

HANDCART COMPANIES AFTER 1856¹

The tragedy of the belated handcart companies turned people against handcart travel. The success of the first three companies was forgotten in the sufferings of the 4th and 5th. The 14th General Epistle from the First Presidency encouraged further handcart migration but cautioned:

- 1) Emigration must start earlier
- 2) Proper arrangements must be completed by the time they arrive on the frontier
- 3) No one should leave Florence after July 1
- 4) They must be provided with better handcarts

It was felt that a dramatic and successful demonstration of the handcart method of travel was needed. On April 23, 1857 a party of 70 missionaries was ready to set out from Salt Lake City for the Missouri River by handcart. They hauled food, clothing, bedding, *everything*, and were not hampered by ox teams. They gathered at Temple Square and received final instructions from Orson Hyde. Brigham Young told them to start, the brass band escorted them a few blocks, the crowd gave them three cheers, and they were on their way.

They reached Ft. Bridger on May 1, forded the Green River on May 3, crossed South Pass on the 6th, Devil's Gate on the 10th, and reached Ft. Laramie on May 21st. They were averaging 28-32 miles per day! They arrived in Florence on June 10th, making the entire trip from Salt Lake to Florence in 48 days! Subtracting resting, repairing carts, etc. their actual travel time was 40 1/2 days.

A representative of the local newspaper, the *Florence Courier*, visited the Mormon camp and observed:

The bodies of the carts were tastefully painted to suit the fancy of the owners, and with such inscriptions on the sides as: 'Truth will Prevail,' 'Zion's Express,' 'Blessings follow Sacrifice,' 'Merry Mormons.' They had canvas covers, and were better looking vehicles in every respect than we had expected to see. From the accounts published in the leading journals throughout the country, the general impression on the mind of the public is that the handcart is the slowest and most laborious mode of conveyance that can be used. From the report of this party and of others, we are inclined to think it exactly the reverse. This party was but nineteen days in coming from Fort Laramie, a distance of 520 miles- an average of over 27 miles per day- some days they made 35 miles. This is certainly not slow traveling, and when we reflect upon the many inconveniences to which a traveller is subjected with his horses, mules, etc., we are inclined to think that for a California or Salt Lake trip we would give the handcart the preference.

This effort proved again the efficiency of handcart travel and emigrating Saints were encouraged to use the method.

The 6th Handcart Company

Those who were to comprise the 6th handcart company, left Liverpool on March 27, 1857. Fourteen returning missionaries and 803 converts were the passengers aboard the “George Washington.” After a speedy voyage, they arrived in Boston in 23 days! And then arrived in Iowa City on April 30. Their preliminary travel was almost as fast as the Elders of Israel! It still took about 3 weeks for all the necessary preparations. They left on May 22. They had mule teams on the wagons, rather than ox teams. Although their travel was hampered somewhat by spring storms, the company of 149 people arrived in Salt Lake on Sept. 11. They had comparatively few problems.

The 7th Handcart Company

The 7th Company of 330 people was mostly Scandinavian Saints. They left Liverpool on April 25 and landed in Philadelphia on May 31. They arrived in Iowa City on June 9th and left on June 13. They left Florence on July 7. Near Ft. Laramie an army oxen had broken its leg by being run over by a wagon. The military captain gave it to the hungry immigrants for meat.

Another instance of providing meat was by an older member of the company who was devoid of a sense of smell. He found a small black and white striped animal and killed it with his cane. When he brought it into camp, both he and the animal were ostracized!

The company arrived in Salt Lake City on Sept 13, having made very good time. They left Florence 3 weeks after the 6th company but arrived in Salt Lake City only one day after the 6th.

Emigration was stifled in 1858 because of the conflict with Johnston’s Army. The next three companies, in 1859 and 1860 had the advantage of being able to ride the train to St. Joseph, Missouri, thence by steamer to Florence.

The 8th Handcart Company

The 8th Company of 235 people left Florence on June 9th, 1859. One young man (boy?) loved the handcart song and sang it at anyone’s request. After three days of handcarting, when asked to sing it, he stamped his foot and said he’d never sing it again, and he probably didn’t. The company made good progress other than being harassed by the Indians a few times. One brave was determined to trade 8 ponies for one of the young ladies. On another occasion a big hunting party had shortly before passed the company, then killed a buffalo. They took a quarter of it then put the hide over it with a note that this was for the handcarts. For whatever reason the anticipated supply trains never met them at the planned locations and they nearly starved before they finally met the wagons at Ham’s Fork (between the Green River crossing and Ft. Bridger). One or two (journals differ) of the young women stayed (married?) some mountain men at the Green River crossing after they had fed the group. They arrived in the Valley on Sept 4. after having their share of struggle and sacrifice. At least 5 members of the company had died.

