Sullivan Richardson's 1939 Hole-in-the-Rock Photography and Filming Expedition

Sullivan Richardson of the Detroit News, who was a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and his Detroit News colleague Arnold Whitaker embarked on an expedition on June 22, 1939, to photograph and film the San Juan pioneers' route between Bluff, Utah, and the Hole-in-the-Rock crevice. After reading of the San Juan pioneers' unsurpassed barriers years earlier, Sullivan and Arnold wanted to see the pioneers' challenges firsthand, and they wanted to share their findings.[1]

Expedition photo, Hole-in-the-Rock crevice in the background.

Richardson solicited help from San Juan area communities to finance the expedition outfitting cost. The towns of Bluff, Blanding, and Monticello, as well as the San Juan County Commission, made contributions.[2]

Hired Expedition Outfitter and Guide Zeke Johnson and his assistant Jim Mike
Zeke Johnson Jr. operated a mule / horse outfitting and guide service to Bridges National Monument from Blanding, Utah. He was hired by Richardson to outfit the expedition and served as one of the guides.[3] At that time, Zeke Jr.'s father Zeke Sr. was the ranger / custodian of Bridges National Monument. Many years earlier, prior to Lake Pagahrit's natural dam in Lake Canyon washing away, Zeke Sr. worked as a cowhand for a cattle operation that used Lake Canyon for winter grazing.[4] Lake Canyon was a significant site on the Hole-in-the-Rock trail. Zeke Jr. likely learned of the Hole-in-the-Rock trail to Lake Canyon, and possibly beyond, from his father.

Jim Mike, a Piute Indian, was famous for his role in guiding the first white men to Rainbow Bridge in 1909. At the time of Sullivan's expedition, Jim Mike was living in or near Bluff, Utah. Jim was an employee of Zeke Johnson. Jim had spent most of his early life in Piute Canyon and around Navajo Mountain on the south side of the San Juan River.[5] From that area the Native Americans could cross the San Juan River, connect with the Hole-in-the-Rock trail, go west up the Hole-in-the-Rock crevice, and continue to the Kaiparowits Plateau to hunt deer and/or go to the town of Escalante to trade goods. Alternatively, the Native Americans could go east to Lake Canyon, Clay Hills, the Bears Ears area and beyond. The trading expeditions from the Navajo Mountain area via the Hole-in-the-Rock trail to Escalante continued well into the 1940s.[6] It is likely that Jim Mike utilized these routes while living in the Navajo Mountain area and would have become very familiar with the Hole-in-the-Rock trail. Note that Native American trails in the area predate the Hole-in-the-Rock trail and the town of Escalante. Substantial portions of the Hole-in-the-Rock trail follow early Native American routes/trails.

In addition to black and white photos of the trail, Sullivan took 16mm color footage. Outside of Hollywood, color films were a novelty at the time. Sullivan showed his film of the Hole-in-the Rock trail to audiences in Detroit, Michigan, and cities in Utah. Sullivan's black and white photographs and color film are the first-known images to be taken of the Hole-in-the-Rock trail.

Sullivan Richardson's expedition and the Hole-in-the-Rock story was published in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints publication*, The Improvement Era*, January 1940, Volume 43, Number 1.

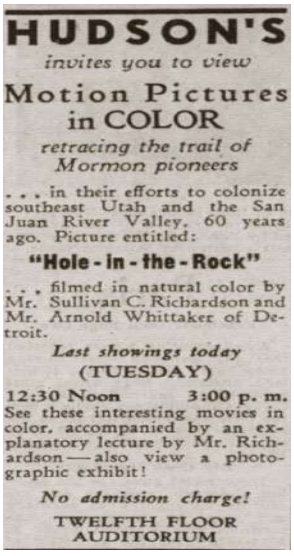
The following pages contain *The Improvement Era* January 1940 article courtesy of "Archive Viewer." The poor-quality images in the article were replaced with scanned images of Sullivan Richardson's original photographs. These photographs are in the University of Utah's Marriot Library Special Collections. All of the replaced images in the article are identical to the original publication's images with the exception of the left image on page 21 and the image on the last page. The originals of these two images do not exist in the U of U collection. However, the images used are the same subject/scene but different poses.

