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Article Summary: In 1866 Charles Savage made the earliest known photograph of Chimney Rock and several other rare images, providing a unique visual record of one of the last years of wagon travel along Nebraska's Great Platte River Road.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Charles Roscoe Savage, John Wesley Jones, William Quesenbury, Albert Bierstadt, Frederick Lander, William Keys

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Photographs / Images: Charles Roscoe Savage, about 1870; Chimney Rock, 1866*; *Ogalillah Sioux Village, North Fork of the Platte, Na*, 1859 (Albert Bierstadt photograph); *Chimney Rock, Ogalillah Sioux Village in the Foreground* (engraving by Samuel Valentine Hunt based on Bierstadt painting; "The Overland Pony Express," *Harper's Weekly*, November 2, 1867; engraving of Chimney Rock, *Harper's Weekly*, November 2, 1867; engraving of Cheese Creek Ranche, *Harper's Weekly*, November 2, 1867; inset text from "The Overland Pony Express," *Harper's Weekly*, November 2, 1867; Cheese Creek Ranche, 1866**; Roland Reed Ranche, 1866**; Fort Kearny, Nebraska Territory, 1866**; O'Fallon's Bluff, 1866*; Mormons camped at Wyoming, Nebraska Territory, north of Nebraska City, 1866*; wagon train fording the South Platte River near present day Hershey, Nebraska, 1866*

*Savage photograph

**photograph attributed to Savage

Charles Savage's Visual Narrative

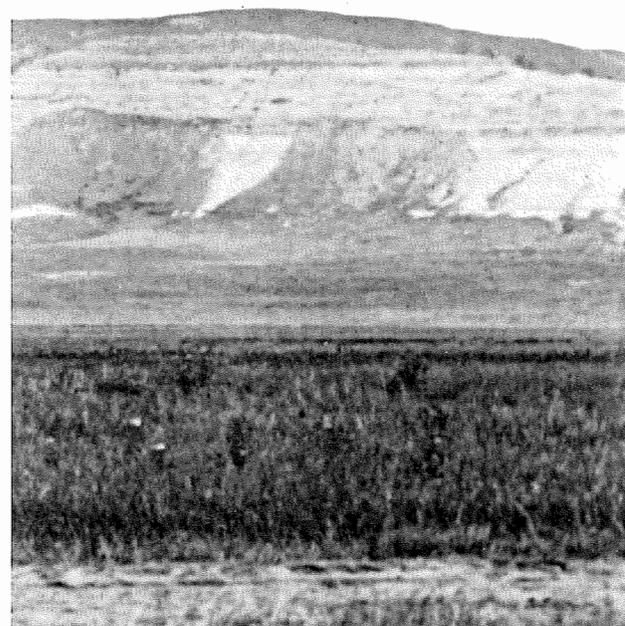


The Platte River Road

Each year some 25,000 people travel the highways along the North Platte River in western Nebraska to visit Chimney Rock, a National Historic Site.¹

IT DOESN'T TAX ONE'S IMAGINATION to think that most of these modern pilgrims get out their cameras to photograph the unusual spire. Imagine again that each visitor takes four or five snapshots. This means that, year in and year out, Chimney Rock is memorialized on film (oddly, in this digital age, film is now a metaphor) about 100,000 times.

Chimney Rock garnered historical significance as arguably the best known of all the landmarks along the overland trails that passed through the Platte Valley in the mid-nineteenth century. From the 1840s through the mid-1860s as many as 500,000 travelers followed what the late trail historian Merrill J. Mattes termed "The Great Platte



River Road" on their way to Oregon, California, Colorado, Montana, and Utah.² Almost everyone who recorded an account of their journey mentioned Chimney Rock as they passed by. The peak years of westward migration coincided with the birth and adolescence of photography, and one would think this legendary landmark would also have attracted the attention of this first generation of photographic artists, but it didn't. There were likely only three photographers who had the opportunity to capture an image of Chimney Rock before the end of the overland migration era and of those, two are credited only by inference. The third, Charles Savage, and the Nebraska State Historical Society's recent acquisition of his 1866 photograph of Chimney Rock, the earliest known to have survived, are the inspiration for this essay.

