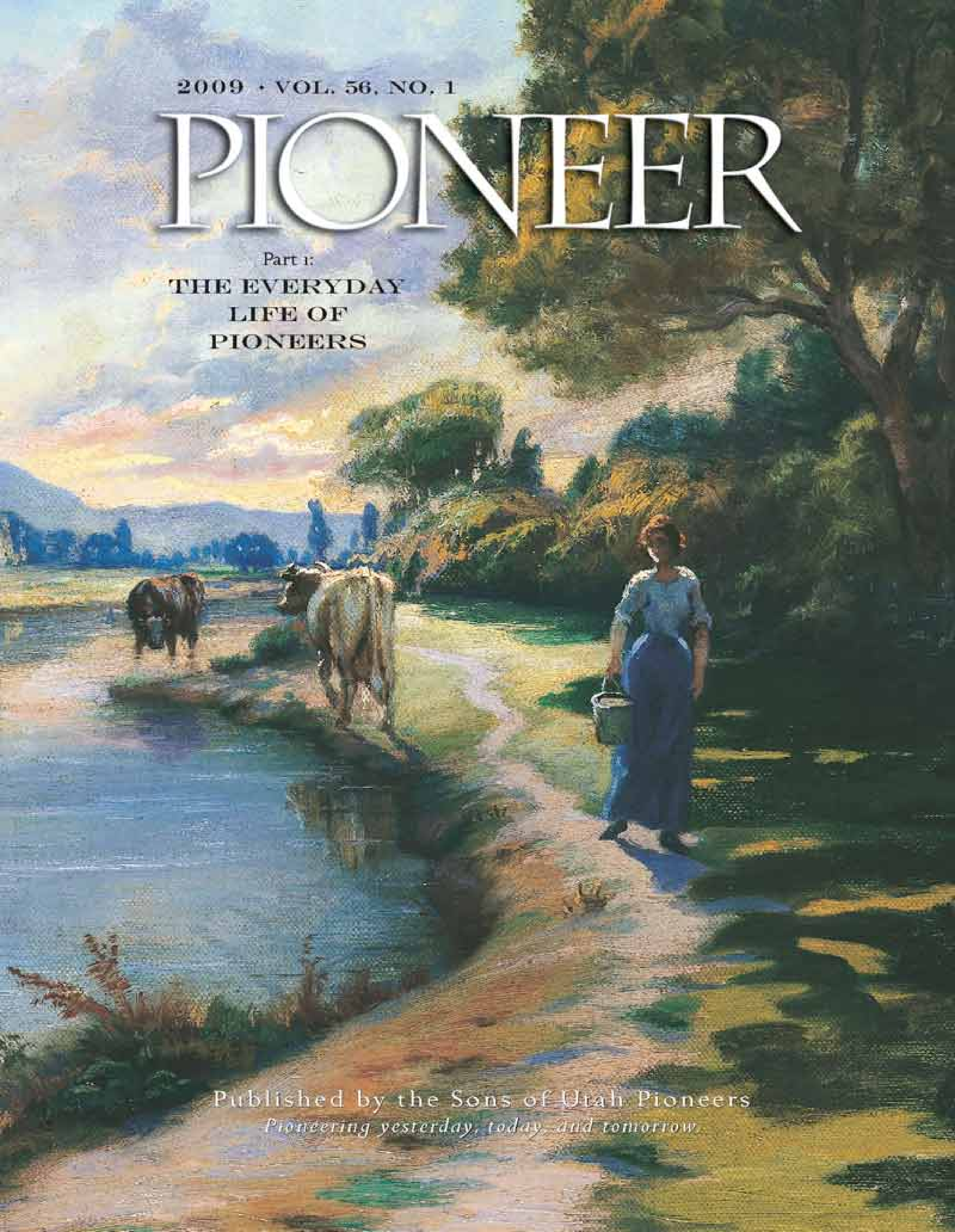
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PIONEER
Part 1:
THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF PIONEERS
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Pioneering yesterday, today...and tomorrow.

there was not much meat to it, and when it was boiled it was black; still it satisfied our hunger. . . . Oh for a few of the good things we had at home!"[18]

Even when enough food was on hand, the monotony of the fare could challenge even the best cook's skill. While waiting for her fiancé to arrive in the Valley, Maren Nielson, a convert from Denmark, had her first taste of boiled wheat and fried jackrabbit, a dish which "tasted rather good," she reflected, although it "was different than anything I had ever eaten." The dish lost its savor for both Maren and her young family in Sanpete County, however, for it became their standard supper fare. Virtually every night for years, according to her record, she had nothing but wheat and jackrabbit to prepare for her family's supper, until the dish she had once enjoyed became positively distasteful to her. Her family, predictably enough, was similarly affected, to the point that one of her sons, when asked to give the blessing over yet another meal of wheat and rabbit, gave the "prayer" in the following verse:

> Rabbit young, Rabbit old,
> Rabbit hot, Rabbit cold,
> Rabbit tender and Rabbit tough.
> Oh please, Dear Lord,
> We've had enough.[19]

Many pioneer women endured these privations through several months of pregnancy—a fact few historians have appreciated. Unlike today, when well-stocked grocery stores are open around the clock, early Utah women in the so-called delicate condition had to nourish themselves with what they had on hand. At times this could be painfully little, as the story of a woman named Catha illustrates.

Conceiving shortly after her arrival in the Valley in the fall of 1847, Catha and her husband lived on rations of a half pound of flour and corned beef over the winter and were reduced to eating thistle greens and buttermilk by the time spring arrived some months later. To make matters worse, Catha spent the spring days walking beside a team of oxen while her husband followed the plow behind. She did have the good fortune to obtain a piece of bread from the midwife as her due date approached, and some obliging neighbors—"whose kindness," she wrote, "I shall never forget"—gave her a little more. But nothing she ate over the entire course of her pregnancy ever amounted to the "full enjoyable meal" her body needed.[20] Catha was fortunate in that her baby, despite the privations, was a "plump healthy child," but many women were not so lucky. . . .

MOVES & LIMITED RESOURCES

The Saints faced at least two other challenges that compounded the difficulties of establishing a home in early Utah. First, many families, either in response to formal mission calls or their own search for greener pastures, made several moves over the course of their lives in the West. Those making a move frequently left established homes and occupations and started afresh. Such moves were generally done by wagon . . . and could be tiring, difficult, and hazardous. While many . . . faced this challenge at least once in their lives, others faced it far more frequently. Nanna Anderson . . . moved some twenty times by wagon over the course of her married life and lived everywhere from Canada to Arizona before she finally prevailed upon her husband to settle down.[21]

Second, the resources and materials that could be used to furnish these homes were extremely limited and primitive. Rag wicks in a dish of grease and, later, candles constituted the light source for these early homes; rope "springs" and straw-filled mattresses answered for beds. . . . [The] small stove, single table, two chairs, and straw bed that comprised the sum total of Rachel Burrton's home furnishings in 1856 were probably quite representative of what most young couples could expect to possess at the time.[22] . . .

While her husband was away and [Leora Campbell, one of the first settlers in Liberty,] was living in a log cabin with no windows and only a hole in the sod roof for a chimney, Leora went into labor just as "an awful storm came up." "The rain came down in torrents," she recorded. "Our house leaked all over, not clear water but mud. There was a place from about the middle of the bed to the head that did not leak. My husband's grandmother was living with us that winter. She put me crosswise of the bed, and put her featherbed over me to keep me dry. She put her quilts under the bed to keep them dry. Wet boards were laid down on my bed for me to lie on. A sheet was hung up to the head of the bed to keep out the

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COVER ART: Jordan River, *by Lorus Bishop Pratt (1855–1923). He was a son of noted Mormon pioneer and churchman Orson Pratt. Lorus's first studies in art were at the University of Deseret with George Ottinger and Danquart Weggeland. Pratt traveled to New York City and London in 1876 for further studies. He was selected by the LDS church to study art in Paris at the Academie Julian in order to paint murals for the LDS buildings and temples. This cover art is a charming example of his rural landscape scene.* (See "The Birth of Utah Impressionism: The Paris Art Mission of 1890,"* Pioneer *magazine, Summer 2000, 4–15.) ©Courtesy Utah Arts Council*

**Source:* Dictionary of Utah Art *by Robert S. Olpin*

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The society also honors present-day pioneers worldwide in many walks of life who exemplify these same qualities of character. It is further intended to teach these same qualities to the youth who will be tomorrow's pioneers.

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BATTLE *of the* HOMEFRONT: *The Early Pioneer Art of Homemaking*

This essay focuses on the pioneers' home life during these difficult early years and on their efforts to establish homes and provide for their families under less-than-ideal conditions. While both men and women engaged in this undertaking, the bulk of the everyday tasks within the home fell on the shoulders of the women. They, more than the men, took responsibility for attending to the children's needs, for planning and making meals out of the available foodstuffs, and for creating a home—a real home—out of whatever shelter was available at the moment. . . .