Jim Mike

Arnold Whitaker

Zeke Johnson Jr. Sullivan Richardson

Color images of the Richardson Hole-in-the-Rock expedition personnel, captured from the 16mm Hole-in-the-Rock footage and enhanced with artificial intelligence technology.



HUDSON'S
invites you to view
Motion Pictures in COLOR
retracing the trail of Mormon pioneers
. . . in their efforts to colonize southeast Utah and the San Juan River Valley, 60 years ago. Picture entitled:
"Hole-in-the-Rock"
. . . filmed in natural color by Mr. Sullivan C. Richardson and Mr. Arnold Whittaker of Detroit.
Last showings today
(TUESDAY)
12:30 Noon 3:00 p. m.
See these interesting movies in color, accompanied by an explanatory lecture by Mr. Richardson — also view a photographic exhibit!
No admission charge!
TWELFTH FLOOR AUDITORIUM

Image of a newspaper ad concerning the showing of the film in the Detroit area.

Availability of the 16mm Footage

In 2000 MacDonald & Associates, a historical film archive based in Chicago, acquired Sullivan Richardson's film from the Richardson family. In 2010 the Library of Congress acquired all 40,000 reels of the MacDonald historic film collection.

With the help of a research librarian at the Moving Image Research Center of the Library of Congress, Sullivan Richardson's film was located. Sullivan Richardson's sons, Dave, Sully, and Steve granted permission to have the Library of Congress digitize the film for the Hole-in-the-Rock Foundation and for the foundation to make the film available to the public. The Hole-in-the-Rock Foundation paid for the digitization process. The film, which is in very poor condition, will be made available after it is color corrected and enhanced/repaired to the extent possible with AI technology.

The Hole-in-the-Rock excursion was not the end of Richardson and Whitaker's adventures. They became quite famous in 1941 for their "Richardson Pan America Expedition," driving

a car from Washington, D.C., 14,000 miles to the tip of South America. Then in 1948, they did an Antarctic expedition. An internet search will lead to more information and videos of these and other Richardson expeditions.

Overview References

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[1] Statement by Sullivan Richardson, page 19, *The Improvement Era*, January 1940, Volume 43, Number 1.
[2] San Juan Record, May 18, 1939, page 2.
[3] San Juan Record, May 18, 1939, page 1.
[4] William LeGrand Black, 1995 Thesis - *The Rebirth of the Historic Hole-in-the-Rock Trail,* page 39.
[5] Stephen C. Jett, "The Great 'Race' to 'Discover' Rainbow Bridge in 1909," Appendix: Personnel and Place Names, originally published in KIVA Magazine, Volume 58, Number 1, 1992.
[6] Oral interview with Escalante resident DeLane Griffin in 2010. The Griffins allowed Native American trading parties to stay on their property in Escalante.

This overview and *The Improvement Era* article image enhancements by Lamont Crabtree, April 2024

TWO THOUSAND FEET ABOVE THE COLORADO
From this great height the river below looks almost narrow enough to step across, while the smooth, sheer walls marking Cottonwood Canyon fade back into miles and distance like pigmy mole hills in pock-marked stone.

HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK

By SULLIVAN C. RICHARDSON

Of the Detroit News

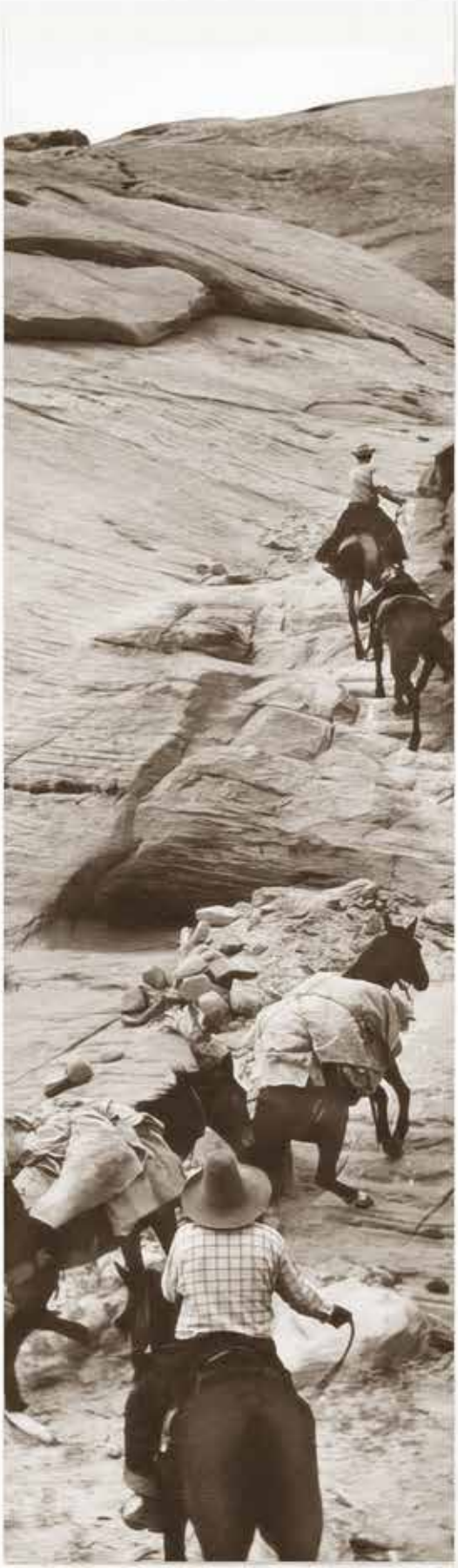
Passing over the "impassable" trail sixty years after makes the story of settling the San Juan seem even greater, even more impossible!

SIXTY years ago this January, a pioneer wagon slid cross-locked into the gaping mouth of a monstrous crack in the two thousand-foot west wall of the Colorado River at the base of Fifty-Mile Mountain in Southern Utah. Shouts of bearded men and bonneted women filled the air. Horses snorted and lunged. The screams of steel wagon tires on solid rock or against loose boulders cut the stillness of the great chasm, and the wagon lurched out of sight around a bend in the close-walled crevice far below.

That crack is now known as Hole-in-the-Rock. That wagon was the first man-made contrivance ever to negotiate that perilous descent. And the man who sat in the driver's seat still lives in Blanding, Utah!

THE SURVIVORS OF HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK, WHO STILL LIVE IN OR NEAR SAN JUAN COUNTY.
Kumen Jones—the man seated—drove the first wagon down through the crack, January 2, 1880.
(See page 56 for other names.)

In the two or three days following that eventful morning, eighty-one more wagons banged, careened, and slid down the forty-five degree slope to the swirling river. Two-hundred-fifty men, women, and children walked or rode the terrifying distance. And one thousand head of horses and cattle crowded, pushed, and slid between the narrow



DUGWAY IN THE SLICK ROCKS
"Where all the wagons got down—but many in pieces!"

Concerning the colored motion pictures and black and white pictures brought back from Hole-in-the-Rock (which may be made available for private showing) the following comments have come:

"These are magnificent pictures."—Wesley Winans Stout, Editor *The Saturday Evening Post*.

"Excellent Pictures."—J. R. Hildebrand, Associate Editor *The National Geographic Magazine*.

"Interesting subject matter and a very beautiful photographic job."—Kenneth MacGowan, Associate Producer Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

"Amazing story and remarkable motion pictures."—W. H. Moore, Sales Director, *The Detroit News*.

"A good story and wonderful pictures."—Ralph Peters, Rotogravure Editor, *The Detroit News*.

"Have never seen better color in travel pictures."—George F. Perriot, Director World Adventure Lecture Series, Detroit.

"Unusually fine pictures and color for 16mm film."—J. L. Middlewood, Director Motion Picture Publicity, Ford Motor Co.

"Everybody satisfied here. The fact that the second day's attendance was better than the first is a very encouraging indication from the standpoint of interest."—Ralph Yonker, Advertising Director, The J. L. Hudson Co., Detroit.

walls to be disgorged into the boiling current at the foot of the cliffs. The marks of wheel-hubs still scar the sheer sandstone faces that wall the crack three hundred feet high on both sides. The crevice is still so narrow you can almost touch both sides with outstretched arms. And the achievement itself, of that crossing of the Colorado, has gone down in history as one of the most amazing accomplishments of any pioneer movement in America. Those pioneers were Mormons. They were answering a "Call" from a prophet of God!

