

Sacrifices of The Handcart Pioneers ¹

(A talk given by Loren Martin)

As I present this message to you today, I have asked the Lord to steel my emotions. Also as I tell the story to visitors at Martin's Cove I have to have the Lord's help. I don't mind shedding a tear because it waters my testimony and helps it grow, but my kids and some others know that when I tell these stories of the handcart pioneers I blubber so much that it is downright embarrassing.

Between 1856 and 1860 there were 10 handcart companies that came across the Mormon Trail. They consisted of nearly 3000 people. Why was it called the Mormon trail? The Mormons were not trailblazers on their trek west. They followed established emigrant routes. The Mormon Trail, the Oregon Trail, and the California Trail all came through the country that we will be talking about. The trail down Echo Canyon and into the Salt Lake Valley had been blazed in 1846 by the ill-fated Donner Party, before the Saints with Brigham Young came in 1847. There are two reasons why it is called the Mormon Trail:

- a. the Church members came in such large numbers over such an extended period of time -- more than 70,000 people over a period of 23 years.
- b. the high drama of the migration of families hoping to find refuge from religious persecution. When a family would become converted to the gospel in Europe or elsewhere they would be immediately enveloped by the Spirit of Gathering of covenant Israel and desire to go where they could build a Temple and establish Zion.

However, it was not easy to gather to Zion. Willing and anxious converts did not translate into financially able ones. Most of those who accepted the Gospel were the humble and poor. The Perpetual Emigration Fund was established in 1849 whereby a person could borrow sufficient resources to emigrate to Zion, and then he would be expected to repay the Fund as quickly as his resources would allow so that others may also have the benefit of such assistance. After 3-4 years the successes of the Fund were notable, however, so many hundreds of converts had the Spirit of Gathering that the Fund was strained to the limit and it was necessary to find a less expensive way to accomplish the task. To outfit each family with a team of horses, mules or oxen, a wagon, and supplies was just too expensive.

Brigham Young devised a plan whereby the emigrants would pull their own handcarts, with minimal supplies. There would be an accompanying small group of wagons to haul major supplies and the larger possessions of the families. There would also be one or two milk cows for every 10 handcarts, and a small herd of cattle to butcher as necessary along the way. Each adult was limited to 17 pounds of personal gear and each child could take 10 pounds in the handcarts. With some food, bedding, cooking utensils and a tent for each 20 people, some of the larger carts were loaded with 400-500 pounds.]

Typical of those who emigrated was the Mortensen family from Denmark. They couldn't all come at once. The oldest girl of the family came in 1855, and sent some money home for the next to come. In 1856 was the turn for younger sister, Bodil Mortensen. The rest of the family was to come the next year after they had saved more money. Nine year old Bodil was put in the

charge of some friends, Jens and Elsie Neilsen along with their little boy, Jens [or Neils], who was 5 or 6. Remember Bodil Mortensen -- we'll mention her again.

It was all quite well organized. Teams of people were stationed in Iowa City (the end of the rail line) to build handcarts, sew tents (some tents were sewn by the pioneers on the ocean voyage), and gather the necessary supplies for the emigrant groups to cross the 1300 miles from Iowa City to their Zion in the west. The immigrants were given supplies at Iowa City to reach Florence/Winter Quarters, where they were resupplied to reach Ft. Laramie. It is important to note that other teams were organized to leave Salt Lake City at appropriate times to meet the groups along the way with additional supplies. Fort Laramie was a resupply point, as was Fort Bridger.

The success of the first three companies in 1856 proved the benefits of the plan. The first two with nearly 500 people total left Iowa City in early June and arrived in Salt Lake City on Sept 26 with only 8 deaths along the way. The third company of 320 people left in late June and arrived 2nd October with no deaths. It was recognized that the journey would take an average of three and one-half months.

But triumph turned to tragedy, and greater sacrifices and trials were to befall the next two companies than all the others combined. The sacrifices of those two companies are too often the yardstick by which the success of the handcart experiment is judged. They were the Willie and Martin handcart companies, consisting of nearly 1100 people. The Martin company of 576 was by far the largest of the companies, indeed nearly twice as large as most of the others, except the Willie company with 500 people. The Martin Company also had more elderly people and children than the average of the other companies. There were also two wagon trains, the Hodgett and Hunt groups, which were hauling freight to Salt Lake City but which were also hauling nearly 400 people. They were to follow the two handcart companies and give assistance as needed. In total, then, there were 1500 people all coming at once.

The two companies seemed to meet obstacles in all the early stages of their trek -- they had difficulty procuring ships in Liverpool and were delayed nearly a month. Agents in Iowa City were not prepared with enough handcarts, wagons, tents, and supplies for such a large group. The emigrants were put to the task of making more handcarts and sewing more tents as quickly as possible. The main problem was that the handcarts had to be made from wood which had not been properly seasoned, and it shrunk and warped, causing significant problems along the way. They were over two months late for optimal travel conditions. June 1 had been recommended as the late-start date from Iowa City and to leave Florence/Winter Quarters *no later* than July 15. The Willie Company left Iowa City on July 15 and the Martin Company left on July 28, with still nearly a month of travel to reach Florence. It was late August before they left Florence. One sub-captain of the Willie Company, Levi Savage, had crossed the plains several times and discouraged the attempt by suggesting they should "not cross the mountains with a mixed company of aged people, women and little children so late in the season." They considered, "What will we do here? We have no money, we have no jobs, we have no homes. We just as well go on." So, in their eagerness to gather to Zion, he was outvoted. Then he said, "Brethren and Sisters, what I have said, I know to be true; but seeing you are to go forward, I will go with you, will help you all I can, will work with you, will rest with you, will suffer with you, and if

necessary I will die with you. May God in his mercy bless and preserve us.” (Some journals suggest — and numbers seem to verify — that approximately 100 of the Willie company may have stayed near Florence until the next year, because later numbers of the Willie Company mention 400 people.)