SHELTER

. . . It is no surprise to learn that the first "house" many immigrants found themselves occupying was the same "house" they had occupied coming across the plains: their wagon. Hannah Nixon's experience in this regard was a common one. Moving to Salt Lake City from a small settlement on the Jordan River, she and her family moved their wagon box onto the floor of an unroofed, one-room house and spent the winter of 1851–52 living there. Although they built a two-room house the following spring, a subsequent call from Brigham Young to settle St. George required them once again to make their wagon their home until a more permanent house could be erected.[1] At least a few families continued to utilize the trusty wagon box even after such a home had been built;

by Andrew H. Hedges, Historian, BYU Professor

A time when living in Utah promised little more than hard work and hunger as the Saints faced challenges in some of the more remote settlements as they established themselves in the Great Basin and surrounding territory.

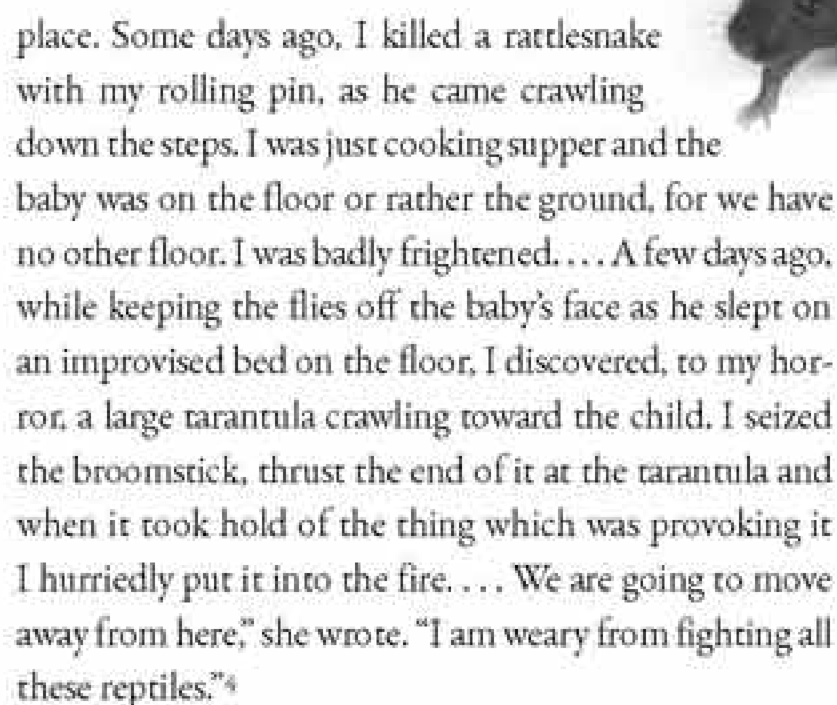
Joseph Fielding's family, for example, which arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in 1848, elected to sleep in their wagons even after they had erected a one-room log cabin.[2] . . .

Cooler by far, but complete with their own set of problems, were the dugouts a number of immigrants used . . . constructed by digging a short, broad trench horizontally into the side of a hill or an embankment. The trench comprised the walls and floor of the home and was covered with brush, branches, canvas, and the like for a roof. . . .

Ann Howell Burt has left us with a lengthy and vivid description of life in such a dwelling. A native of Glamorganshire, Wales, Ann immigrated to America as a child in 1851, came west to Utah in 1852, married, and found herself living in a dugout in summer 1863. "The neighbors," she recorded in her journal, "call it the Castle of Spiders and it is well named, for I never saw so many reptiles and bugs of all kinds." She continued: "For several mornings I was puzzled to find my milk-pan skimmed; could not understand what could have done it. So the other evening I sat down behind the door, with my knitting, to watch proceedings, and what was my surprise to see a huge bull-snake come crawling out from the head of our bed and swaying gracefully toward my crude cupboard, began to skim my cream. Now I cover my milk tightly."[3]

Things did not improve over the course of the summer, as subsequent entries indicate: "This is a hideous

For many immigrants, their wagon became their home . . .



place. Some days ago, I killed a rattlesnake with my rolling pin, as he came crawling down the steps. I was just cooking supper and the baby was on the floor or rather the ground, for we have no other floor. I was badly frightened. . . . A few days ago, while keeping the flies off the baby's face as he slept on an improvised bed on the floor, I discovered, to my horror, a large tarantula crawling toward the child. I seized the broomstick, thrust the end of it at the tarantula and when it took hold of the thing which was provoking it I hurriedly put it into the fire. . . . We are going to move away from here," she wrote. "I am weary from fighting all these reptiles."[4]

"MICE WERE VERY TROUBLESOME. . . . [SETTLERS] COULD SEE THEIR GROUND FLOOR TREMBLE AS [THE MICE] RAN ABOUT UNDER THEIR COVERED TRAILS. AND WHEN THE STONES AT THE CORNERS [OF THE CABINS] SUPPORTING THEIR ROOFS, LOOSENED AND FELL BY THE RAIN, THE FRIGHTENED MICE RAN IN HORDES. SOMETIMES AS MANY AS 60 WOULD BE CAUGHT BEFORE GOING TO BED."