SOMETIME ago, Arnold Whitaker and the writer, both of Detroit, read the story of that trek written by a man who said many kind things about the "Zealots of Zion" who built a makeshift road through Hole-in-the-Rock, and many unkind things about the Mormon leaders who sent their people over the "inhuman trail." We wanted to see what that trail was like: not only at the river itself, but across the desolate sandstone country that stretches from Cottonwood Canyon up to Shoot-the-Chute, through the Slick Rocks, across Lake Gulch and the deep sand of Sand Wash, over Clay Hills Pass, and down to Bluff itself on the San Juan. We hadn't been on a horse in fifteen years, but we were Westerners by birth and we "figured we could take it."

On June 22, last, we were on the way. Zeke Johnson of the Natural Bridges Monument took our lead. Jim Mike, Ute Indian discoverer of Rainbow Natural Bridge, brought up the rear. Five pack horses, four saddle horses, two movie cameras, three still cameras.

HOLE IN-THE-ROCK

The horse didn't want to swim. The first try he pulled the boat right back to the bank. Second try, he swam round and round the boat as the river swept them far downstream. He was finally turned loose to keep him from drowning. He got back to our side quivering with exhaustion. The third try was successful with a different horse.

two pack-bags full of film, tripods, and other picture-taking impedimenta constituted the expeditionary corps. We were pioneers of 1939, for the Hole-in-the-Rock road had been abandoned for wagons since it had first resounded with the creaks of heavy wheels and the plodding of weary oxen six decades ago. For five or six years pioneers followed the Clay Hill road leading to the lake country and only pack outfits have gone over the trail since then. The hot dust of '39 rose in choking clouds from our horses' hoofs as we struck out for the first water hole beyond Clay Hills Pass, thirty miles away.

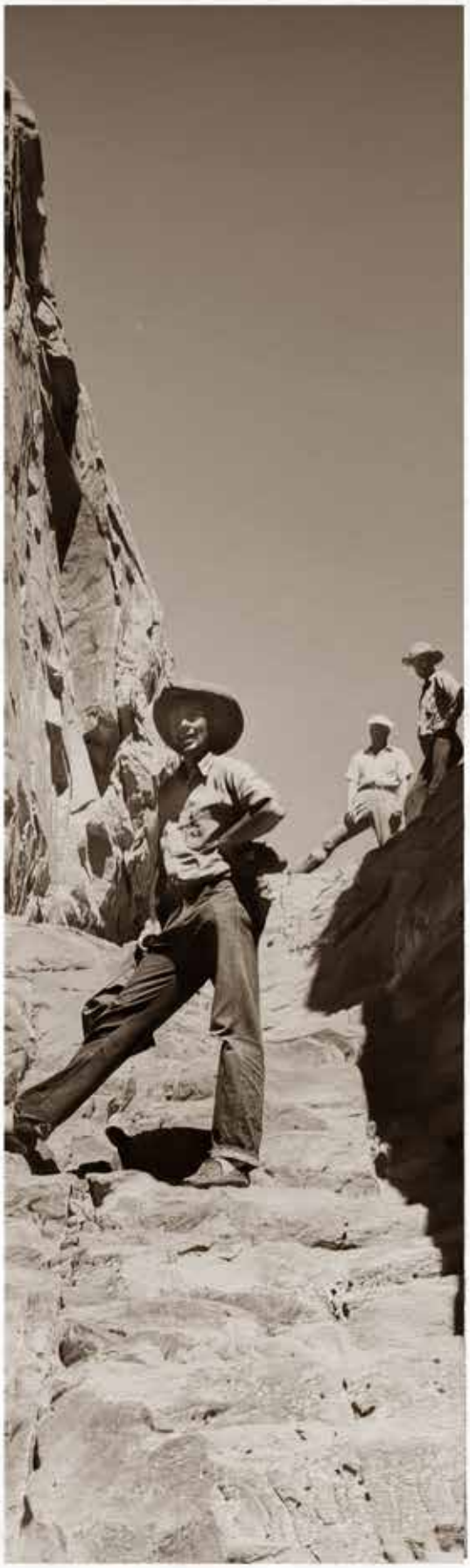
As we rode along through the scrub cedar and pinon pine footing that great red escarpment that runs all the way from White Canyon down into the Colorado Country near Navajo Mountain, Zeke briefly summarized the story of the original trek:

Brigham Young was a great colonizer. He had to find room for converts who still streamed across the plains to the mountains of Zion. (Zeke had been a missionary for the Church up in New England. His conversation was nicely mixed with cowboy slang, Western idiom, and good English.)

John Taylor followed Brigham Young as president of the Church and adhered to the policy of colonizing all colonizable places the Saints could reach.

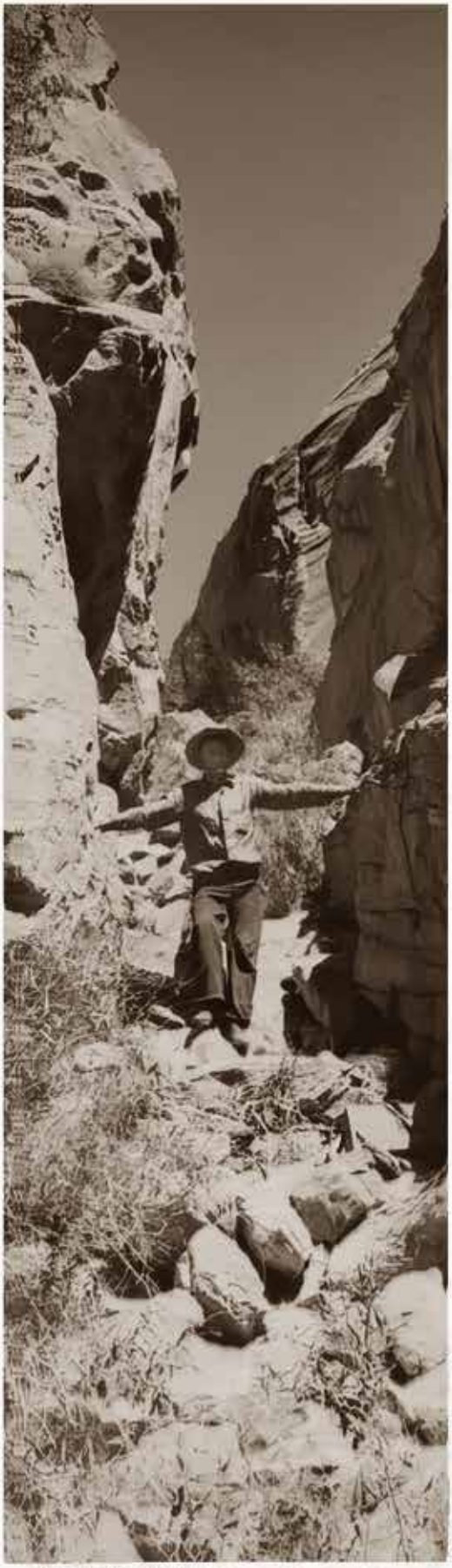
In late 1878, President Taylor sent a scouting party by a sure but scantily known route down into Arizona, via Lee's Ferry to Moencopie (Indian outpost), and back up the other side of the "V" route to the mouth of Montezuma Creek on the San Juan. They had a bad time: deserts, sheer canyons, high rims and plateaus, all the way. Tank water (water which stands, between infrequent rains, in giant potholes worn deep in solid rock) was all they could find to drink, and that tasted as if it had run through a sheep corral. Indians were bad. Later parties ran out of provisions and had to grind horse feed in hand mills for bread. "A shorter, easier route must be found," said their report.

Bishop Schow, road scout, dropped southeast from Escalante along the desert footing Fifty-Mile Mountain to the Colorado. He looked down through a deep crevice in the two thousand-foot west wall—Hole-in-the-Rock—to the water far below, up through Cottonwood Canyon on



AT THE TOP OF THE HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK

Steps cut by hand in solid rock gave the horses surer footing as the wagons started their cross-locked slide toward the river 2,000 feet below!



