo Canyon — which is unlikely — or have waited several days to capture the specific scenes.

At this stage of the journey to the Salt Lake Valley, the wagons would not have stopped merely for the convenience of the photographer. Savage missed his chance to photograph Scotts Bluff due to bad timing — his party arrived during the heat of the day and the train could not wait until conditions improved. The images attributed to Carter are the kind of photographs that more likely could have been made by a photographer who was *with* the train and able to take advantage of photo opportunities that otherwise would have been unpredictable. Savage himself provided indirect evidence that he took the Echo Canyon photographs in his description of the trail between Fort Bridger and Salt Lake City: "The road winds through canons and valleys and offers many features of great interest to the tourist photographer."[20]

There is no doubt about the origin of the two images from the Nebraska segment of Savage's trip. As the only known photographs relating to emigrant travel in the Platte Valley, they are a unique addition to the documentary record of the overland migration.[21]

NOTES

[1]Nelson Wadsworth, "Zion's Cameramen: Early Photographers of Utah and the Mormons," *Utah Historical Quarterly,* 40 (Winter 1972), 46.

[2]Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History 1839-1889* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1942), 272.

[3]Wadsworth, "Zion's Cameramen," 48.

[4]Ibid., 50.

[5]Charles R. Savage, "A Photographic Tour of Nearly 9,000 Miles," *Philadelphia Photographer,* 4 (1867), 313.

[6]Most of the printing that was done from these negatives was contact printing, which involves putting the negatives in direct contact with the photographic paper and then exposing it. Thus, the print is exactly the same size as the negative. For this reason a photographer of that day might work in a variety of negative sizes, depending on the size of print that the photographer desired.

[7]Savage, "Photographic Tour," 313.

[8]Ibid., 314.

[9]There are two other accounts of the overland trek of the wagon train(s) of which Charles Savage was a part, and both have been published. They are: Frank Driver Reeve, "London to Salt Lake City in 1867: The Diary of William Driver," *New Mexico Historical Review,* 17 (January 1942), 53; and Caroline Hopkins Clark, "Mrs. Clark's Story," *Our Pioneer Heritage,* 10, 47. For reasons difficult to explain, Reeve errs in dating the Driver account to 1867. In the text on page fifty-three he clearly records the year as 1866. See also Merrill J. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 607.

[10]Savage, "Photographic Tour," 314.

[11]Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives,* 5, and *The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 21.

[12]Reeve, "London," 54; Savage, "Photographic Tour," 314.

[13]Savage, "Photographic Tour," 314.

[14]Reeve, "London," 52, 53.

[15]Savage refers here to Ridgeway Glover, an impetuous young photographer who in June 1866 began sending letters to the *Philadelphia Photographer* telling of his efforts to photograph the Indians. Glover was working out of Fort Phil Kearny in Montana, photographing the Sioux and Cheyenne. He was found dead, scalped, and mutilated on September 14, 1866. Taft, *Photography,* 275, 276.

[16]Savage, "Photographic Tour," 315.

[17]Wadsworth ("Zion's Cameramen," 50) states that Savage made "hundreds of pictures" on the 1866 trip and "many of these can be found today." However, the photo archives at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints contains only four Savage photographs that can be attributed to the 1866 trip. Brian Sokolowsky to author, November 6, 1989.

[18]Mattes, *Great Platte River Road,* 21.

[19]Taft, *Photography,* 491.

[20]Savage, "Photographic Tour," 315.

[21]Savage went on to make a famous photograph of the joining of the rails at Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869. He continued his photography business in Salt Lake City until he retired in 1906. Savage died February 3, 1909. (See Wadsworth, "Zion's Cameramen," 53, 54.)