—*Mary Horne, 1847*

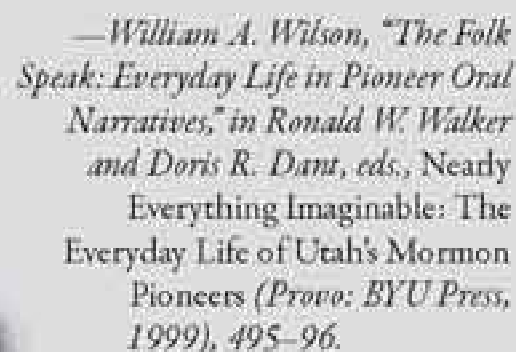
The next level of sophistication beyond the dugout was the well-known log cabin . . . equipped with nothing more than dirt floors that could be cleaned—if such a word is appropriate—by wetting the dust and sweeping it out with a homemade broom.[5] As if that were not enough of a trial, Mary Horne, one of the pioneers of 1847, reminds us that the timber out of which these cabins were constructed was full of bedbugs and that during the first few years of settlement in the Valley, "mice were very troublesome." These uninvited houseguests intruded in such numbers, she continues, that the settlers "could see their ground floor tremble as [the mice] ran about under their covered trails. And when the stones at the corners [of the cabins] supporting their roofs, loosened and fell by the rain, the frightened mice ran in hordes. Sometimes as many as 60 would be caught before going to bed. [The pioneers] had to make their own traps, and one contrivance was a bucket full of water with a board sloped at each end, balanced on the edge, and greased. This caught dozens of mice."

Mary closes her account of this infestation by noting that "the first cat and her progeny were invaluable."[6]

The early Saints learned from the records kept by trappers, mountain men, and early explorers that Utah was a desert. Accordingly, they built their early cabins with the understanding that the roofs need

When Grandma Gurr was a child, her mother told her of the hardships endured by those who settled in Orderville. They had no houses, so the settlers had to dig holes in the ground. These they covered with brush. When it rained they had to leave, and she said as soon as it would start to drizzle, the people would begin to pop up like prairie dogs. They were all very poor and could not afford shoes, so in the winter they would take a hot board with them when they went to school. They would run as fast and as far as they could, and then they would put the board down and stand on it to warm their feet and then begin over again. Granddad Gurr was sixteen before he had a pair of shoes.

—William A. Wilson, "The Folk Speak: Everyday Life in Pioneer Oral Narratives," in Ronald W. Walker and Doris R. Dant, eds., Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah's Mormon Pioneers *(Provo: BYU Press, 1999), 495–96.*



not necessarily be impervious to rain. Before experience taught them to do otherwise, they made cabin roofs by placing a layer of grass and weeds, "then a good layer of earth," over poles placed as close together as possible.[7] The finished product was almost flat. Although noted for its warmth, it apparently did little more than slow the rain—which came in torrents at times. Leaking roofs turned the Saints' homes, with their dirt floors, into muddy messes. As one unfortunate sister recalled, "We had rain out of doors and a mud-fall in the house, for the continued fall of rain so thoroughly soaked the earth over head that the downpour was mud, good-honest-mud." She continued: "You can imagine the condition our beds and bedding were in, as long as there was a dry spot, we would move it there, but after a while there was no dry spot. One of the family had a babe nine days old, she stayed in bed till it was soaked through, then she was placed in a chair before the fire with an umbrella over her head."[8]

Mary Horne noted that "the flags and dirt formed but a slight protection [against the rain], and it was a strange sight to see [the people] sitting at their tables or on the bed, their heads covered with an umnbella while the rain was coming through the roof long after it had ceased outside."[9] Melting snow had the same effect on the small cabin Williamena McKay lived in at Huntsville while her husband served a mission to Arizona. The snow caused the cabin's chinking to dislodge, turning its earthen floor to mud.[10]

Perhaps the most enduring house the earliest settlers could build out of native materials was one of adobe or rock. These were generally better insulated against both the cold and the heat than other shelters, they did not disintegrate in the rain, and they generally provided an effective barrier against the incursions of wildlife. . . .