Things went reasonably well for the first several hundred miles, although the handcars made from green wood broke down more often, requiring repairs, causing delays which extended the days, and used up precious supplies.

In mid-September, the two companies were overtaken by a group of missionaries returning from Europe. They were apparently in light carriages or perhaps on horseback and were able to travel much more quickly. They arrived in Salt Lake on Oct 4 and immediately went to tell Brigham Young of the two companies still on the plains. He was absolutely stunned! He had apparently known of the companies, but considering the lateness of the season, had supposed that they would spend the winter near Winter Quarters or somewhere nearby in Nebraska. Indeed the last resupply wagons headed for Ft. Laramie and Ft. Bridger had turned around and returned to the valley. The next day (Oct. 5) at general conference was mounted the heroic effort to rescue the two handcart companies who were somewhere on the high plains of Wyoming with winter fast approaching. On Oct 7 the first wagon train of 22 wagons, under the direction of George D. Grant, left Salt Lake. There were eventually to be over 200 wagons which left the valley loaded with supplies for the rescue effort. Several of the rescuers were those same missionaries who had just returned to the valley. But some of the emigrants had been their converts and they were understandably anxious about their condition. The rescuers really had no idea how far they would have to travel to reach the handcart companies: maybe to Ft. Bridger, maybe at the Green River crossing, surely no further than the Sandy, impossible to be any further than South Pass! They sent a scouting party of 4 people ahead to find the belated handcart companies.

It should be noted that the two companies were assured that assistance would be sent back from Salt Lake City, because of the missionaries passing them. However, they did not expect such assistance until they got to South Pass. When their anticipated supplies were not at Ft. Laramie they had to reduce rations to make their food last as long as possible. By Oct 1, the Willie Company had reached Fort Laramie and they were traveling 16-20 miles a day. Oct 10 they crossed the Platte River at Fort Caspar (present day Casper, Wyoming). A few years earlier, Brigham Young had recognized the value of having a ferry at that point to ferry people and wagons across the river. It was quite a profitable enterprise and very serviceable (In addition to the Mormons, hundreds of others bound for Oregon and California also used the same route, and paid a toll of money or foodstuffs to be ferried across.) But then a French-Canadian by the name of Richard (pronounced Reshaw) recognized the profit potential, and built a bridge across the river, thereby running the ferry out of business. The first bridge washed away in a spring flood so he built a larger one which was really a marvel in its day. It was about 16 feet wide (wide enough for two wagons to pass) and nearly 1000' long. But it was a toll bridge. He charged \$5 per wagon and \$4 per hundred head of livestock. The handcart companies never had the money to pay the toll so they went about 5 miles upstream and waded across the river. By Oct 14 the Willie company had reached Independence Rock, one of the chief landmarks of the trail, the “Register of the Desert”. This was recognized as approximately half way for immigrants going to Oregon or California and if they reached it by July 4 they were on schedule to reach their

destination before winter set in. Chimney Rock in western Nebraska was the half-way point for the Mormon pioneers.

On Sunday, October 19, the first snowstorm hit! The Willie Company was at the ice slough, still approximately 50 miles from South Pass, where they would cross the continental divide. I'll now include a few journal entries of their experiences. These are from John Chislett:

John Chislett

As we were resting for a short time at noon a light wagon was driven into our camp from the west. Its occupants were Joseph A. Young and Stephen Taylor. They informed us that a train of supplies was on the way, and we might expect to meet it in a day or two. More welcome messengers never came from the courts of glory than these two young men were to us. They lost no time after encouraging us all they could to press forward, but sped on further east to convey their glad news to Edward Martin and the fifth handcart company who left Florence about two weeks after us, and who it was feared were even worse off than we were. As they went from our view, many a hearty 'God bless you' followed them.

We pursued our journey with renewed hope and after untold toil and fatigue, doubling teams frequently, going back to fetch up the stragglers, and encouraging those who had dropped by the way to a little more exertion in view of our soon-to-be improved condition, we finally, late at night, got all to camp - the wind howling frightfully and the snow eddying around us in fitful gusts. But we had found a good camp among the willows [at the 6th crossing of the Sweetwater], and after warming and partially drying ourselves before good fires, we ate our scanty fare, paid our usual devotions to the Deity and retired to rest with hopes of coming aid.

The morning before the storm, or rather, the morning of the day on which it came, we issued the last ration of flour. On this fatal morning, therefore, we had none to issue. We had, however, a barrel or two of hard bread which Captain Willie had procured at Fort Laramie in view of our destitution. This was equally and fairly divided among all the company. Two of our poor broken-down cattle were killed and their carcasses issued for beef. With this we were informed that we would have to subsist until the coming supplies reached us — All that now remained in our commissary were a few pounds each of sugar and dried apples, about a quarter of a sack of rice and a small quantity (possibly 20 or 25 lbs.) of hard bread. These few scanty supplies were on this memorable morning turned over to me by Captain Willie, with strict injunctions to distribute them only to the sick and to mothers for their hungry children, and even to them in as sparing a manner as possible. It was an unenviable place to occupy, a hard duty to perform; but I acted to the best of my ability, using all the discretion I could.

Monday Oct. 20

Being surrounded by snow a foot deep, out of provisions, many of our people sick, and our cattle dying, it was decided that we should remain in our present camp until the supply train reached us. It was also resolved in council that Captain Willie with one man should go in search of the supply train and apprise its leader of our condition, and hasten

him to our help. When this was done we settled down and made our camp as comfortable as we could. As Captain Willie and his companion [Joseph Elder] left for the West, many a heart was lifted in prayer for their success and speedy return. They were absent three days—three days which I shall never forget. The scanty allowance of hard bread and poor beef, distributed as described, was mostly consumed the first day by the hungry, ravenous, famished souls.