ALMOST TOUCHING THE WALLS WITH OUTSTRETCHED ARMS

"Room enough for a wagon—if you greased both sides of the box," pronounced Whitaker.

the other side, onto "Wildhorse Mesa," and decided the Saints could get their wagons down through the Hole with comparative ease, "float" the river, and "be on their way in no time"—in which conclusions Schow was more optimistic than history justifies.

The wagons gathered at Escalante and started south. They established base camp at Fifty-Mile Spring. Here conflicting reports said no road could ever be built through Hole-in-the-Rock; that wagons could not possibly climb the walls of Cottonwood Canyon; and that east of that long Mesa, the country was "absolutely impassable." But the Saints had accepted a "Call." The wagons pushed on.

Finally at the big crack, men were lowered in half-barrels by ropes into the bottom of the Hole. With hand drills and precious blasting powder they widened the slit enough to let a wagon scrape through. Halfway down, the crevice widened to a huge gash. Powder was almost gone. Slick rock, shelving away at about eighty degrees, stopped progress. One of the men got an idea. With the hand drills, they bored small holes across the face of the rock, drove tough oak pegs into the holes, laid brush against the pegs, filled loose dirt and rock in behind the brush—and got a roadway.

"But their trouble wasn't over when they crossed the river," Zeke continued, squinting sideways at the sun to see if we were keeping to schedule on the trail. "Cottonwood Canyon was a nightmare. Shoot-the-Chute was worse. And the Slick Rocks, well—" he hesitated, "you'll see it as we go along."

Disappointment and heartbreak followed the arrival on the San Juan. Every irrigation dam built in the river was washed out almost before it was completed. Starvation forced the men to divide and some of them went northeast into Colorado to work for wages and provisions, while the rest remained behind to care for the women, children, and dying crops. After three years the "Call" of the Church was rescinded and people were free to leave if they chose. Most of them did. Only about fifteen families now live at Bluff, and still no irrigation dam tames the river, but other colonies in the San Juan region did grow from this venture and have produced one of the most colorful chapters in Mormon colonization history.

(*Continued on page 54*)

DOWN THROUGH THE HOLE

This is the way it looked to the pioneers as they bit their lips, shouted "Giddap!" and slid in. Wheels were cross-locked and men held back with ropes and chains tied to the rear ends of the wagons.

Bee-Hive—A Worldwide Program

(*Concluded from page 50*)

This organization is one of the finest aids to missionary work. Here we have an opportunity to show what "Mormonism" is in action. (Nola Mae Kerby and Ruth B. Erikson, Evansville, Indiana.)

The response from the Southern States proves that in nearly every section of the mission, the Bee-Hive work is going forward joyfully.

During this Jubilee year, the girls will undoubtedly find that they can increase their own joy and that of the communities in which they live by carrying their program forward actively in the various ways that have been outlined.

HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK

(*Continued from page 21*)

BY THE time Zeke's story was finished we had picked up the old trail itself and were well down onto Whirlwind Desert, working steadily toward Clay Hills Pass.

It was here the scene really began. The old roadway was still plainly visible even after sixty years, balancing on the crest of a long narrow finger of clay as we started the climb. Farther up the Pass we found the old dugway so steep the horses had to stop for breath every hundred yards, and the Pass was three miles from bottom to top.

"I see why they had to cross-lock wagon wheels when they came down this." Whitaker surveyed the steep trail rising above his head only a few yards on. He wiped his hot face on his sleeve.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," countered Zeke. We rode on.

The sun was hanging on the upper rim of the Pass. Bands of brilliantly colored clay running from burnt-apple brown through dusty reds into deep purple, cut the peculiar base strata of the little canyon. High above us the ever-present sandstone finally pushed out of the clay, and from there to the Colorado, three days later, we didn't find another bit of dirt: nothing but bare rock and heavy shifting sands blown free by wind from the outcropping bulges, the sheer walls, and finally from the vast sea of smooth, pock-marked sandstone billows that let us down to the river itself.