While dugouts, shanties, cabins, and adobe or rock dwellings constituted the principal types of

Three years passed before the family grew enough vegetables to spare some for the table . . .

homes for the Saints, circumstances occasionally required them to live in other structures as well. Eva Beck and her family, for example, who immigrated from Germany in 1863, spent their first winter in Lehi living in a former chicken coop.[11] Similarly, Lucina Boren of Wallsburg lived in an empty granary in Heber during hostilities associated with the Black Hawk War.[12] Such structures were utilized for both relatively infrequent and short periods of time but constituted an important aspect of the Saints' housing prospects all the same. . . .

MEALS

Pioneer women usually assumed responsibility for preparing meals for the family. This was no easy task in early Utah. Prior to the coming of the railroad, stoves and specialized utensils for preparing food were scarce, as their weight and bulk frequently prevented their being hauled across the plains in wagons. Primitive means of preservation meant that only a few types of foodstuffs could be imported from the outside as well, and initially, pioneers used much of their supply as seed for the following year rather than for food. Poor yields due to crickets and droughts continued to limit the amount of the harvest the Saints could use for food. Mary Horne reported that three years passed before her family grew enough vegetables that they could spare some for the table.[13]

The net result of these forces was that early pioneer women again faced the all-too-familiar problem of making do with what little they had on hand. Many, predictably enough, utilized a wide variety of native plants—including the famed sego lily bulbs, milkweed shoots, "marrowfat peas," wild parsnips, currants, pigweed greens, and even mushrooms—as they sought to supplement their families' diets.[14] Conditions slowly improved as the Saints perfected irrigation techniques, obtained a greater variety of seeds, and grew

THE SEGO LILY *is a sacred plant in Native American legend. Sego is a Shoshonean word thought to mean "edible bulb." The flower thrives in desert-like conditions. It blooms in May and June. There are about seven variations of the plant in Utah.*

The pioneers of 1848–49 ate the sego lily bulb to help ward off starvation. Some bulbs were as large as walnuts, but most were the size of marbles. The bulbs were best fresh-cooked because they turned thick and ropey when cool.

By the 1880s those early settlers who had eaten the bulb felt it set them apart from newcomers to the Salt Lake Valley. The old-timers thought that to have suffered through the hard times of the early Utah colonizing showed their tenacity and righteousness. For those pioneers it became a badge of virtue to have been a "bulbeater."

On March 18, 1911, the Utah State Legislature designated the sego lily as the state flower. Early in 1913 the LDS General Relief Society Board chose it as their official emblem. . . . Karl E. Fordham's poem "Sego Lily" portrays the plant as an image of home, mercy, freedom, and peace.

—History Blazer,
December 1995

"Sego Lily"
Sego lily in
the valley,
Sego lily, colors rare;
In the beauty
peaceful emblem
on hillside so fair;
Then we'll sing
our song
"Praise to thee,"
Flower giv'n by
heav'n tenderly.

accustomed to the region's unpredictable weather, but native plants continued to be a staple in outlying areas like Liberty—where Leora Campbell and her husband ate nothing but sego lily roots "for three or four days at a time"—well into the 1860s. After the poor harvest following the entrance of Johnston's Army into the territory in 1858, Saints like Ann Burt turned again to roots even in more centrally located areas.[15]

Under such conditions, the ability to improvise was at a premium. Water mixed with parched barley, wheat, and even peas substituted for coffee; cornstalks and watermelons were processed into molasses. Settlers ate the rinds of melons after having first boiled them in molasses.[16] Ingenuity, coupled with a strong stomach, became even more important during the lean winter months, when supplies were low and the chance for outside aid fell off to almost nothing. Mary Horne recalled one family whose stores gave out midwinter but who had a ready supply of fresh milk. Allowing a portion of each day's milk to stand and thicken, they would then mix it with fresh milk and "eat it for bread." This constituted their sole source of subsistence for six weeks.[17] Ann Burt noted in her diary how one family tried to enhance its meager supply of flour over the winter of 1855–56 by mixing it with sawdust—a failure, it turned out. She also recorded the desperate straits of her own family. "We were given a piece of meat by Brother V.," she wrote. "He had been up in the mountains and carried home a couple of dead animals that had died of starvation during the cold winter. Well,

Materials to furnish homes were extremely limited and primitive . . .