We killed more cattle and issued the meat; but, eating it without bread did not satisfy hunger, and to those who were suffering from dysentery it did more harm than good. This terrible disease increased rapidly amongst us during these three days, and several died from exhaustion. Before we renewed our journey the camp became so offensive and filthy that words would fail to describe its condition, and even common decency forbids the attempt. Suffice it to say that all the disgusting scenes which the reader might imagine would certainly not equal the terrible reality. It was enough to make the heavens weep. The recollection of it unmans me even now - those three days! During that time I visited the sick, the widows whose husbands died in serving them, and the aged who could not help themselves, to know for myself where to dispense the few articles that had been placed in my charge for distribution. Such craving hunger I never saw before, and may God in his mercy spare me the sight again.

The snow storm also hit the rescue party, nine miles east of South Pass on Willow Creek. Not realizing the desperate circumstances of the two handcart companies, they pulled off the trail down into a willow area (approximately a mile) to wait out the storm. One of the party, Harvey Cluff, had an inspiration that he should go back up to the main trail and leave a sign that they had turned off and were down in the willow area. In late evening, soon after he returned to camp, Captain Willie and his companion rode up and told the rescue group of the dire condition of the handcart company. If Cluff had not followed the premonition to go put up the sign, Willie and Elder very likely would have missed them and perhaps gone on to their own death. Needless to say, very early the next morning the rescue company hooked up their teams and were again on their way.

Tues Oct 21. (Chislett)

On the evening of the third day after Captain Willie's departure, just as the sun was sinking beautifully behind the distant hills, on an eminence immediately west of our camp several covered wagons, each drawn by four horses, were seen coming towards us. The news ran through the camp like wildfire, and all who were able to leave their beds turned out enmasse to see them. A few minutes brought them sufficiently near to reveal our faithful captain slightly in advance of the train. Shouts of joy rent the air; strong men wept till tears ran freely down their furrowed and sun-burnt cheeks, and little children partook of the joy which some of them hardly understood, and fairly danced around with gladness. Restraint was set aside in the general rejoicing, and as the brethren entered our camp the sisters fell upon them and deluged them with kisses. The brethren were so overcome that they could not for some time utter a word, but in choking silence, repressed all demonstration of those emotions that evidently mastered them. Soon, however, feeling was somewhat abated, and such a shaking of hands, such words of welcome, and such invocation of God's blessing have seldom been witnessed. I was

installed as regular commissary to the camp. The brethren turned over to me flour, potatoes, onions, and a limited supply of warm clothing for both sexes, besides quilts, blankets, buffalo robes, woolen socks, etc. I first distributed the necessary provisions, and after supper divided the clothing, bedding, etc., where it was most needed. That evening, for the first time in quite a period, the songs of Zion were to be heard in the camp, and peals of laughter issued from the little knots of people as they chatted around the fires. The change seemed almost miraculous, so sudden was it from grave to gay, from sorrow to gladness, from mourning to rejoicing. With the cravings of hunger satisfied, and with hearts filled with gratitude to God and our good brethren, we all united in prayer, and then retired to rest.

Thursday, Oct 23

A few days of bright freezing weather were succeeded by another snow storm. The day we crossed the Rocky Ridge it was snowing a little—the wind hard from the northwest—and blowing so keenly that it almost pierced us through. We had to wrap ourselves closely in blankets, quilts, or whatever else we could get, to keep from freezing. Captain Willie still attended to the details of the company's traveling, and this day he appointed me to bring up the rear. My duty was to stay behind everything and see that nobody was left along the road. I had to bury a man who had died in my hundred, and I finished doing so after the company had started. In about half an hour, I set out on foot alone to do my duty as rear-guard to the camp. The ascent of the ridge commenced soon after leaving camp, and I had not gone far up it before I overtook a cart that the folks could not pull through the snow, here about knee-deep. I helped them along, and we soon overtook another. By all hands getting to one cart we could travel; so we moved one of the carts a few rods, and then went back and brought up the other. After moving in this way for a while, we overtook other carts at different points of the hill, until we had six carts, not one of which could be moved by the parties owning it. I put our collective strength to three carts at a time, took them a short distance, and then brought up the other three. Thus by traveling over the hill three times—twice forward and once back—I succeeded after hours of toil in bringing my little company to the summit. The six carts were then trotted on gaily down hill, the intense cold stirring us to action. One or two parties who were with these carts gave up entirely, and but for the fact that we overtook one of our ox-teams that had been detained on the road, they must have perished on that Rocky Ridge. One old man, named James (a farm-laborer from Gloucestershire), who had a large family, and who had worked very hard all the way, I found sitting by the roadside unable to pull his cart any farther, I could not get him into the wagon, as it was already overcrowded. He had a shotgun which he had brought from England, and which had been a great blessing to him and his family, for he was a good shot, and often had a mess of sage hens or rabbits for his family. I took the gun from the cart, put a small bundle on the end of it, placed it on his shoulder, and started him out with his little boy, twelve years old. His wife and two daughters older than the boy took the cart along finely after reaching the summit.” [As mentioned previously, there were a few wagons with each handcart company to haul the heavier items. The Willie Company had five wagons and the Martin company had seven.]

We traveled along with the ox-team and overtook others, all so laden with the sick and helpless that they moved very slowly. The oxen had almost given out [because of pulling through the snow, and lack of forage]. Some of our folks with carts went ahead of the teams, for where the roads were good they could out travel oxen; but we constantly overtook some stragglers, some with carts, some without, who had been unable to keep pace with the body of the company. We struggled along in this weary way until after dark, and by this time our "rear" numbered 3 wagons, 8 handcarts, and nearly 40 persons. With the wagons were Mellen Atwood, Levi Savage, and William Woodward, captains of hundreds, faithful men who had worked hard all the way.