The first of the photographers who may have

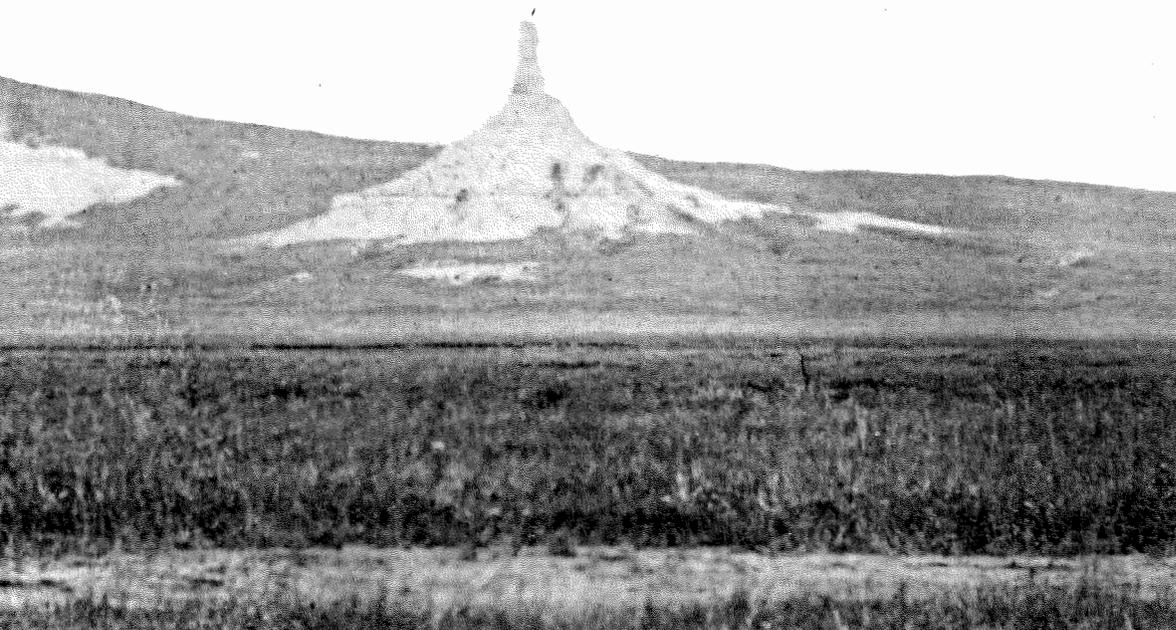
photographed Chimney Rock would have been a daguerreotypist traveling from Sacramento, California, to St. Louis with John Wesley Jones in 1851. Jones and a gaggle of sketch artists and photographers took their west-to-east jaunt to make visual notes that Jones would later translate into a colossal painting, a panorama he dubbed the Pantoscope. The painting was probably nine feet tall and hundreds of yards long, literally a moving picture reeled between two tall capstans rather like recording tape. At concert halls throughout the East, Jones provided a rousing narrative of the overland trail experience, while assistants unscrolled the huge painting behind him.

Opposite: **Charles Roscoe Savage, about 1870.** Utah State Historical Society Collection Number 921, p. 2

Below: **Chimney Rock, 1866. Photograph by Charles R. Savage.** NSHS RG3319:1-45

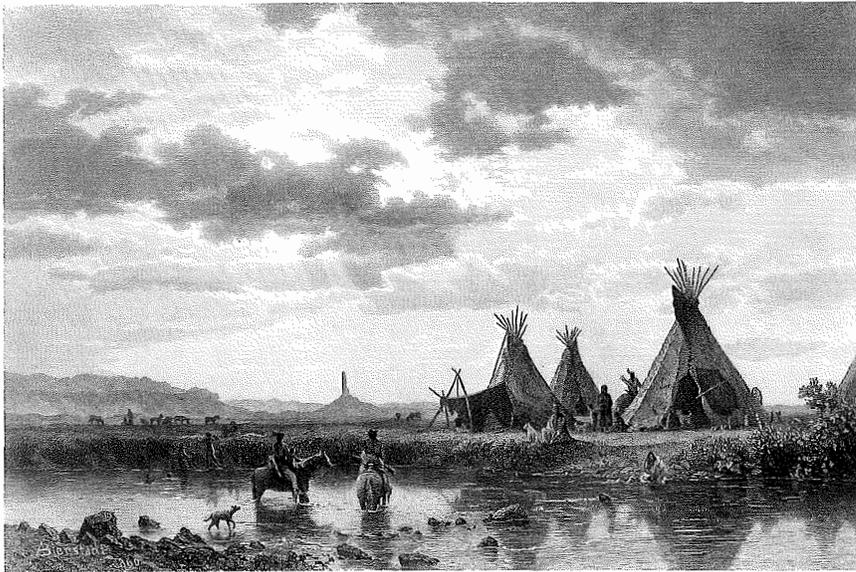
in 1866

BY JOHN E. CARTER





(98.) Ogalallah Sioux Village, North fork of the Platte, Wya.



