

## Battalion - About the Program - Producer Q and A

### A CONVERSATION WITH KEN VERDOIA, PRODUCER OF BATTALION

Ken Verdoia is the Senior Producer for Public Affairs with KUED-TV. The recipient of more than 100 regional, national and international awards for journalistic and program excellence, his documentaries on western history have proven to be some of the most popular programs produced locally for public television. Most recently, Verdoia was inducted into the prestigious Silver Circle Society of the Rocky Mountain Southwest Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (NATAS). The Silver Circle is comprised of a select group of honorees who have made significant contributions to the television industry in the past 25 years. BATTALION is Ken's 20th documentary for public television.

Q: What relevance does the Battalion story have for viewers today? Beyond re-enactors, descendants and history buffs, who will this documentary reach?

A: As we were bringing this story together for public television, a story that seems to be about long-forgotten events, our nation went to war with Iraq. It was a time of reflection for all Americans, and especially for those of us working on this project. Each day produced another parallel between this lost chapter of history from 15 decades past and the daily headlines of our country at war. Consider the situation of the Battalion: Marching under their nation's flag, across a harsh desert landscape in a foreign land, toward a potentially deadly enemy, confronting culture and language that was different from anything they had previously experienced. Critics called them "invaders" and "occupiers" while supporters called them "liberators." The parallels between 1846 and 2003 were very powerful. To have the journals and diaries of these soldiers from more than 150 years ago, to listen to their fears, uncertainties and complaints, takes us very close to understanding how this group faced danger and shaped the American experience. It reminds us of the importance of our history, the idea of an ever-evolving continuum of events.

And, just as our nation's military in 2003 is shaped by the contributions of men and women, we need to remember that women played an important role in the march of the Mormon Battalion in 1846.

Q: The Battalion never saw battle in the Mexican-American War. Aside from completing one of the longest recorded marches in military history, what did they do?

A: In the simplest terms, they were part of a series of events that changed the way our nation thought of itself. The Battalion's role in the War with Mexico was small from a military standpoint, but terribly important in terms of the nation realizing "Manifest Destiny"—the dream of a coast-to-coast nation. This unlikely group becomes critical to establishing an American presence in California, particularly in the area between San Diego and Los Angeles. The very nature of the group calmed a lot of fears that existed in the "Californio" or Hispanic culture. But they do more than just lay claim to the land. They are at "ground zero" when gold is discovered near present-day Sacramento in 1848. They spread the word and build roads into the gold fields. They play a significant role in fueling the California Gold Rush, which transforms the American West.

While they were never the featured players, they were the critical supporting cast. Their story takes us inside a series of events that redefined the nation.

Q: Which detail of the story gave you the strongest personal reaction?

A: You have to remember that this Battalion was recruited out of refugee camps that existed on the

edge of wilderness. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints had been driven from a series of settlements, and had set off on a mission to leave the United States. These were desperate times—families were starving and disease was killing hundreds. Many members of the Mormon Church held the government responsible for their suffering. Against this backdrop, Brigham Young convinces 500 of his best men to leave their families and enlist in the army and fight Mexico. It is an incredibly shrewd maneuver by Young, because the soldier's pay will help the church immigrate to the West.

But the leave-takings are powerful and poignant as the men leave their families behind. And for dozens it will be a last farewell.

The writings of the men and women saying goodbye stay with me as an incredibly American moment, in which individuals find the strength to set aside personal needs to serve a greater common good.

Q: As you followed the Battalion's route, what did you realize about their service to the United States?

A: I've been fortunate to do a number of programs over the years that have traced the paths of various pioneering groups in the West. Never have I found a path more difficult, challenging and potentially deadly than the trail of the Mormon Battalion during the War with Mexico. Even though parts of their route had been mapped by earlier expeditions, they had to struggle through some of the harshest, driest terrain anywhere in North America. They often marched days without water. They were exposed to fevers and disease that crippled and killed the men. They ran out of food and had to eat pack mules that died along the way. And there was always the threat of the Mexican Army appearing over the next rise. Yet they pressed on. Incredible dedication. To borrow from the late Stephen Ambrose, they truly became a "band of brothers" who pushed on because they simply would not let their buddies down.

Q: The Battalion had the chance to strike it rich in California's Gold Rush. Why didn't they stay at Sutter's Mill?

A: Imagine the situation. You are at the very heart of the California Mother Lode. The first on the scene. You dip your hat or basket into a bank of the American River and pick out small gold nuggets with your fingers. On an average day, you pocket more money in gold than you can earn in a month in any city in America. While some members of the Battalion could not resist the opportunity, the vast majority didn't stay longer than their first chance to leave. They were committed to reuniting with their families. They felt a strong attachment to the plans of their church to establish a new "Zion" in the Great Basin. So, if you are one of those members of the Battalion turning your horse East to make your way to an uncertain future, you meet thousands of people pouring into California seeking one glimpse of the opportunity from which you have turned away. It is just another aspect that makes this such a unique story.

Q: Was there something special about the Mormon Battalion that made them a better occupying force for the American Southwest? Couldn't anybody have undertaken this march? In the end, how did they benefit?

A: At the outbreak of the War with Mexico, our nation had a very small standing army. Certainly not large enough to do battle with another nation, let alone occupy the vast stretches of the American Southwest. So the call was made for volunteers. The majority of the men who signed up were pretty rugged, hard-living men who were looking for a fight. The Mormon Battalion was made up less of frontiersmen than farmers and merchants---and most of them were very sober, religious men. While ready to do their duty, they were less likely than other volunteers to carouse and intimidate the residents of towns they passed through and occupied. Their non-Mormon army officers greatly

appreciated that, and tried repeatedly to get the Battalion members to stay in the army to bring order to California after the war was over. But most moved on.

There were other remarkable marches during the War with Mexico, at least one march that may have been longer and even more difficult than that of the Mormon Battalion. But this march of 500 unlikely soldiers is one very important thread in sewing together the American nation we now take for granted. They were men who marched, not for personal glory, but to serve others. They didn't want to go, and it's almost a misnomer to call them "volunteers"---but when the call came from their spiritual leaders, they stepped forward to serve. They marched for family, faith, and country. . .perhaps in that order. But they found the courage and determination to serve all three.