We finally came to a stream of water [Strawberry Creek] which was frozen over. We could not see where the company had crossed. If at the point where we struck the creek, then it had frozen over since they passed it. We started one team to cross, but the oxen broke through the ice and would not go over. No amount of shouting and whipping could induce them to stir an inch. We were afraid to try the other teams, for even should they cross we could not leave the one in the creek and go on. There was no wood in the vicinity, so we could make no fire, and were uncertain what to do. We did not know the distance to the camp, but supposed it to be 3 or 4 miles. After consulting about it, we resolved that some one should go on foot to the camp to inform the captain of our situation. I was selected to perform the duty, and I set out with all speed. In crossing the creek I slipped through the ice and got my feet wet, my boots being nearly worn out. I had not gone far when I saw some one sitting by the roadside. I stopped to see who it was, and discovered the old man James and his little boy. The poor old man was completely worn out.

I got him to his feet and had him lean on me, and he walked a little distance, not very far. I partly dragged, partly carried him a short distance farther, but he was quite helpless, and my strength failed me. Being obliged to leave him to go forward on my own errand, I put down a quilt I had wrapped around me, rolled him in it, and told the little boy to walk up and down by his father, and on no account to sit down, or he would be frozen to death. I told him to watch for teams that would come back, and to hail them when they came. This done I again set out for the camp, running nearly all the way and frequently falling down, for there were many obstructions and holes in the road. My boots were frozen stiff, so that I had not the free use of my feet, and it was only by rapid motion that I kept them from being badly frozen. As it was, both were nipped.

After some time I came in sight of the camp fires, which encouraged me. As I neared the camp I frequently overtook stragglers on foot, all pressing forward slowly. I stopped to speak to each one, cautioning them all against resting, as they would surely freeze to death. Finally, about 11 p.m., I reached the camp almost exhausted. I had exerted myself very much during the day in bringing the rear carts up the ridge and had not eaten anything since breakfast. I reported to Captains Willie and Kimball the situation of the folks behind. They immediately got up some horses, and the boys from the Valley started back about midnight to help the ox teams in. The night was very severe and many of the emigrants were frozen. It was 5 a.m. before the last team reached the camp. [A full 24 hours after leaving the previous camp.]

I told my companions about the old man James and his little boy. They found the little fellow keeping faithful watch over his father, who lay sleeping in my quilt just as I left him. They lifted him into a wagon, still alive, but in a sort of stupor. He died before morning. His last words were an enquiry as to the safety of his shotgun.

There were 13 who died that night at Rock Creek. Two of them were Bodil Mortensen and her little “brother” Jens Neilsen. Bodil had been sent out in the snow to find some firewood. All that was available was sage brush. They found her later, frozen against a handcart wheel, still clutching an armload of sagebrush—faithful to the end. Two others died from the exertion of digging the grave, so 15 were buried at that site—Rock Creek Hollow.

[First half of last verse, *Come, Come, Ye Saints*/also last half of last verse, *Oh My Father*.] After comparatively fewer trials, the Willie Company finally reached Salt Lake City on Sunday, November 9. (Interestingly, as we shall see later, the same day that the Martin Company left the Cove) The number of people in the company who died was 67.

Thursday Oct 9, the Martin Company reached Fort Laramie. They bought what supplies they could, but they were comparatively expensive, so in reality, very little was able to be purchased considering the size of their company.

Sunday, Oct 19, they undertook the last crossing of the Platte River near Ft. Caspar and the storm hit them. I’ll quote some of the Journal entries of John Jaques and Patience Loader for particulars of their experiences:

Jaques

That was a bitter cold day. Winter came on all at once, and that was the first day of it. The river was wide, the current strong, the water exceedingly cold and up to the wagon beds in the deepest parts, and the bed of the river was covered with cobble stones. Some of the men carried some of the women over on their backs or in their arms, but others of the women tied up their skirts and waded through, like heroines as they were, and as they had done through many other rivers and creeks. The company was barely over when snow, hail and sleet began to fall, accompanied by piercing north wind, and camp was made on this side of the river.

Loader

We had to travel in our wet clothes until we got to camp. Our clothing was nearly frozen on us and when we got to camp we had very little dry clothing to put on. We had to make the best of our poor circumstances and put our trust in God that we take no harm. It was too late to go for wood and water. The wood was too far away. That night the ground was frozen so hard we were unable to drive any tent pins in and the tent was wet. When we had taken the tent down in the morning it was somewhat frozen and it hadn’t thawed all day, so we stretched it open the best we could and got in under it until morning. The bugle sounded early in the morning for we had to travel seven miles before we could get any wood to make a fire.

After we got to camp [the next camp the following day], we found we still had to go a long way for wood. So, my sister, Maria, and myself went with the brethren to get the wood. We traveled in the snow knee deep for nearly a [half] mile to the cedars. We found nothing but green cedar, as all the dry wood on the ground was covered with snow. I asked one of the brethren to cut me down a shoulder stick, so he kindly gave us quite a large, heavy log. My sister took one end on her shoulder and I raised the other end to my shoulder and we started back to camp. We had not gone far when we both fell down with our load. The deep snow made it very hard for us to get back to camp with the wood, but after much hard work we got there. My mother and sisters were anxiously waiting our return, for they were both hungry and cold. As soon as I could get some wood chopped, I tried to make a fire and cook a little broth, as I had an old beef's head. I was always on the lookout for anything I could get to eat, not only for myself but for the rest of the family. We removed the skin from the beefhead and chopped it up the best we could, put it into the pot with some snow and boiled it for a long time. About four o'clock in the afternoon we were able to have some broth. I cannot say that it tasted very good. It was flavored both with sage brush and smoke from our green cedar fire. But after it was cooked we felt very thankful to have that much. It would have tasted better if we had had a little pepper and salt, but that was a luxury we had been deprived of for a long time. This was our dinner and supper together. After we had eaten what we could the remainder was left for the next day. I put the fire in the bake oven and took it into the tent and we all sat around it to keep as warm as we could.