The horses had had no water all day. They were froth-covered from perspiration and the intense climb. Our own drinking water had been carried in two two-gallon sacks over saddle horns. But the sacks were new and most of the water had leaked out. We were as desperately in need of water as were the horses. It had been an hour since we could even spit the dust from our throats. Our lips were swelling, our nostrils stung, and I began to wonder if we'd ever make the top of the Pass.

"You fellows need more pioneer blood in you," grinned Zeke wryly.

"I'll settle for water," countered Whitaker. He didn't even smile.

At the crest of the Pass we turned to look back. The old road fell away from us like a ragged string let down a broken canyon wall. Half a mile below, the string seemed to bury itself on end in the steep, colored knolls and cones of clay that banked the cliffs. Farther on it broke into view again, twisting and turning and seeming to get nowhere, then finally dropped from sight completely in the dry gullies and ridges that ran like colored washboards down to the foot of the Pass.

Far out on the rough desert floor —miles and miles to the eye—the slanting rays of a red sun highlighted deformities in the earth, throwing shadows into hazy blue relief, finally losing them, too, in a soft wispy purple carpet which appeared to be tacked right against the base of turreted rims in Monument Valley. It was a magnificent view, but we couldn't help imagining how it looked that day, a long time ago, when wagons wound in and out among the knolls, and weary oxen plodded . . . plodded . . . to the shouts of dusty-faced men and grim, determined women.

Next day—beyond Greenwater Spring—we ran into the sand, heavy sand, into which our horses sank, fetlock deep. The sun burned down, parboiling our legs in our high boots. We switched them back and forth along the sides of the sweating horses, trying to break the heat rays, but it didn't do much good.

"Must be one hundred twenty degrees," Zeke announced from under his big, torn Stetson. "Even in April this sand gets hot. Many's the time old Aunt Deal Perkins told about her walking alongside their wagon through this stretch. Her bare feet'd get so hot in the sand she'd take off her sunbonnet and stand on it to cool 'em off."

It was the third day, noon, when we finally reached the Slick Rocks leading down off Wildhorse Mesa. Ten feet below the crest of the upland wound the shoreline of the old, prehistoric sea which geologists say once covered that country and washed all the top off. From that line down to the desert floor, eight or nine hundred feet below, was nothing but a maze of gullies, small canyons, and ridges of pock-marked "Irish potatoes in stone," carved and piled there by the ancient waters and eroded later by the desert wind. To bring wagons down that place looked as impossible as a flight to Mars.

"It was here," Zeke said, "that the original scouts almost gave up finding a way down. After two days' looking, they finally knelt down and prayed, and soon after that some mountain goats showed

HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK

up from nowhere. They shinnied off down the side of the Mesa. The scouts followed them, and later when the wagon train finally arrived from Hole-in-the-Rock, they followed down the exact trail set by those goats. Wait till you see it." The wait wasn't long.

We ate a liquid lunch in the scant shade of a broken cedar—tomatoes, peaches, pineapple, with lots of syrup, to avoid excessive thirst in the middle of the hot day—and half an hour later we were at the bottom of the first of the three dugways which had catapulted the wagons down off the Mesa. We looked at the old road in amazement.

The blasted out section was probably less than a hundred feet down, but it pitched towards us at an angle of some forty degrees, banging down in a series of rough, broken drops sometimes a foot or more at a time. To the immediate right of the dugway was a giant pothole, dropping the entire distance in one perpendicular plunge. Scarcely six feet separated the blasted-out wall from the dizzy edge, and it seemed impossible that anyone would dare drive a wagon between the two.

"Mormon dugways," Zeke observed with a wide grin at our shocked faces, "reminded one old pioneer of the cowboy's beefsteak: just done enough to eat raw!"

"He knew his—dugways," said Whitaker through grim lips.

The other two dugways were just as bad, the last one even worse in angle of descent. The horses picked their way gingerly. It seemed a miracle they could even keep their feet on such a trail. (I had Zeke take the whole train up, then come back down while I took motion pictures.) When we finally pulled away from those Slick Rocks, up the Mesa, we determined if Hole-in-the-Rock were any worse, we'd be glad to give the whole trail back to the pioneers—with emphasis.