The Last of the Handcart Companies

The last of the ten handcart companies were the two which came in 1860. The 9th company sailed from Liverpool on March 30 with 594 Saints, all British except 70 from Switzerland. They arrived in Florence on May 12. There were 233 of the people who made the handcart trek. Although their supplies ran low, they were able to gorge themselves on fish at the Sweetwater

and they were resupplied near the Green River crossing. At Henefer (Weber River crossing) a farmer said they could have all the potatoes they wanted if they'd dig them, and a man living on Big Mountain sent seven yoke of oxen down to pull the handcarts up the hill. They arrived in the Valley Aug 27 with only 1 death along the way. It had taken 11 weeks to make the journey at what they considered a rather leisurely pace.

The 10th company left Liverpool on May 10. There were about 335 British, 312 Scandinavians, and 85 Swiss. Smallpox broke out and made a very unpleasant voyage. There were 10 deaths, 4 births, and 5 marriages at sea. They arrived in Florence July 1 and the handcart group left on July 6 with 124 persons. They were given a promise at the start that if they were humble and faithful, not one of would die on the trail, and this was literally fulfilled. They picked up 1400 lbs. flour at Three Crossings of the Sweetwater (cached there for them?) and they were able to have 1 1/2 lbs of flour per person per day which was comparatively a feast. They arrived on the 24th of Sept.

At best the handcart trek across the plains was never viewed by anyone as a pleasure jaunt. Mary Ann Stucki Hafen, a young Swiss girl of 6 when she crossed the plains, had deep recollections of the trek for the remaining 85 years of her life:

The train landed us at the point of outfit. Father was a carpenter, and they asked him to stop for a while and help make handcarts, as most of the people were too poor to buy teams.

When we came to load up our belongings we found that we had more than we could take. Mother was forced to leave behind her feather bed, the bolt of linen, two large trunks full of clothes, and some other valuable things which we needed so badly later. Father could take only his most necessary tools.

There were six to our cart. Father and mother pulled it; Rosie (two years old) and Christian (six months old) rode; John (nine) and I (six) walked. Sometimes, when it was down hill, they let me ride too.

Father had bought a cow to take along, so we could have milk on the way. At first he tied her to the back of the cart, but she would sometimes hang back, so he thought he would make a harness and have her pull the cart while he led her. By this time mother's feet were so swollen that she could not wear shoes, but had to wrap her feet with cloth. Father thought that by having the cow pull the cart mother might ride. This worked well for some time.

One day a group of Indians came riding up on horses. Their jingling trinkets, dragging poles and strange appearance frightened the cow and set her chasing off with the cart and children. We were afraid that the children might be killed, but the cow fell into a deep gully and the cart turned upside down. Although the children were under the trunk and bedding, they were unhurt, but after that father did not hitch the cow to the cart again. He let three Danish boys take her to hitch to their cart. Then the Danish boys, each in turn, would help father pull our cart.

After about three weeks my mother's feet became better so she could wear her shoes again. She would get so discouraged and down-hearted; but father never lost courage. He would always cheer her up by telling her that we were going to Zion, that the Lord would take care of us, and that better times were coming.

Even when it rained the company did not stop traveling. A cover on the handcart shielded the two younger children. The rest of us found it more comfortable moving than standing still in the drizzle. In fording streams the men often carried the children and weaker women across on their backs. The company stopped over on Sundays for rest, and meetings were held for spiritual comfort and guidance. At night, when the handcarts were drawn up in a circle and the fires were lighted, the camp looked quite happy. Singing, music, and speeches by the leaders cheered everyone. I remember that we stopped one night at an old Indian camp ground. There were many bright-colored beads in the ant hills.

At times we met or were passed by the overland stage coach with its passengers and mail bags and drawn by four fine horses. When the Pony Express dashed past it seemed almost like the wind racing over the prairie.