Chimney Rock, Ogalallah Sioux Village in the Foreground. This steel plate engraving by Samuel Valentine Hunt was based on Albert Bierstadt's well known painting. It was produced by the *Ladies Repository* as part of a series of portraits and landscapes tipped-in the magazine. Nancy K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art and Enterprise*, New York: The Brooklyn Museum in association with Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 273.

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Little evidence of that enterprise survives. The Pantoscope and all of the photographs, of which Jones bragged there were 1,500, were lost. There is, however, an extant sketchbook created by William Quesenbury (pronounced Cush-en-berry) during Jones's 1851 trek that is the subject of a forthcoming book. Four of Quesenbury's drawings of Chimney Rock appear in the sketchbook, suggest-

(98.) Ogalallah Sioux Village, North Fork of the Platte, Na (sic). Photograph by Albert Bierstadt, 1859. NSHS RG3122-1

ing that Jones's troupe would have been in the vicinity long enough to make a daguerreotype or two. Because we surmise that the photographic artists were still part of the entourage, and Jones himself was skilled in the process, it is impossible to imagine them not practicing their craft, particularly in the presence of such a noted landmark. There is no way to be sure, however, because any photographs that Jones's party made have been lost to history.³

The other likely Chimney Rock photographer was Albert Bierstadt, best known for his breathtaking landscape paintings of the American West. Like Jones, Bierstadt employed a camera to make visual notes for his later works. In the spring of 1859 he joined Frederick Lander's government expedition sent out to improve a wagon road from Fort Kearny to California, and he packed along a stereographic camera.

The Lander party set off from St. Joseph, traveling through Nebraska and following the North Platte River into what is now Wyoming. Bierstadt later created one of his better known paintings, entitled, *Chimney Rock*, as a result of this trip. An engraving based on this painting, with a Sioux village added in the foreground, was published in the January 1866 issue of *The Ladies Repository*. We know Bierstadt had his camera out from his extant photograph of a Lakota man standing near his tipi on the North Platte River, probably made a few days before the Lander party reached Chimney Rock in early June.⁴

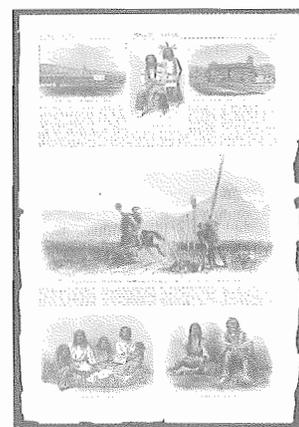
Although published lists of Bierstadt's photographs reveal that he made several photographs during this expedition, like those taken by Jones's daguerreotypists, most have vanished over time. Given the subject matter of Bierstadt's painting featuring Chimney Rock, and the knowledge that he used his camera to make visual notes, it is logical to assume that he would have photographed the geological curiosity while he was camped nearby.

The only photographer of the three who had the opportunity to make a photograph of Chimney Rock during the 1850s and 1860s and for whom clear evidence exists that he actually did so was Charles Roscoe Savage. In the summer 1990 issue of *Nebraska History* I wrote of Savage's trip across the Plains in 1866 in company with a large party of Mormons on their way from the Missouri River to Utah.⁵ The article focused on two Savage photographs made on that trip, which the Nebraska State Historical Society had recently acquired. I noted that Savage had mentioned taking "good photographs of both Castle and Chimney Rock" in an article published in the February 1867 *Philadelphia Photographer*.⁶ I contacted all of the repositories in the United States that were likely to have the two photographs to which Savage referred. While several of his photographs from the trip had survived, I was forced to conclude that his 1866 photograph of Chimney Rock was lost to us as well.