Because of the snow, the condition of the people and the animals, and the availability of firewood, it was decided to camp at this place for a few days to rest. This became known as the "Nine day camp" and is near Mineral Springs, which was very bad water. Meanwhile, the light wagon driven by Young and Taylor had reached Devil's Gate but they had been told that if they had not yet met the Martin Company by the time they reached there, to wait until the wagons caught up with them. So they were there probably five days. When the wagons arrived, it was determined to send three riders back on the trail to see if they could find the Martin Company. It took them a day and a half to ride the 55 miles to where they found the stranded immigrants.

Tuesday Oct 28. (Jaques)

The 28th of October was a red letter day to this handcart expedition. On that memorable day Joseph A. Young, Daniel W. Jones and Abel Garr galloped unexpectedly into camp amid the cheers and tears and smiles and laughter of the emigrants. Those three men being the most advanced relief company from Salt Lake, brought the glad word that assistance, provisions, and clothing were near, that ten wagons were waiting at Devil's Gate for the emigrants, which cheering intelligence had been previously communicated to Captain Hodgett's wagon company, in camp hard by, and first reached by the express, who after a very brief stay in the handcart company pushed on to Captain Hunt's wagon company, encamped on the Platte beyond the handcart company. The express stayed with Hunt's company for the night. All was now animation and bustle in the handcart camp, everybody was busy at once in making preparations for a renewed start in the morning. The revived spirits of the company were still exhilarated by an increased ration of flour that day.

Patience continues

We were all glad to move from this place. It seemed that if God our Father had not sent help to us that we must all have perished and died in a short time, for at that time we had only very little provisions left and at the request of Captain Martin we had come on four ounces of flour a day for each one to make the flour last as long as we could. I don't know how long we could have lived and pulled our handcarts on this small quantity of food. Our provisions would not have lasted as long as they did had all our company lived, but many of them died causing our provisions to hold out longer. I remember well poor Brother Blair. He was a fine, tall man, had been one of Queen Victoria's life guards in London. He had a wife and four children. He made a cover for his cart and put his four children on the cart. He pulled his cart alone, his wife helped by pushing behind. The poor man was so weak and worn down the he fell several times that day but still he kept his dear little children on the cart all day. This man had so much love for his wife and children that instead of eating his morsel of food himself he would give it to his children. Poor man, he pulled the cart as long as he could, then he died and his wife and children had to do the best they could without his help. The children got frozen. Some parts of their bodies were all sores, but they got to Salt Lake City alive.

31st of October (Patience)

It was a nice, bright morning but very cold and clear. The snow was very deep in places. It was hard pulling the cart, I will say that we traveled on all day in the snow, but the weather was fine and in the middle of the day the sun was quite warm. Some time in the afternoon a strange man appeared to me as we were resting. He came and looked in my face. He said, 'Are you Patience?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'I thought it was you. Travel on, there is help for you. You will come to a good place. There is plenty.' With this he was gone. He disappeared. I looked but never saw where he went. This seemed very strange to me. I took this as some one sent to encourage us and give us strength. We traveled on and got into camp. (Greasewood Creek] There were five or six brethren with their wagons camped there. They had been and got quantities of wood and they had already made a dozen big fires for us and there was plenty of lovely water. That was a great treat to us for we had had nothing but snow water and that did not taste good as we had to melt it over the camp fire. It tasted of sage brush, and sometimes of cedar wood smoke. We felt very thankful to our brethren for making us these good fires and supplying us with wood so abundantly. I really must say I was very thankful, for since our dear father died, it had fallen on me and my sister, Maria, to get most of our wood and I thought it was good that we did not have wood to get that night after such hard pulling all day through the snow. It was nearly dark when we got to camp. It seemed good to get a pound of flour again that night. The brethren fetched out some provisions and clothing. I was thankful to get a nice warm quilted hood, which was very warm and comfortable. I also got a pair of slippers as I was nearly barefoot. We still had to pull our handcarts as there were not wagons sufficient for us to ride. Only those that were sick could ride.

A brother from the valley came to our camp. He asked if I knew of a certain family. I told the brother that there were the two children living in this company, but that the father had become discouraged and stayed at Laramie and that the mother had died. At this the poor

man broke down and said, 'She was my poor dear sister. As soon as I heard of the trouble and distress of this handcart company, I made ready to come in search of my sister and family. Where are the children?' I directed him to the wagon they were in as he wanted to take them into his wagon. He said he had fetched provisions and a feather bed and good warm blankets and quilts for his sister. I told this brother how these two poor boys had suffered severely with cold and hunger since their poor mother had died. One morning as we were getting ready to leave camp, I saw these dear boys, one eleven and the other not more than four or five years old. The older boy was crawling along on his hands and knees. His poor feet were so frozen the blood ran from them into the snow as the poor thing made his way along to the sick wagon. The other poor dear child was crying by his brother's side, and his poor little arms and hands all covered with sores from frostbite, and scarcely anything on to cover his poor little body. Many years later I heard that they were still living and doing well.

We traveled on for some few miles, then we came to the Sweetwater River and there we had to cross. [This would be near Martin's Cove. Apparently her memories were written in later years because there are some details missing, such as their arrival at the Fort at Devil's Gate and staying there two days before her next recorded events. The small Fort/trading post had been built in 1852 but was abandoned by the fall of 1856.] We thought we should have to wade as the cattle had been crossing with the wagons with the tents and what little flour we had and had broken the ice. But there were brave men there in the water, packing the women and children over on their backs. Those brethren were in the water all day. [These were the four brethren from the valley that we have heard about who pretty much carried the whole company across.] We wanted to thank them but they would not listen to my dear mother who felt in her heart to bless them for their kindness. She said, 'God bless you for taking me over this water' and they said in such an awful rough way, 'We don't want any of that. You are welcome, we have come to help you.' Mother turned to me, saying, 'What do you think of that man, Patience?' 'He is a rough fellow.' I told her, 'That is Brother Kimball, I am told. They are all good men, but I dare say they are rather rough in their manners.' But we found that they all had good, kind hearts. This poor Brother Kimball stayed so long in the water that he had to be taken out and packed to camp and he was a long time before he recovered as he was chilled through and in after life he was always afflicted with rheumatism.

