



The original Lee cabin at Lonely Dell, built partly from timbers from Major Powell's boat.

## LEE'S FERRY AT LONELY DELL

BY JUANITA BROOKS\*

SINCE the bridge at Marble Canyon was completed in 1929 anxious travelers no longer scan the map for Lee's Ferry at Lonely Dell. Five miles above the span that levels the gorge, that place is now hardly an eddy in the stream of travel. Only a sentimental connection or a keen sense of history will take today's tourist there.

Yet for more than half a century this was the bottle-neck through which all emigration from Utah to Arizona must pass, the part of the journey most dreaded. The difficult roads, the perilous crossing, the precipitous scramble up the opposite bank combined to add a real hazard to a journey otherwise full of hardship.

Legend says that the place was named by John D. Lee's wife, Emma. When they arrived on December 21, 1871, she with four young children, and a fifth to be born within a month, walked over the roughest stretches while her husband tried to make enough of a road to keep the wagon from tipping over. She viewed the valley at the mouth of the Paria, a sandy floor dotted with desert brush and walled with cliffs as barren as the second day of Creation and exclaimed, "Oh, what a lonely dell!"

The name stuck. From that day forth it unofficially headed all letters and diary entries until on July 24, 1872, when Lee wrote proudly that "Maj. Powell adopted my name for the place, Lonely Dell & so ordered it to be printed on the U. S. maps."

Since time began, the Colorado River has been an almost impassable barrier, affording only a few places in all its twisting miles where man may reach the stream. When in the fall of 1776 Father Escalante and his group came into the area, they followed the age-old Ute trail to the river, crossing some thirty miles above the mouth of the Paria at what is still called "The Crossing of the Fathers."

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[September 11, 1957, marks the centennial of the massacre at the Mountain Meadows, which event led to the exile of John D. Lee at Lonely Dell on the banks of the Colorado.—Ed. note]

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Here also Jacob Hamblin made his first ford in 1858, the same trail which he followed many times thereafter. Not until 1864 did he make a successful crossing at the Paria, later Lee's Ferry. Traveling down the stream in 1869, the Powell party stopped here and made it a supply point on subsequent trips.

So the place was not unknown when John D. Lee arrived, nor was the idea of a ferry here new, but he was first to bring a wagon to it, and to open the way to wagon travel into Arizona. More important, perhaps, is the daily record which he kept of life in this outpost. From it we may get a close-up, intimate picture of the problems involved in living here where the nearest town, Kanab, was ninety miles away and the Paria settlement on the plateau above "40 miles by Indian trail and 100 miles by wagon road," as Lee estimated.

When they pulled their wagons into the valley that December day, the first basic need was shelter. Of this Lee wrote:

Thursday 28 [Dec.] 1871 . . . Now all my energies was turned to building a couple of houses for Emma was still in suspense. I fixed her as comfortable as I could with carpeting, tent, &c. This evening we encountered a desperate tornado, accompanied with heavy rain &c

Later he commented that:

The storm reminded me of former storms as the heaps of sand indicated, which I considered a timely warning not to build in this place. So I selected a location a little further down the valley where the N. W. winds would not have so faire a sweep.

. . . Up to Jany 12, 1872, I finished the two houses, laid the floors with flagstone & commenced a stone corral

When just two years later, January 27, 1873, he records that again the wind blew a hurricane, unroofed the house and blew some of the lumber two hundred yards, the reader is reminded that violent storms were among the facts of life in this place.

The houses finished, corrals made, chicken coop of woven willows secure against coyotes, Lee made a short trip to check on the cattle and horses he had left in the valleys along the stream, to return and find that he had:

. . . an increase in my family. Emma B. was delivered of a Daughter on Wed. Jany 17th about 7 o'clock p.m. &

named it Frances Dell after the place of our location & her sister Fanny.