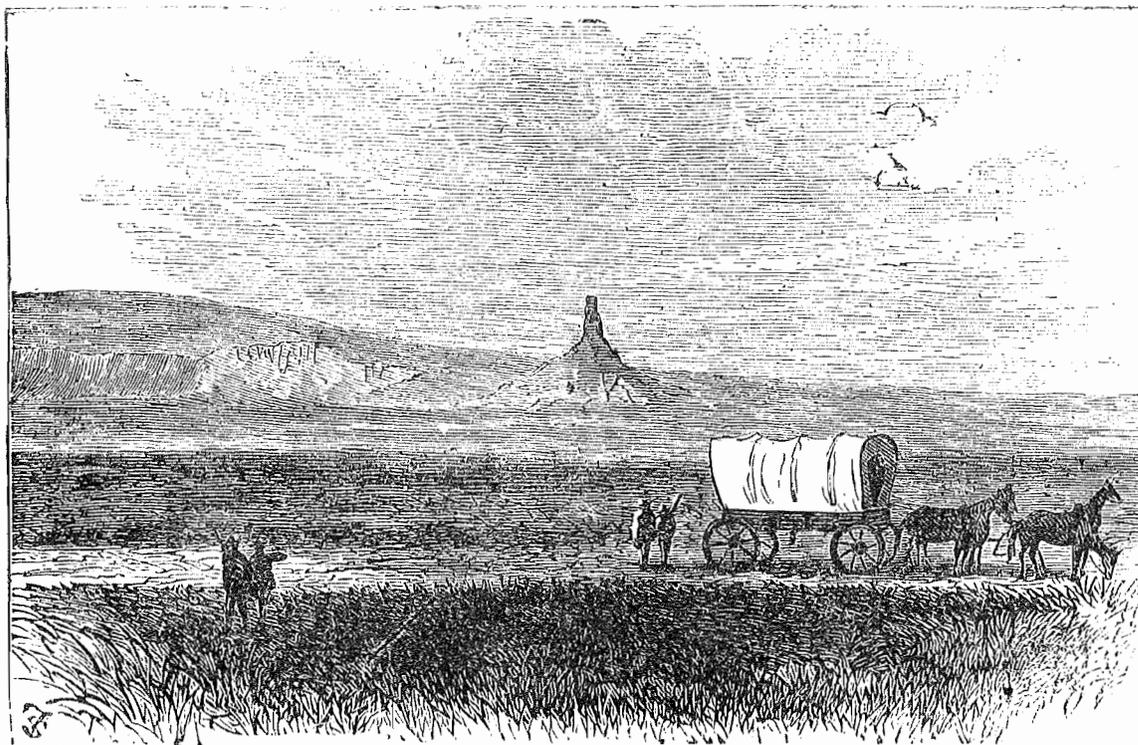
That assessment changed recently when the Nebraska State Historical Society was able to purchase Savage's 1866 Chimney Rock photograph at auction. That same auction offered, and the Society obtained, another photograph from the 1866 trip showing O'Fallon's Bluff. Both are carte de visites in excellent condition.

As I examined the Chimney Rock photograph I discovered that it was the basis for an engraving that appeared in a November 1867 issue of *Harper's Weekly*. That the engraver enhanced the photograph by adding some travelers in the foreground can be readily determined when the engraving is compared to the photograph; the figures are quite out of scale in relation to Chimney Rock.⁷