After we were over the Sweetwater we had to travel some distance to a good camping place. We had a very nice camping place. In the early part of the journey and until the relief party was met, the camps were made in open situations, as a rule, with a special view to avoid, as much as possible, being surprised or ambushed by Indians. Afterward, sheltered spots were chosen, with a view to make the company as comfortable as possible in camp. Here we remained for 9 days as we had to wait until more provisions came to us. [It was actually 4 days and 5 nights — from Nov. 4 until Nov. 9th. Perhaps her memories of this event were confused with the nine day camp after they crossed the Platte River.]

(LM) Picture with me for a minute: I'm facing north from a monument erected along the trail in 1933. Behind me are rolling sagebrush hills for several miles, with the Ferris mountains perhaps

10-12 miles distant. In front of me the Sweetwater River meanders down through a grassy valley which is perhaps 15-18 miles long and 1/2 to 3/4 of a mile wide. Across the valley is a range of eroded granite hills several hundred feet high. I can't see what is beyond them - probably higher hills. The hills are sprinkled with cedar trees. About 3/4 of a mile to the east is Devil's Gate where the Sweetwater River cuts through the granite hills. It is about 400 feet deep, perhaps 60-80 feet wide and a couple of hundred yards long. Straight ahead of me is a valley perhaps a mile wide and about a mile long up into the granite hills. There are several other similar clefts in the granite mountains but this is the largest. Near the east side of the valley is a large sand dune, which was formed by the wind over the centuries. The other clefts have sand dunes as well but, again, this dune is the largest and is rather pyramid shaped from this angle. It is now covered with short brush and grass. On the west and south it slopes gradually. The east and north edges drop off more sharply. I hope the picture I have painted shows a rather pleasant place. But in a Wyoming blizzard it was anything but comfortable. Between the east side of this sand dune and the granite hill is the little valley/cove the rescuers had found while looking for firewood and where they took the Martin Company for some protection from the blizzard for the 4 days.

Soon after the Hodgett and Hunt wagon trains reached the Fort at Devil's Gate, a council meeting was held and it was determined that it was more important to save the people than to haul the freight. So the wagons were unloaded of all unnecessary provisions and the cache was left until spring to be moved into the valley. [This is another story of tremendous sacrifice. Twenty men were left to guard it, with one month's rations. Some skinny cattle were left and it was assumed that the men could survive on them with whatever else they could find. Also as the rescuers traveled west they would meet other rescue wagons and they could send one over. However, the wolves killed most of the cattle and the rescuers had to travel further than expected before they met additional wagons. Before the winter was over the men at the Fort had boiled the hides and any other rawhide they could find and the leather from harnesses to find anything to subsist on. If it had not been for Indians who came by on several occasions to help them, they probably would not have survived, but all lived. Daniel W. Jones was the leader of the group.]

Loader

The cattle had nearly all given out, both in the wagon companies and our company and a great deal of freight had to be left there until spring. We were on four ounces of flour a day nearly all the time we were in camp on the Sweetwater, but the morning we had orders to leave there, we were told to leave our handcarts. We were all very glad to leave the cart, but we had to walk for several days before we could all ride in the wagons. It seemed good to walk and not have a load to pull through the snow. We got dear mother in the wagon to ride and we girls were good and willing to walk until such time as it would be convenient for us to ride. During our 9 days stay [Nov 2nd to Nov 9th] on the Sweetwater many of the stout young men went out and got rawhide and anything they could eat. On one occasion I got a bone given me with scarcely any meat on it. I was cooking it to make a little soup for breakfast and the brethren from the Valley came and asked me to go to their camp and sing songs for them. So I left mother to see to the cooking of the bone and my sisters went with me. The brethren had cut down logs and formed seats for us all around the camp fire, but they said they had nothing to give us to eat as they themselves were short of food. Well, we sang and enjoyed ourselves for 2 or 3

hours and then we went to our tent. When we arrived there our fire was out and mother had gone to bed and my ten year old brother was also in bed. Mother said, 'I fetched the pot with the soup,' We said, 'alright mother. We stayed longer than we ought to, but the brethren did not want us to leave, but we told them we would go and sing for them another night. We were so hungry but we had nothing to eat and it makes you hungry to sing.' 'You had better not go to sing for the brethren again. I must tell you, I got so hungry that I took the bone out of your soup and picked the little meat off it and put the bone back into the pot. It seemed that I could not go to sleep without telling you, for I knew you would not find anything on the bone in the morning.' 'We told her that was all right. We felt glad that our dear mother found a little bit to eat and we all went to sleep and slept comfortable and warm until morning, not withstanding it was a terribly cold, freezing night.'

Monday, Nov 10. (Jaques)

At length, preparations having been completed for a final start from Devil's Gate and vicinity, the handcart company left the ravine. The precise date I cannot give, but I think it must have been about the 10th of November. [Actually, Nov 9th.] I cannot remember the handcarts after leaving the ravine and my impression is that none were taken from there. [As near as we understand, most of the handcarts were abandoned at Devil's Gate Fort. Probably about 10 were taken up into the Cove with supplies, and they were abandoned when the company left the Cove.] Be that as it may, by this time there was a sufficiency of wagons to take in most if not all of the baggage of the company, and to carry some of the people. It was a trying time that day in leaving the ravine. One perplexing difficulty was to determine who should ride, for many must still walk, though, so far as I recollect, and certainly for most of the company, the cart occupation was gone. There was considerable crying of women and children, and perhaps a few of the men, whom the wagons could not accommodate with a ride. One of the relief party remarked that in all the mobbings and drivings of the Mormons he had seen nothing like it. C.H. Wheelock could scarcely refrain from shedding tears, and he declared that he would willingly give his own life if that would save the lives of the emigrants. After a time a start was effected and the march was recommenced along the valley of the Sweetwater toward the setting sun. The subsequent camps in the Sweetwater country I do not remember with distinctness, except one, in a quaking asp grove in a ravine, a mile or two to the south of the road, and another one on this side of the Three Crossings of the river, among the rocks to the north of the road, and a very cold place. At the Aspen Grove camp, I have been told, sixteen corpses were interred. Several discoveries were made on the journey. The way to have a warm sleeping place was this — sweep away the ashes of the camp fire and lay your bed on the spot where the fire had been built. You would be sure to sleep warm there, if anywhere. In the morning the same spot was found to be the most available for a graver use - it was the easiest place in which to dig a grave to bury the night's dead. Thus, in this severe winter traveling and camping economy, the earth served three separate, distinct and important purposes.