His first recorded experience as ferryman came the next morning when "before sunrise we was saluted by the whoops & yells of a band of 15 Navajos, pleading with us to set them over the river. . . ." At first he was reluctant to comply because he was a stranger to them and if they should be unfriendly or hostile, he was only one man with one woman able to help and several small children. He decided to take the chance, and with his wife Rachel and two small boys began to cork an old flat boat, evidently the one built by Major Powell the year before when he went to visit the Moquis.

When all was ready the boys were afraid to go over, so Lee and Rachel rowed across and brought the natives back with their luggage of "blankets of full cloth, calicos, domestics, made up clothing, linseys & handkerchiefs." Lee traded two horses for some of their wares, part of which he again exchanged at the settlements above for three hundred grape roots.

More important always than the ferry business, was the task of raising food in this hostile environment. First, last, and all the time was the problem of irrigation water. The Paria, normally a small, quiet stream, drained a wide area, and rain on its far reaches might bring a flash flood here which would scoop out the dam and fill the ditches. In a pattern often repeated one reads such entries as the following:

June 12, 1872 Now begins the Tug of war. A dam 8 foot deep & 7 rods long to make besides heavy repairs on the ditch, before water can be brought to revive the dyeing crops, vines & trees. However imidetely we went to work. . . . I with my 4 litle boys & what assistance Emma could render with a young babe at her Breast, we continued our exertions for 21 days, watering the fruit trees and some vines by hand & by the grace of God we finally conquered & brought out the water & began to revive our dying crop. . . .

Just one month later, on July 20, he wrote:

. . . On reaching the Dell I found that a much greater freshet than any of the season had been & swept a portion of my Dam away & filled up my eregating ditch some 2 feet deep with muck or clammy mudd. To remove this deposit out of the ditch was more than eequal to making a new ditch. . . . At the expiration of 10 more days labor we had the water out again.

Each year it is the same, with such entries as "all hands on the dam," or "our energies were on the dam until we almost dispaired of ever getting the water in time to save our trees and vines," being common.

There were times when transient prospectors gave Lee a day or two's work on the dam, or when passing Navajos helped in return for beef and transportation, or when members of the Powell party lent a hand. Between them all, Lee did reap a harvest of vegetables the first year. He entertained members of the Powell company on July 24, and the next day wrote:

. . . We are begining to enjoy the fruits of our labors daily as green corn, vegitable Marrow or summer squash, cucumbers, beets, onions, raddish, & beans and a few mellons are in full blast. They are not only a Treat but a great blessing to us in this Desert country.

During the spring of 1872 several groups of miners and prospectors visited Lonely Dell. The mining boom at Pioche, Nevada, had been on since 1870, and word had got out that there were fabulous deposits of gold lying exposed in the reaches of the Grand Canyon. Usually such visitors were a blessing to the Lee family, for besides bringing them news of the world outside and the diversion of new faces, they sometimes left supplies. Of a group of eleven men who came with three wagons, Lee wrote:

The miners which had come & gone had flour & groceries & some picks & shovels to part with, which to us at that time were certainly a Godsend; that whereas our supplies had run out, we were again replenished with Flour, Bacon, coffee, tea, sugar, rice & dried fruit, also some long-handled shovels & picks which we much needed. . . .

Another company, on the other hand, borrowed tools and dishes and then started down the river on a raft. Within a few miles they "stove in their raft, lost their traps, & near drowned themselves. The tools was of great loss to me, so far from commerce." The Powell boats which had been left at the bank were sometimes used by travelers and then left on the opposite shore. Lee evidently felt some responsibility for their care, for he remarks that one company helped him to "put Maj. Powells boat back in the cache."

His interest in establishing a ferry himself was no doubt whetted by the report of Captain Dodds, who was for a time in charge of

the rations and animals of the Powell party. He reported that in less than four months a ferry would be built across the river, and within four years a railroad would run through here to Santa Fe. Lee evidently wrote to his superiors regarding this report, for in October he mentions that James Heath had brought lumber for the boat and on December 16, "about midnight Uncle Tommy Smith arrived with the gunels for a ferry boat."