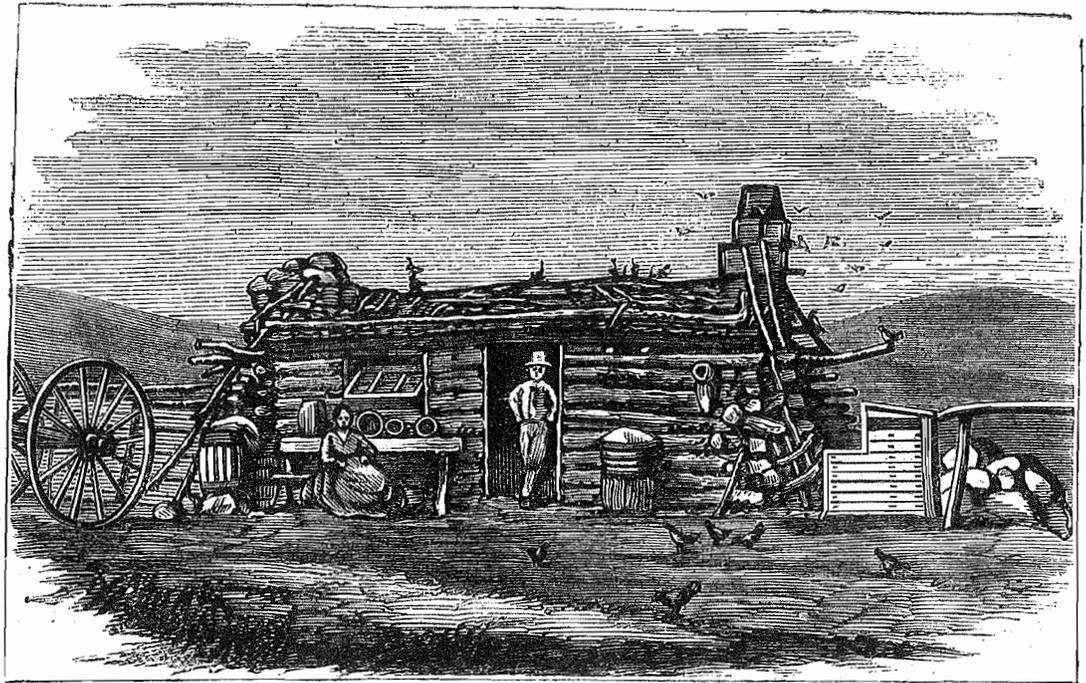
Matching the Chimney Rock photograph to the related engraving led to another association. The same *Harper's* article included an illustration of the Cheese Creek road ranche. The ranche was located south of today's Lincoln, Nebraska, along the Nebraska City to Fort Kearny Cutoff of the overland trail, a direct route from the Missouri River to Fort Kearny laid out in 1860. The Mormons and Savage followed this cutoff. The engraving identifies Cheese Creek as a Pony Express stop, but the Pony Express did not pass that way during its brief reign in 1860-61. I suspect the *Harper's* editors confused Cheese Creek with Rock Creek, an actual



"The Overland Pony Express," *Harper's Weekly*, November 2, 1867. NSHS Museum Collection 11055-1980



Engraving of Chimney Rock, *Harper's Weekly*, November 2, 1867. NSHS Museum Collection 11055-1980



Engraving of Cheese Creek Ranche, *Harper's Weekly*, November 2, 1867. NSHS Museum Collection 11055-1980

Pony Express station and road ranche located about fifty miles southwest of Cheese Creek as the crow flies.⁸

A photograph likewise matches the engraving of the Cheese Creek Ranche, but it is only a copy print made from the original in 1930. The original was then in the possession of Anna Keys-Maris, who indicated that the picture had been made by her grandfather, William Keys, a photographer in Iowa prior to coming to Nebraska. I question her attribution. *Harper's* noted that the photographs from which the Cheese Creek and Chimney Rock engravings were made came from Savage and his partner, George M. Ottinger. While this does not mean Savage could not have acquired a photographic print of Cheese Creek from Keys, it seems more likely that the original photograph was indeed made by Savage himself, who passed by the Cheese Creek Ranche with his camera during his trip with the Mormons in 1866.

There is further evidence that he did just that. In the 1867 *Philadelphia Photographer* article Savage reported, "The road from Nebraska City to Fort Kearney presents but few objects of special interest to the photographer. I secured negatives of one or two of the overland stations, and a few rural scenes not remarkable for any particular feature different from the same genre of subjects elsewhere."⁹

The other illustrations surrounding this suggestive picture may be said to be scenes and persons with whom the express rider and his pony are intimately acquainted. "Chimney Rock," the same as that indistinctly seen in the back-ground of the large picture, is a curious sandstone formation near the North Platte River; and is now fast decaying, and, as it were, "chipping away." The Ute Indians, of whom we give two pictures, are located near Salt Lake City—a small peaceful tribe fast dying out. The same may be said of the Snake Indians, whom we also illustrate. We give also one of the abandoned overland stations in Nebraska. The railroad already extends beyond Cheese Creek, on which this station is located, and the station is therefore abandoned as "a thing of the past."

We are indebted for the original photographs of these several engravings to Messrs. SAVAGE & OTTINGER, photographers, of Salt Lake City, Utah.