At evening Nov 11, (Jaques)

Just before sunset, a strange quiver like a thrill of hopefulness was communicated down the wavering line. Coming toward the train was a lone man leading two horses with great pieces of buffalo hung on each side of the animals.

It was Brother Ephraim Hanks and he had brought fresh buffalo meat that everyone set to cooking at his own fire. But more than meat, he brought them hope, the advance scouts of another rescue party were just a day away, and behind them a day or two further down the road were food and clothing and a chance to rest.

It was like this, he was saying, his large hands spread out to the fire. "No matter what I did or where I went I couldn't forget you folks. I kept wondering how you were getting on, what with the early snows and everything.

One night I was down near Utah Lake where I had gone fishing...I was after a load that time, not just a string for supper. Well, I was staying at Gerney Brown's place, and though the bed was comfortable enough, I could not sleep. Finally I did drop off, but no sooner than I'd done it I was waked up again. Somebody said, 'Ephraim!' That's my name, so I said, Yes?

But it wasn't Gerney that was speaking. No one was in the room. Then my name was spoken again. My heart was like to pound right out of my body, but I couldn't see anything. Third time the voice said 'Ephraim,' seemed like it was sort of sharp and out of patience.

I said, Yes, yes. Is there something I can do for you?

Then the voice said clear as if I'd been face to face with a neighbor, 'Ephraim, that handcart company is in trouble, will you help them out?'

I got right out of bed. Gerney, he got my team hooked up and Sister Brown fixed me a bite and some food to carry along. Got to Salt Lake about daylight, and what should happen but I met a messenger from brother Brigham, on his way to fetch me...Seems since I was a boy that the Lord has always been willing to keep in touch with me if I'd keep in touch with Him...

This is the way I have it figured...The Lord isn't going to fool around with any gifts just to make a show to impress folks. I don't hold for goings on in meeting like I've seen in some sects. I do know when a body needs the Lord — needs something the Lord can do for him so bad that there isn't any other way out — that is the time that the Lord will show His face or His voice and there'll be healings and tongues and prophesy and all the rest.

For a time no one spoke, then Brother Hanks said in a different, more jovial voice, Yes, the Lord does strange things, but I noticed he always counts on human folks to help Him out. Now I've traveled this road time and time again and at this time of year I wouldn't ever have expected to meet a buffalo. But you folks needed meat and he was put in my

way. Now, if I hadn't been there, or if I couldn't have brought him down—well, the way I figure it, the Lord wouldn't have bothered to have him there, that's all...

Jaques

The next morning everyone in camp was talking about Brother Hanks, about his prayers for the sick, but even more the operations he had performed with his hunting knife. Many of the Saints were carrying frozen limbs which were endangering their lives. Brother Hanks anointed these folks and prayed that the amputation could be done without pain. Then when he took out his great hunting knife, held it to the fire to cleanse it, and took off the dying limb with its keen blade; many with tears in their eyes said they hadn't felt a thing.

November 12 - 20, 1856. (Jaques)

As the emigrants proceeded on their terrible journey, there was no appreciable mitigation of the piercing wintry cold, but its intensity rather increased. The rocky ridge and south pass were crossed on the 18th of November, a bitterly cold day. The snow fell fast and the wind blew piercingly from the north. For several days the company had been meeting more relief teams, which had been urged on by the Joseph A. Young express, [Joseph Young had been sent back to Salt Lake on horseback with information regarding the companies.] and as the company was crossing the South Pass, there was a sufficiency of wagons for the first time, to carry all the people and thenceforth the traveling was more rapid. But it was much colder to ride in a wagon than to follow afoot, and a few of the sturdier of the emigrants preferred to hold onto the wagons and walk behind them.

Patience verifies the above

A good brother, who owned a wagon told us we could sleep in it. He would make a hole in the snow and make his bed there. He thought we would be warmer sleeping in the wagon. We made our bed there but we only had one old quilt to lie on and in the night I woke up and called to mother. 'I am freezing.' The side I had been laying on was so benumbed with cold that mother got up and helped me out of the wagon. [It is the same idea currently with bridges and overpasses of freeways becoming icy and frozen first. The cold can attack from both above and below.] There were some big fires burning in several places in the camp and lots of the sisters were sitting and sleeping near the fire to keep warm. So I went to a fire and stayed there the remainder of the night. In the morning we traveled on again as usual. One great blessing: we had more food to eat. We got our pound of flour a day and sometimes a little meat and very soon we were all able to ride instead of walking, and we could stay in the wagons at nights. After we baked our bread, we put the hot coals in our bake oven and took it in the wagon and that made it quite comfortable and warm for us to sleep.

I can remember how kind the brethren were to us poor, distressed miserable looking creatures. I think we must have looked a very deplorable set of human beings to them when they first met us. What brave men they must have been to start out from Salt Lake City in the middle of winter in search of us poor folks. They did not know how far they would have to travel in the snow before they would find us. [It was reported that snow drifts at the top of Big Mountain were 20 feet deep. People from the valley came out and

shoveled and tromped down the snow so the rescuers could get through with the handcart people.]