The day after Christmas brought the Indian runner, Tocotaw, with a message from Jacob Hamblin to say that Brigham Young and party would be in St. George by December 28, [1872] and that trouble was brewing anew over polygamy, so that men with more than one wife might have to flee the law. Now with a sense of urgency, he resumed work on the boat and it was ready in less than two weeks.

On Saturday, January 11, 1873, Lee wrote in detail of the first launching of the boat. A total of twenty-two persons were in attendance, including Emma and her children, several of the older Lee boys, Thomas Smith and his two sons who were the chief builders, Jackson, a young man brought out to tutor the Lee children, and the Indian messenger, Tocotaw. They had dinner in the bottom of the boat, after which:

. . . we launched the Boat & called her the Colorado & the skiff we named the Pahreah. The Colorado is 26 by 8½ feet, strong, a staunch craft & well constructed & a light runer. The party presant all crossed on her to Christen her & take a pleasure ride. We crossed over & back twice. Uncle Tommy Smith & son Robt rowed her over & I steered. Set down a good post & fastened her with a cablechain & reached home about dusk. . . .

Now that the ferry was ready, there was a great need for a road to get wagons to it and a greater need for a road up the steep bank on the opposite side, for although Jacob Hamblin and others had followed the Indian trails to the Moenkopi and Moenavi, no wagon had yet crossed the stream.

That Brigham Young and the other church leaders were genuinely interested in opening up Arizona for settlement is shown by the fact that on February 1, 1873, Lorenzo W. Roundy and twelve men arrived en route to that territory to explore for likely areas for settlements. On February 25 they returned to Lonely Dell with the report that they had visited the area of the San Francisco Moun-

tains and that a colony would likely be sent there this spring. Such an undertaking could mean only that a road must be built.

On April 2 following, a company arrived for the express purpose of making the road. Under the direction of Joseph W. Young with Edward Bunker and Isaac C. Haight as assistants, the twenty-five men worked diligently for fifteen days, and then left Lee some powder and shot with which to blast away a few places where the cliff would not admit the passage of a wagon.

The first company to pay for use of the new boat arrived on April 22. Lee hauled their nine wagons over, and at least thirty-three animals. Here he established the price which was still in use in 1885—\$3.00 per wagon and 75¢ per animal, with no charge for people or luggage. From this first company he collected \$46.00, much of which was in flour, salt, meal, and groceries.

On May 9, a second company arrived, consisting of fifteen wagons, thirty-seven animals and four cows, and on the very next day twelve more wagons came up. This group cooperated so well and helped so much that:

. . . After we had crossed the last waggon some fifteen or twenty of the co. took a Boat Ride on the river by the silver light of the moon & while we were gliding over the Still waters of the Colorado, the music & the voice of the songsters made melody. All felt well. Went to rest about midnight, all satisfied.

Two days later still another company, this one only eight wagons drawn by ox teams, arrived. They rested and visited at the Dell for one day before they went on, and again after all were safely on the opposite bank, Lee took some twenty of them for a boat ride. ". . . Had one Lady on Board with us, had music by the constantina, Dancing & singing. We had a splendid time. . . ."

The largest company yet to arrive came on May 22, but by this time the river had risen some ten feet, which meant that a new road must be built to bring the wagons in, and that the water was swift and dangerous. Lee's account of the difficulties is vivid:

. . . We were compelled to remove the crossing about ½ mile above on account of the swiftness of the current, then by means of a rope 100 feet long, we towed the Boat up over ½ mile up both Sides, making the crossing verry hard. Nevertheless with care, perseverance & industry we succeeded in crossing 62 animals in all, 15 oxen & cows & 2

calves & 47 horses & mules & 19 waggons, 3 women, 1 child & 28 men on

Mon., May 26 about 10 morning all safe without any accident with the exception of braking two oars, one Rough lock & one wagon missing the Boat as the wagon was roled in & detained us about one hour, & one cow & one horse jumped off the boat and swam ashore all right. . . .