"The Overland Pony Express" (detail), *Harper's Weekly*, November 2, 1867. NSHS Museum Collection 11055-1980

The Keys attribution for the Cheese Creek photograph was a family story told sixty-four years after the photograph was taken and, by that time, the story had been further embellished. For example, in 1932 the same engraving of the Cheese Creek Ranche as published in the 1867 *Harper's Weekly* appeared in the *Sunday (Lincoln) Journal and Star*, this time identified as the homestead of J. W. Cranmer. The newspaper story moved the ranche to Harlan County, about 130 miles to the



Cheese Creek Rancho, 1866. Photograph attributed to Charles R. Savage.
 NSHS RG2469-03

southwest, and attributed the image to Albert Bierstadt, who “was on a hunting trip with ‘Buffalo Bill’ Cody and several prominent Omaha citizens when he made these sketches in Harlan County.”¹⁰ Because the newspaper article was based on an interview with Cranmer, an octogenarian at the time, we can assume that he had something to do with the identification of the illustrations. Memory can be a tricky business.

In my judgment, the most likely author of the original photograph of the Cheese Creek Rancho is Charles Savage. It was published as an engraving and attributed to him in 1867, a little less than a year after he completed his 1866 trek across the Plains. I believe the attribution of the photograph to Keys is a heartfelt but erroneous family tale. Without actually inspecting the original, however, there can be no conclusive proof.

My confidence in the Savage attribution for the Cheese Creek image was bolstered when I looked at a photograph of Roland Reed’s road rancho, also located on the Nebraska City to Fort Kearny road, west of the modern-day village of Beaver Crossing, Nebraska. That photograph, like the one of Cheese Creek, is a copy from an original. Roland Reed’s son, William, loaned the copy print to Addison E. Sheldon, then Nebraska State Historical Society superintendent and editor of *Nebraska History* magazine. In 1937 William Reed

penned a reminiscence, in which he remarked,

I well remember the Mormon trek, how they stopped and took the two pictures of the old Ranch house and our family. They had a large caravan, some twenty wagons with four yoke of oxen on each. These wagons were covered, with a high box, and carried a very heavy load. They were three times the size of our wagon box today. Some of the colonists were walking, others drove the oxen and rode. They went over to Beaver Creek to establish their camp for the night, but purchased food and supplies from my father’s trading post. I remember that it was late afternoon when the pictures were taken.¹¹

One of the photographs was, of course, the one loaned to Dr. Sheldon. The other image appeared in a Beaver Crossing community history brochure in 1932.¹² There can be little doubt that the unnamed photographer was Charles Savage, and reinforces the argument for his authorship of the Cheese Creek image.

Linking the two road rancho photographs to Savage suggests another attribution. In his *Philadelphia Photographer* article, Savage reported, “When we reached Fort Kearney it was blowing a gale of wind, but, in spite of that, I made a desperate effort to *take* the Fort, with indifferent success.”¹³ An early photograph of Fort Kearny,



Roland Reed Ranche, 1866. Photograph attributed to Charles R. Savage. NSHS RG2469-05

again a copy print, is dated 1866. Close examination shows the treetops are nothing but a blur, probable evidence of Savage's gale. In a long exposure typical of the photography of that era, objects or people in motion turn into ghostlike smudges on the negative. In the Fort Kearny photograph we can see the stationary tree trunks but the wind-whipped branches become fog. Absent a firm attribution, available evidence points to Savage.

Bringing together the photographs of Cheese Creek, Roland Reed's road ranche, Fort Kearny, O'Fallon's Bluff, Chimney Rock, and the two images published in the 1990 *Nebraska History* article, provides an excellent visual narrative of the Great Platte River Road in 1866, the last year a substantial number of people took wagons westward along that corridor. It was the dawn of the age of rail transportation in the American West and the Union Pacific was, even then, laying track along the Platte.

The Savage series begins with a photograph of a group of Mormons camped at Wyoming, Nebraska. Wyoming was a settlement north of Nebraska City in Otoe County, not to be confused with the present state by the same name. After the

Mormons relocated their Nebraska base from Florence near Omaha in 1864, Wyoming was the jumping off point for many Mormon emigrants during the next two years.¹⁴

From Wyoming, the party with whom Savage traveled followed the Nebraska City to Fort Kearny Cutoff, which would have taken him to Cheese Creek and thence to the Roland Reed Ranche about twenty miles farther west. Continuing along the cutoff to the Platte River, Savage and the Mormons would soon have reached Fort Kearny. From there the travelers proceeded westward along the Platte to the confluence of its north and south branches and followed the south bank of the South Platte to a ford known as the lower crossing, near today's Hershey, Nebraska.