The 413 survivors of the Martin company reached Salt Lake on Sunday, November 30. The Hodgett and Hunt wagon companies continued to straggle in until December 15. (Last half-verse of Come, Come Ye Saints -- "But if our lives are spared again . . .")

But for some, even after reaching Salt Lake City, all was not yet well:

William Palmer

Such is the story of a woman from the Martin Handcart Company who, in spite of crushing handicaps, carried on the highest mission of womanhood. Her name was Ellen Pusell [Pucell] Unthank, but she was called 'Nellie' by her friends and kinsfolk.

Nellie, when nine years of age, left her home in England to come with her parents to Utah where they could worship with others of their faith and assist in building a new Zion. Nellie's parents were among those who died and were laid to rest in snow banks. But those who died and were laid to rest in the snow perhaps were most fortunate of all. They were through with their suffering and had gone to their reward.

The rescue wagons gathered up the sufferers and took them to Salt Lake City where the Church saw to it that they were cared for.

Poor little Nellie, nothing could be done to save her feet. When they took off her shoes and stockings the skin with pieces of flesh came off too. The doctor said her feet must be taken off to save her life. They strapped her to a board and without an anesthetic the surgery was performed. With a butcher knife and a carpenter's saw they cut the blackened limbs off. It was poor surgery, too, for the flesh was not brought over to cushion the ends. The bones stuck out through the ends of the stumps and in pain she waddled through the rest of her life on her knees.

In poverty and pain she reared a family of six children but never asked for favors of pity or charity because of her tragic handicap. William was a poor man and unable to provide fully for his family; so Nellie did all she could for herself. She took in washings. Kneeling by a tub on the floor she scrubbed the clothes to whiteness on the washboard. She knit stockings to sell, carded wool and crocheted table pieces. She seldom accepted gifts or charity from friends or neighbors unless she could do a bundle of darning or mending to repay the kindness.

The bishop and the Relief Society sometimes gave a little assistance which Nellie gratefully accepted, but once a year, to even the score, she took her children and cleaned the meeting-house. The boy carried water, the girls washed the windows and Nellie, on her knees, scrubbed the floor.

"This heroic woman gave to William Unthank, a posterity to perpetuate his name in the earth and he gave her a home and a family to give comfort and care in her old age." Nellie Pucell Unthank is the great grandmother of Sister Louise Meldrum in my home

Ward. [Others of her descendants visited Martin's Cove in the Summer of 2002 and said that in her memory, members of the family still go and clean a Stake Center in Cedar City once a year.]

In memory I recall her wrinkled forehead, her soft dark eyes that told of toil and pain and suffering, and the deep grooves that encircled the corners of her strong mouth. But in that face there was no trace of bitterness or railings at her fate. There was patience and serenity for in spite of her handicap she had earned her keep and justified her existence. She had given more to family, friends and to the world than she had received." Because of her sacrifice and stalwartness there is a memorial statue of Nellie at Southern Utah University

John Jaques

In the beginning of the journey the company paid more or less regard to the observance of Sunday, but in the latter part, as the hardships increased, there did not seem to be any Sundays. I can recollect none, excepting that on which the company arrived in this city.

Worn down by the labors and fatigues of the journey, and pinched by hunger and cold, the manliness of tall, healthy, strong men would gradually disappear, until they would grow fretful, peevish, childish and puerile, acting sometimes as if they were scarcely accountable beings. In the progress of the journey it was not difficult to tell who was going to die within two or three weeks. The gaunt form, hollow eyes, and sunken countenance, discolored to a weather-beaten sallow, with the gradual weakening of the mental faculties, plainly foreboded the coming and not far distant dissolution, though the faces and limbs of some were swelled or bloated. Many whose lives were saved by their arrival in the valley, would have died as sure as fate if they had been subjected to two or three weeks more exposure, fatigue and privation. Nothing could have saved them.

I, who for weeks together stood face to face with death in these repulsive aspects ..., who witnessed his victories daily under heart-rending circumstances, who saw those near and dear to me succumb to his attacks under such circumstances and fall helpless victims of his all-conquering power, and who at that time would scarcely have cared the toss of a button to avoid a decisive wrestle with the grim monster myself.

The meeting of the emigrants with relatives, acquaintances and friends was not very joyous. Indeed it was very solemnly impressive. Some were so affected that they could scarcely speak, but would look at each other until the sympathetic tears would force their unforbidden way. In a short time, however, the emigrants were taken into the homes of their friends and made as comfortable as circumstances would permit them to be while they thawed the frost out of their limbs and recruited their health and strength. The new comers would eat and eat until they were literally and perfectly ashamed of themselves, and then retire from the table hungry. It took a long time for an emigrant to fill up and reduce his appetite to its normal condition. It was a serious affliction upon those who had it, as well as upon their hospitable friends.

(LM) Some have asked, “Why didn’t the Lord protect them?” The answer is, “He did protect them!” Only He knows why He did not forestall the icy fingers of an early winter that fall of 1856. We wonder that 67 of the Willie company, and 145 of the Martin company perished on the way. But the greater wonder is that any of them survived! Even today with the warm clothing and supplies that winter sportsters take into the mountains while skiing or snowmobiling, if they do not return at night we mount extensive rescue efforts because we are concerned that they will not survive in the wilds more than a night or two. But here were hundreds of these people, nearly starved, most wearing little but rags, some with no shoes, with temperatures down to 15 or 20 below zero -- for weeks, even months. How great the wonder that any survived! The Lord did protect them! Some of the great men and women of the Church have been and are the descendants of those who survived the tremendous ordeal of the Willie and Martin handcart companies. How grateful we must be for their sacrifices. In our generation we can stand taller, reach higher, and see farther than any previous generation on earth, because we stand upon the stooped shoulders and bedraggled figures of those faithful Saints who only were trying to reach their Zion of Peace and Rest, and to participate in the sealing ordinances restored by Elijah. May we ever be grateful for their sacrifices.

1 References:

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