

History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Star Valley, Wyoming



In 1847, early members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints took their westward trek through Wyoming from Fort Laramie, following the Oregon Trail along the Platte River to Fort Bridger. The pioneers used rafts and a boat to ferry themselves and their belongings across the Platte River near present-day Casper. Nine men stayed behind to continue the profitable ferry, which found business from Oregon-bound travelers.

In Wyoming, the pioneers met Jim Bridger, who gave an optimistic opinion of the Great Basin area. Most pioneer companies traveled through Wyoming without incident; however, the Willie and Martin handcart companies of 1856 started later in the year and became trapped in the winter snows. Approximately 200 of the 1,075 in the companies died. Others were saved by Utah rescue parties.

Star Valley, a vast, beautiful wilderness in the summer, was not an inviting area for early settlers. At an elevation of over 6,000 feet, the climate is both cold and dry. Nighttime temperatures in December through February often drop to forty below zero for weeks at a time. Accounts of their lives dealing with snow eight feet deep on the valley floor demonstrate the courage and tenacity of these early settlers, whose descendants still inhabit the valley today.

In 1877, Church members settled the Star Valley area, and the following year, Church President Brigham Young dedicated the spot as a gathering place for members of the Church.

The Bear Lake Stake, similar to a diocese, was organized in August of 1877. It encompassed Bear Lake County, Idaho; Rich County, Utah; part of Uinta County, Wyoming; and one settlement (Soda Springs) in Bingham County, Idaho. This vast, harsh region of the Intermountain West was under the leadership of Stake President William Budge. By 1879, the Bear Lake Stake extended 90 miles to encompass the Salt River Valley. The name was later changed to the Star Valley Stake by visiting LDS Apostle Moses Thatcher in 1878.

At that time, Thatcher stood on a vantage point overlooking the valley and commented on its beauty. “I hereby name this valley Star Valley,” he said, “because it is the star of all valleys.”

The Church continued to grow in the area, and in 1909 a new tabernacle was dedicated in Afton, Wyoming. The tabernacle has been remodeled several times but still stands in the middle of Afton as a testimony to the faith of the early settlers in Star Valley.

The hope of having a temple in Star Valley was realized in October conference 2011, when President Thomas S. Monson announced there would be a temple built in Star Valley, Wyoming. The temple will be the first in the state.

Today there are over 68,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Wyoming in 163 congregations.