Savage must have left the party to make his photograph of O'Fallon's Bluff, the only such image known. O'Fallon's Bluff lies to the west of the lower crossing. In the photograph one can see that the bluff crowds the river, and travelers were concerned that the narrow passageway between the bluff and river offered an inviting setting for possible ambush by Indians.¹⁵ The trail here was also often boggy and impassible. The wagon trains, therefore, ascended O'Fallon's Bluff and followed

“When we reached Fort Kearney it was blowing a gale of wind, but, in spite of that, I made a desperate effort to take the Fort, with indifferent success.”

Charles R. Savage



Fort Kearney, Nebraska Territory, 1866. Photograph attributed to Charles R. Savage. NSHS RG2102:1-3

Savage must have left the party to make his photograph of O’Fallon’s Bluff, the only such image known.



O’Fallon’s Bluff, 1866. Photograph by Charles R. Savage. NSHS RG2154:8-27

along its crest before descending to rejoin the trail near the river. A portion of O'Fallon's Bluff is now the site of an eastbound rest area on Interstate 80, located southeast of the modern-day town of Sutherland, where today's travelers can view original wagon ruts preserved within the rest area boundary.

I suspect that because Savage had the time to go to O'Fallon's Bluff and return, he made the photograph in the late afternoon and that the Mormon entourage camped that night on the south side of the Platte, leaving a full day to ford the river. At the lower crossing, Savage photographed wagons emerging from the river, with other wagons in the distance that appear to be crossing upstream. His view is the only known photograph showing emigrants traveling through Nebraska's Platte Valley in covered wagons during the overland migration years.

After fording the South Platte and reaching the North Platte River, the Mormon train passed Ash Hollow and Courthouse Rock, both notable trail landmarks. Chimney Rock soon appeared on the horizon. Since leaving the Missouri River, the travelers had enjoyed a relatively easy passage along the natural highway the Platte Valley afforded, with few natural landmarks to relieve the flatness of the Great Plains. They thus viewed Chimney Rock with amazement. While it seems diminutive in Savage's photograph, Chimney Rock loomed large, both on the landscape and in the travelers' minds. Here was a dramatic precursor of ever more rugged and spectacular terrain, signaling the mountains that lay farther to the west.

Savage wrote vividly of the difficulties of photographing along the trail. It was midsummer, and the heat threatened to spoil the chemicals required for wet plate photography. Every time he wanted to make a negative he had to concoct his solutions, set up a camera, and pour his emulsion onto a piece of glass, expose and then develop it, all before the plate dried. This process could occupy upwards of half an hour.

Savage's equipment and photographic supplies were bulky. He dragged them all the way from Ohio in a specially built wagon. He also found that once the wagon train was underway the Mormons did not want to stop just so he could take a photograph. If he struck out on his own or fell behind, he risked drawing the attention of Indians ranging in the area. It seems obvious why few individuals wanted to undertake the rigors of making photographs along the trail. So why did Savage bother?

Photographers, especially then, did not photo-

graph for posterity. Rather, they made photographs to sell. For nearly twenty years, from 1847 to 1866, the Mormons had a singular shared experience, the arduous overland journey to their new Zion in the Salt Lake Valley. By 1866 the Mormon capital of Salt Lake City was well established and burgeoning. Savage knew his market well and, I suspect, found eager customers for his wares. His photographs were, in fact, the visual narrative of *their* experience, *their* journey to the Promised Land.

As the generation of the overland emigrants was replaced by those of the rail and automobile travelers, the immediacy of these images and their significance faded into nostalgia and novelty. After the emigrants and their descendants had died and their personal effects were cleaned out of family homes, photographs gathered in bulky albums, photographs whose meaning and relevance had degraded, were lost. Now these rare and, to us, priceless photographs have reemerged to tell us about that amazing journey. Today we visit Chimney Rock in numbers nearly equal to those who passed it during its halcyon days of the mid-nineteenth century. Now everyone photographs it. ■



NOTES

¹ Chimney Rock National Historic Site, with a visitor center operated by the Nebraska State Historical Society, is located 1.5 miles south of Highway 92 near Bayard, Nebraska.

² Mattes proposes the total of up to 500,000 overland travelers between 1841 and 1866, based on his bibliography of overland travel accounts published as *Platte River Road Narratives* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 5.

³ Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 71–74. A book length work focused on the Quesenbury sketchbook, authored by Society Research Architect David Murphy, University of Nebraska at Omaha Historian Michael Tate, and photographer/filmmaker Michael Farrell, is forthcoming.

⁴ Nancy K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art and Enterprise* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum in association with Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 144, 273.

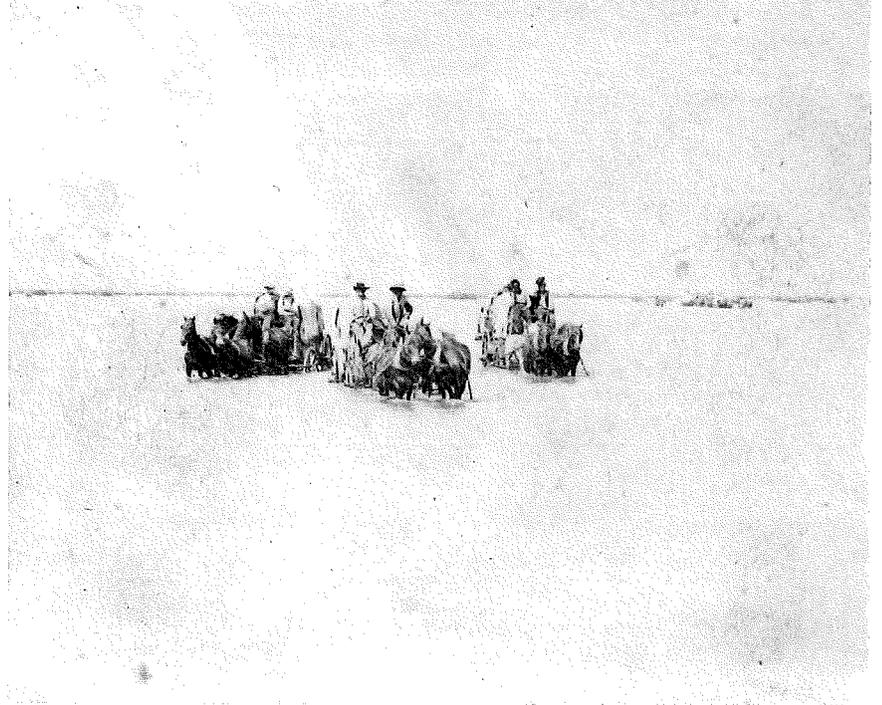
⁵ John E. Carter, "Photographing Across the Plains," *Nebraska History* 71 (Summer 1990): 58–63.

⁶ Charles R. Savage, "A Photographic Tour of Nearly 9,000 miles," *The Philadelphia Photographer* 4 (1867): 315.

⁷ "The Overland Pony Express," *Harper's Weekly*, Nov. 2, 1867, 693–94.

⁸ Merrill J. Mattes and Paul Henderson, "The Pony Express: Across Nebraska from St. Joseph to Fort Laramie," *Nebraska History* 41 (June 1960): 97, map inserted between 110–11.

⁹ Savage, "Photographic Tour," 314.



Wagon train fording the South Platte River near present day Hershey, Nebraska, 1866. Photograph by Charles R. Savage. NSHS RG3351-32

¹⁰ John H. Kearnes, "Last Nebraska Buffalo Hunter Relates Narrow Escapes of Early Bison Hunts," *Sunday (Lincoln) Journal and Star*, Feb. 21, 1932: 3-C.

¹¹ W. A. Reed, [Reed's road ranche and Beaver Crossing], unpublished manuscript in the Nebraska State Historical Society library, call number 921/R99/R25b, 1937.

¹² *Community History of Beaver Crossing, 1872–1932* (Beaver Crossing, Nebraska: 1932): 2.

¹³ Savage "Photographic Tour," 314.

¹⁴ Michael W. Homer, "After Winter Quarters: The Mormons and Nebraska Territory," *Nebraska History* 65 (Winter 1984): 481. This photograph also exists as a stereograph in the archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Salt Lake City, suggesting that Savage may have made his photographs as stereographs but later produced them in the popular carte de visite format.

¹⁵ Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 264.

Mormons camped at Wyoming, Nebraska Territory, north of Nebraska City, 1866. Photograph by Charles R. Savage. NSHS RG3351-31