Our provisions began to get low. One day a herd of buffalo ran past and the men of our company shot two of them. Such a feast as we had when they were dressed. Each family was given a piece of meat to take along. My brother John, who pushed at the back of our cart, used to tell how hungry he was all the time and how tired he got from pushing. He said he felt that if he could just sit down for a few minutes he would feel so much better. But instead, father would ask if he couldn't push a little harder. Mother was nursing the baby and could not help much, especially when the food ran short and she grew weak. When rations were reduced father gave mother a part of his share of the food, so he was not so strong either.

When we got that chunk of buffalo meat father put it in the handcart. My brother John remembered that it was the fore part of the week and that father said we would save it for Sunday dinner. John said, 'I was so very hungry and the meat smelled so good to me while pushing at the handcart that I could not resist. I had a little pocket knife and with it I cut off a piece or two each half day. Although I expected a severe whipping when father found it out, I cut off little pieces each day. I would chew them so long that they got white and perfectly tasteless. When father came to get the meat he asked me if I had been cutting off some of it. I said "Yes. I was so hungry I could not let it alone." Instead of giving me a scolding or whipping, father turned away and wiped tears from his eyes.'

At last, when we reached the top of Emigration Canyon, overlooking Salt Lake, the whole company stopped to look down through the Valley. Some yelled and tossed their hats in the air. A shout of joy arose at the thought that our long trip was over, that we had at last reached Zion, the place of rest. We all gave thanks to God for helping us safely over the Plains and mountains to our destination.

When we arrived in the city we were welcomed by the people who came out carrying baskets of fruit and other kinds of good things to eat. Even though we could not understand their language, they made us feel that we were among friends.

We were invited home by a good family who kept us two or three days, until my parents were rested. Then we were given a little house near the river Jordan, three miles from town, and father was put to work on the public road. He was paid in produce, mostly flour and potatoes, from the Tithing Office.²

In all, over the 5 year period, there were 2962 people who gathered to Zion by handcart. There were about 250 deaths, but less than 40 in other than the Willie and Martin companies.

The economy of handcart travel is undisputed. It enabled hundreds to emigrate who, in all probability, never could have come to America. Also, by this plan the limited resources of the Perpetual Emigration Fund were so spread as to afford assistance to many more emigrants than could have been helped with wagon trains.

. . . Concern for material welfare alone could never have produced the handcart migrations. It took consecrated resolution, the sustaining conviction of a deeply religious faith. Spiritual resources buoyed these humble, faithful souls with a strength to endure summer heat and winter cold, fatigue and hunger, discouragement and despair.

Like Israel of old, these modern "Children of God" responded to a Prophet's voice. From their zeal for a new religion, they drew strength. From an abiding faith in God and his overruling care, and from a firm belief in the divinity of the command for Latter-day Saints to gather to Zion, they were enabled to gird up their loins and walk the long scourging trail.³

During the decade of the 1860s another method of immigration was tried. This was the period of the "Down and Back Companies". Livestock and produce had become rather plentiful in Utah by then. It was determined that a wagon train loaded with provisions could leave Salt Lake City early in the spring, cache food at some appropriate stations along the way, arrive in St. Joseph in time to pick up the immigrants for the year, and return them to the Valley. Thus the enormous expense of purchasing wagons, teams, and supplies on the Missouri could be avoided.

In 1861, there were 200 wagons, 2000 oxen, and about 250 men in 4 companies involved in this experiment. They carried 150,000 lbs. of Utah flour and deposited much of it at 4 stations between the Valley and the Missouri. Similar trains went each year except in 1865 and 1867 when there were battles with Indians in Utah. In 1868 such trains involved 540 wagons, 650 men, and 4000 oxen.

Young single men were always quite eager to undertake the journey so they would be the first to meet the newly arrived young women. Some of the men took repeated trips. For example, John R. Murdock made the trip 5 times and boasted that he had brought more Saints to Utah than any other one man.⁴

As the rail-heads pushed further west in the middle 60s, the length of ox-train transportation became increasingly shorter. The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 brought to an end the romantic era of wagon trains and handcart treks. Those who rode on the trains became known as Pullman Pioneers!

¹Adapted From: Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, pp. 143-195.)

²Ibid. pp. 187-190

³Ibid. pp. 194-195

⁴Slaughter, William, *Trail of Hope*, pp. 139-140