The captain complained at conditions, stating that a company should never have been called until they had a better road to the ferry and better boat. Lee was so indignant that he wrote his entire answer, in which he pointed out that all the Mormon emigration had been made by people who had pitched in and helped make roads for those that followed. As for the boat, she would "carry 4 tons burden, safe for common waggons & teams. All Ready some 50 waggons & 100's of animals had crossed in perfect safety."

On June 4, in less than two weeks after the crossing of this large company, men from the first began returning with reports that the water was dried up, the country only sand and rock and desert, with no food for their animals. Many had abandoned their wagons entirely, others had left heavy items such as stoves and implements by the way. While some groups tried to find places for their cattle to feed after they had re-crossed the stream, determined not to give up the mission entirely until they received orders from Brigham Young, one company in House Rock Valley not yet to the Dell, "stampeded, poared out their molasses on the ground & salt &c, & give ½ their bacon, flour, and groceries to be hauld to Kanab. Unfortunate for me that I was not there or I would have laid in my groceries. . . ."

The final blow to the Arizona settlement for this year came when on June 16, "a heavy gale blew up from the south, blew a large tree into the harbour & dashed the ferry boat & broke her loose & she doubtless went over the rapids or sunk." Lee was accustomed to reverses, but when such a disaster as this came he could only wonder if it might not be the Hand of God. Could the idea of settling Arizona be premature? At least it was stopped for this season.

Now Lee was faced with personal problems. Warned that he must leave this place, he crossed the Colorado and sought refuge in the desert beyond, living for nine months at Moenkopi or Moenavi near the home of Chief Tuba. During this time he knew that John

L. Blythe had been appointed to head another company into Arizona, to build a rock fort at Moenkopi. But first he must make a boat, not only for his own company but for all the planned emigration. A "Telegram" evidently carried by Indian runner from the last settlement at Kanab settled Lee's claims to the ferry and made his duties clear. It read:

St. George, Jay. 28th, 1874

To John D. Lee, Senior  
Via Kanab

Dear Sir:

Your letter to A. F. MacDonald was received by us with much interest. We are glad to hear you are still interested in the advancement of our settlements. In regard to the Boat, built by Jno. L. Blythe & Smith, our only object was to have a suitable boat large enough to cross with safety & accommodate the People. As to giving any one permission to cross without paying, we have never contemplated any thing of the kind. If you will see that this Ferry is kept up, you are welcome to the use of our Boat. You should charge a suitable price for your labour. When we come along with our company, we shall expect to pay you liberally for your services. We shall send chains to secure the boat.

See that your wife Emma gets a proper title to secure the Boat location, as probably the Ferry may be valuable some day & a support to your Family. We & our Families are all well & are doing all we can to accomplish good.

Yours Respectfully,

Brigham Young  
G. A. Smith

Lee's delight at receiving this letter was almost pathetic. Although he must give up his dream of moving his family into the San Juan country and must instead stay with the ferry, this friendly word from Brigham Young was more than recompense. He immediately left Moenavi, paused at Lonely Dell long enough to help the Blythe company over the river, and made his way to St. George, where on April 5, 1874, he had dinner with President Young and spent a long evening in consultation.

The next day he traveled with the president's party north, and stayed with them until April 8. On taking leave from him "Pres

Young implicitly enjoined it upon me to see after the Ferry & not let the Boat get away, & not let it go into the hands of our Enemies, not to hire gentiles to tend it."

On November 7, 1874, just seven months after this parting, Lee was arrested at Panguitch and taken to Beaver for trial for his participation in the massacre at the Mountain Meadows some seventeen years earlier. Now Emma was alone at Lonely Dell, and for her the name seemed more appropriate than ever. True, she had already spent much time here with only her children for company; she had borne a second daughter here with only her thirteen-year-old son to assist, while her husband was in hiding. But then she could look forward to the return of John D., to whom she was devotedly loyal. Now, though she shared his belief that he would eventually walk a free man again, her future was uncertain.

