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Appendix 2: How Far to Cumorah?

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Appendix 2: How Far to Cumorah?

To Mr. Eugene L. Roberts and Mrs. Eldon Reed Cluff in their fascinating book *Benjamin Cluff* (Provo, 1947) we are indebted for valuable chapters (7 through 12) on the Brigham Young Academy Expedition to South and Central America. In those pages the reader may find a clear answer to the question: What geographical barriers would definitely bar an army from passing from Central America to the north country? The answer is — *none*.

On April 17, 1900 a troop of twenty-five men with mules and wagons left Provo, Utah, with the purpose of seeking information casting light on the Book of Mormon in lands to the south. Upon reaching the Mexican border the expedition was disbanded (August 12, 1900) by order of the General Authorities—not because it had reached impassable terrain, but because of the expense involved in a large-scale operation. Proceeding into Mexico with a reduced force of nine men and without wagons, the party found far easier and more pleasant going than they had had in Arizona. Oaxaca they describe as a very Eden, a hunter's paradise, through which they were able to make eighteen to twenty miles a day. Even the terribly rugged Sierra Madre Mountains were crossed in three weeks.

Since the object of the expedition was to gather information, it moved very slowly. Each of the nine men was a specialist, and each was allowed to do a thorough job. Thus C. Van Buren made one of the finest collections of South American birds in the world, J. B. Fairbanks "fre-

quently remained at some camp or city to paint'' and took long trips to the coast to ship his pictures back home, Cluff and three others made one side-trip of four hundred miles to inspect the ruins of Palenque, and after passing Mexico City the whole party climbed Popocatepetl. It was such activity rather than any terrors of the road that made progress slow. When in Guatemala Professor Wolfe dropped out, it was not because going had become impossible but because he had never liked the idea of marching beyond Nogales and had been persuaded only with great difficulty to accompany the party as far as he did. Nowhere is the jungle described as an impenetrable barrier: There were always trails and ancient roads to follow. Swollen streams seem to have presented the only serious obstacles to travel, yet they were all successfully crossed, and had the party not been unwise enough to attempt Central America during the rainy season, they could have been avoided almost entirely. When Brother Magelby fell sick in Salvador, all but Cluff and Kienke stayed with him. At one time or another every member of the expedition came down with fever—but all survived. Had Brothers Cluff and Kienke been able to afford a ten-man escort (extremely moderate by explorer's standards), they would have made better time on their journey to Panama. As it was, they got through without serious mishap, and what delayed their entry into the city of Panama was not jungle but a revolution, which also obliged them to go part of the way by boat. In Panama City they were joined by other members of the expedition (so far were they from being downhearted), and then some of the men took the mules across the isthmus to Colon in only three days, though they had only "uncertain and indefinite trails" to follow. From Colon the party went to Colombia by boat—solely because of Indian troubles, and not because of geographical obstacles, for the worst of the jungles and streams were already behind them. In Bogota the expedition finally came to an end not because the coun-

try had become impassable, but because the Colombian government advised them against proceeding further, since "south of Bogota the Americans would most likely have all their possessions confiscated by revolutionists before they had traveled far and they would almost certainly be killed."

Two aspects of B.Y. Academy Expedition are particularly pertinent to the question of Book of Mormon logistics: the actual travel time of the party and the nature of the obstacles that slowed it down. As to the first, if we subtract time taken off for missionary work, resting on the Sabbath, side-trips and exploration, receiving the endless and exuberant hospitality of Saints and natives along the way (a very demanding and time-consuming obligation), caring for the sick, collecting, preparing and shipping specimens, negotiating for passports, duty-exemptions, guides, etc., we find that the actual time on the road is to be measured rather in weeks than in months. If one chooses to stop off in Elko for three weeks on a trip from Salt Lake to San Francisco, one cannot rightly describe the journey as taking three weeks—and the explorers from Provo deliberately and constantly delayed on the road. Even when actually under way the group made no effort to move quickly—to set a record for speed was the one thing farthest from their thoughts.

Yet even with all these things to slow them to a crawl, the party reached the first "Narrow Neck of Land" on February 16, 1901, less than ten months after leaving Provo. Fully four of these months had been spent in Utah and Arizona, while more than a month more had been wasted in negotiations on the Mexican border. The second "Narrow Neck" was reached April 13, 1901, less than a year from Provo, and the narrowest neck of all was entered but two weeks later—it was a revolution that delayed arrival at Panama City until the fall of the year.

As to the nature of the obstacles, it will be readily seen

that they are not such as any Jaredite or Lamanite army would have to cope with. Official delays, swollen streams, care for the sick, social obligations, ignorance of the country, hostile Indians, revolutions, lack of guides, lost and strayed pack animals, the labor of preparing scientific collections—such hindrances could all be avoided by the means and experience at the disposal of seasoned armies. The B.Y. Academy Expedition occasionally ran across ancient roads some of which they took to be Nephite. Needless to say, such jungle ways would have been in infinitely better repair in the days of old. The marching of armies would in a very short time establish a system of clearly marked and easily traveled strategic roads, and these would improve from year to year after each campaign. Tough native troops, adequately supplied with every means of accomplishing rapid forced marches, could easily pass from the Narrow Neck of Land to the North Country in a matter of *days*. In World War II, the Japanese demonstrated that the “impenetrable jungles” of Malaya, on which British strategy relied very heavily, were simply a myth. As Professor Spears points out in his book *Deserts on the March*, there are no “impenetrable jungles” in nature. According to the famous military maxim of Suvorov, “where a deer can go, a man can go, and where a man can go, an army can go.” It has been proved time and again.

Without committing us to any particular Book of Mormon geography, the remarkable journey of the B.Y.A. Expedition, made more than fifty years ago by a very poorly equipped company during the rainy season through territories of hostile Indians and revolutionaries, proves that Jaredite or Lamanite armies could easily have followed the old established patterns of making yearly raids of continental scope.