We reached the river at noon on the fourth day. And Hole-in-the-Rock looked worse! As we stood at what seemed the bottom of the world, looking up to the top of those great walls, which appeared riveted against the very top of the sky, and our eyes followed the course of that gigantic crack which rushed down at us from the blue sky far above, we had to stand for a moment in silent tribute to the courage of people who would dare drive wagons into such

RICHARDSON AND WHITAKER
"We slept in our shirts and left our razors in Blanding."

a place. It seemed no wagon ever made could hold together and come down that wild slide. But it had been done: Successfully!

We had made arrangements before leaving Detroit to have Zeke put a raft or boat across the stream, and swim a horse to the other side. There seemed no other way of picturing on film what it meant to the pioneers to swim their cattle and horses across and float eighty-two wagons over. Now as we looked at the thick swirling current we quite lost our enthusiasm for the job. We found an old tin boat high in the brush that had a date mark of 1915 on it. We had no idea how it got there, but Zeke decided it would be safer than a raft despite the fact it leaked like a basket. A 1x6 ripped from the boat floor and split in the middle, became the paddles. Whittaker was to handle them; Jim Mike was to do the bailing, and Zeke led the horse.

The first try was unsuccessful: the horse pulled them back to the bank. The second try got them into the current, but the horse still refused to strike for the other side. He swam round and round the boat while the river swept them far down stream. He was finally turned loose to save himself from drowning. With difficulty the "leaking old tub" was also pulled back to our shore. The third try, with a different horse, brought success. He swam like a duck. But hours later while we stood around the camp fire with night settled over us like a satin comforter, and the moon making ghostly shadows on the great walls, we were sure we had an inkling of what it was like on that cold January day, 1880, when the first wagon careened wildly down that crack opposite us, and slipped gingerly into the cur-

(*Concluded on page* 56)

HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK

(*Concluded from page 55*)

rent that now whined so softly at our very feet.

Next morning we crossed again and climbed to the top of the famous Hole. It took us almost two hours to make the distance, for the sun was terrific, and the steep grade, strewn now with huge boulders, made the going very slow indeed. The narrow part of the crack itself was all Zeke had described: close-walled, terrifying, scarred by the wheelhubs of heavy wagons! It seemed impossible to believe that eighty-two of them had ever made the wild descent. But the scars, the small hand-drilled holes that had held pegs anchoring brush, logs, and loose rock to the slanting face of the slick-rocked turn half way down, and the stone steps both there and at the top of the Hole, too, bore mute testimony we could not deny. On the desert floor above we found part of an old iron wheel—probably a flywheel of a smithy's forge—and broken bits of dishes, to add weight to that already impressive testimony. The whole silent atmosphere seemed

HEAVY GOING IN THE DEEP SAND BETWEEN LAKE GULCH AND GREENWATER SPRING.

filled with voices of the past wanting to tell us of heroism, courage, and achievement. And it didn't take much imagination to listen to those voices!

Back in Blanding we found ten survivors of that epic trail brought together in reunion and for pictures to finish off the movies we had taken over the route: Kumen Jones, 83, the man who drove the first wagon down Hole-in-the-Rock; Sarah W. Perkins, 79; Parley R. Butt, 77; Margaret Adams, 75; Charles E. Walton, 72; Mary Jane Wilson, 68; Leona J. Neilson, 67; Caroline C. Thurston, 66; Caroline Redd, 64; and Jennie D. Wood, 61. All of them were "feeling fine" and could tell stories that made fiction seem tame and colorless. They did an old-fashioned dance—the swing your partner, all promenade, kind—to commemorate the big dance held New Year's Eve, December 31, 1879, on the smooth expanse of slick-rock at the top of Hole-in-the-Rock. It seemed a fitting climax to a film dedicated to the courageous accomplishment of men and women who found no obstacle too great to bar them from a path designated by a prophet of God.

"And they fled into the wilderness. . . . And they pitched their tents, and began to build buildings; yea, they were industrious and did labor exceedingly."—Mosiah 23:3 and 5.