To a woman reared in the moist air of England, accustomed to the lush green countryside and loving the cool, wooded areas, this barren land was always ugly. Naturally lively and sociable, she loved the crowds, and in Utah she delighted in dances or rag bees or quiltings. Since 1866 she had been hostess and cook in the Lee home for the entertainment of President Young and his parties; it was she who supervised and largely prepared the community dinners. She was at her best with people. Here the eternal silence was so heavy that it seemed to fill the valley and beat in soundless waves against her ear drums. In Harmony she had a lovely flower garden, vegetables, a grape arbor, and orchards of fruit. Here she managed to keep a few valiant trees alive, but at what cost! Certainly for the next few years, the name Lee's Ferry could well have referred to Emma Lee.

After the fiasco of 1873, the business of colonizing Arizona was stopped temporarily. One company led by John L. Blythe and Ira Hatch and consisting of fifteen men did cross in 1874, but all except Blythe, Hatch, and Ammon M. Tenney returned almost immediately. The next year James S. Brown led an exploring company deeper into the territory, but it was not until 1876 that a real colonization program was begun. Now Warren M. Johnson was called to operate the ferry.

During this time John D. Lee in the state penitentiary at Salt Lake City took a lively interest in the doings at the river, writing Emma frequent letters of encouragement. Part of his advice was to ". . . counsel with Bro Johnson, as he is a man of age & experience

& not to make any trades or moves of a general interest [without] consulting him.”

The 1876 call was for four companies of fifty men each—under Lot Smith, Jesse O. Ballinger, George Lake, and William C. Allen. Each family was to travel as it could to Kanab, and from there they crossed the Colorado and traveled into Arizona in groups of ten wagons. The first company arrived on the Little Colorado on March 28, 1876, the others stringing in for several weeks. In August of that year Captain Allen and others returning for their families decided to avoid crossing at the ferry by taking the route through New Mexico. This proved to be so long and difficult that it was not tried again, later settlers coming via the Lonely Dell.

A census taken January 1, 1878, shows the total of Mormon emigrants for the two previous years. The communities were Sunset 136, Ballenger 277, Allen's Camp 76, Woodruff 50, Moenkopi 25—a total of 115 families with 564 people.

In the meantime John D. Lee had been tried and convicted of murder in connection with the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and had been taken back to the site of that tragedy for his execution on March 23, 1877. Widowed now, Emma decided to take her family across the river and settle in Arizona. As to the disposal of the ferry, James H. McClintock in his *Mormon Settlement in Arizona*, page 93 says:

In the summer of 1877, Ephraim K. Hanks was advised by President Brigham Young to buy the ferry, but this plan fell through on the death of the President. The ferry, later, was bought from Emma Lee by Warren M. Johnson, as Church agent, he paying 100 cows, which were contributed by the people of southern Utah and northern Arizona settlements, they receiving tithing credits therefor.

The ferry continued operation until the Marble Canyon bridge was completed, much of the time under the management of the Warren M. Johnson family. Yet the name “Lee's Ferry” still persists, and Lonely Dell is still an appropriate descriptive for the isolated, quiet retreat in the desert.

#### LATER TRAVEL AT LEE'S FERRY

After the mass migration of 1876-77, it would seem that travel to and from Arizona settled into a pattern of small companies or

single wagons on the road. An interesting record is found in a pocket-sized, paper-bound account book kept by Warren M. Johnson. As a cover title it carried in bold letters, highly embellished, the caption BROWN'S IRON BITTERS. The front entries contain the record of Lee's Ferry from March 5 to September 10, 1885; turned around and starting from the back is the record from July 19 to October 30, 1888. While neither is complete for its season and both are very brief, they do contain some illuminating facts and will admit all kinds of speculation.

The facts consist of the date, the name of the person in charge, the number of wagons (w), the numbers of animals (a), the price collected and whether this was cash, cattle, cloth, flour, or other goods. There is no indication of direction of travel, which leaves the reader plenty of room for argument.

The total travel for the part of 1885 that is included is seventy-seven wagons and three hundred twenty animals. By far the greater part of this (forty-six wagons) was made up by outfits traveling alone with two or perhaps three horses. Four companies were made up of two wagons each, while those of more than two were:

March 5, 1885	W. Freeman & Co 3 w 6 a
April 9 "	George Averett & co 5 w 12 a
July 21 "	D E Garner 3 w 8 a
Sept 2 "	Roundy & Ingram 3 w 10 a

In addition to these were three groups of unnamed miners or horsemen and twelve groups of Indians, none of whom had a wagon, some designated as Piutes, others Navajos, and others just Indians. Seven Piutes with four animals crossed on April 12, and paid for transportation in buckskins; perhaps it was the same seven who returned six days later with five animals and paid ferriage in "goods." One miner with two animals would be leading a pack horse, while the two miners with only one animal would likely be leading a burro. The fact that they remain anonymous may mean only that they are not "brethren" in the church, though it might also mean that they had good reason not to want to give their names.

On April 27, Chester Sessions, John Miles, J. A. Green, George Ogleby, and Arthur Marott, each with one wagon and two animals, crossed the river. Were they all going to Arizona? Take John Miles, for instance. He was the first man to be arrested for polygamy in October of 1878, and his case received national attention. His English

wife, Carrie Owen Miles, had come with him from his mission without knowing that he was pledged to one Emily Spencer in Zion. She made a good story; the case was given full publicity; Miles was sentenced to five years in prison, a decision upheld by the supreme court of Utah but later reversed by the United States Supreme Court. For a while the issue had rested, but in 1884 action against polygamists had begun again in earnest. Rudger Clawson was arrested in October of that year, and the general church policy was for the brethren to avoid the officers if possible. It is something to conjecture about.

The travels of a man like Jacob Hamblin are easier to follow. When he crosses the Colorado on June 6, we can be sure that he is coming toward Utah because he spoke in the St. George tabernacle on June 28. When he crossed again on July 6, he was evidently returning to Arizona with the same outfit except that he had acquired an extra horse en route.

Only twice in this year does he give the home address of a client. On August 16 David Farley of Snowflake passed with 1 *w* 2 *a*; on the twenty-fifth following Mrs. Tyler of Woodruff also with 1 *w* 2 *a*. The fact that neither was able to pay ferriage may be some indication of the financial status of the Arizona settlers. The only other woman to be listed as in charge of an outfit was September 2, Mrs. C. Christiansen with 1 *w* 2 *a*, who paid her bill in corn, \$3.00.

The 1888 fragment, though brief, follows again the same pattern. There are the Indian travelers and the nameless men on horseback, with most of the wagon travel being single outfits. On July 19, Ira Hatch with 1 *w* 3 *a* gave an order from W. Woodruff in payment, which would indicate that he was traveling in the interest of the church. The largest order of the season came on August 29 and 30 when he ferried over Charles Jensen & co with 2250 sheep and took for his labor a note in the amount of \$67.50.

On September 1, Mrs. Elizabeth Averett with 1 *w* 2 *a* was not able to pay, and on the 3rd following Able Ray 1 *w* 4 *a* "said he had only 1.50 Had a wife & 2 children pd. \$1.00."

Totals for this period were 53 wagons and 333 animals. It would seem that there was a general movement of either horses or cattle—he does not designate which—nor does he indicate which way they were going. The larger groups include:

Sept 3	Hyrum Clark 3 w 12 a & swam stock			
		due		\$12.00
Sept 24	Jacob Butler & co 3 w 32 a stock			
		\$12.00 cash	6.75	\$18.75
Oct 2	Whiting & Isaacson 4 w 12 a cash			\$13.50
Oct 8	Dall Jones & Mattice 4 w 10 a cash			\$12.50
Oct 8	Julius Macklprang 1 w 48 a & swam			
	stock horses cash			\$26.75

So the record goes on, and the reader may choose to look at it from the point of view of the ferryman or his family, to check on the travel by season, or to follow individual travelers who pass more than once in a summer. From whatever angle it is approached Lee's Ferry was the most important point in the road from Utah into Arizona, the one which no one could miss. Complete records of the travel here might provide material for research in several fields and endless diversion for the statistically minded.