

## WILLIE HANDCART HISTORIC SITES INFORMATION

The trails the immigrants followed to Oregon, California, Utah Territory, and also the Pony Express riders came to the Sweetwater River about 55 miles west of Fort Caspar (now Casper, Wyoming). From the point where they first encountered the Sweetwater near Independence Rock, as they proceeded up the valley they crossed the river four more times and then as they again crossed at one particular location it became known as the Sixth Crossing of the Sweetwater.

Somewhere along the Sweetwater River within a few miles of the Sixth Crossing, the Willie handcart immigrants bogged down because of a snow storm on Oct. 19, 1856. They were rescued a few days later by men and wagons sent from the Salt Lake Valley by Brigham Young.

Due to a combination of circumstances, the immigrants comprising the last two handcart companies to cross the plains in 1856 started on the journey across the plains much too late to arrive in Salt Lake City before winter began. They were almost two months behind schedule. One of the companies was led by Captain James Willie and the other by Captain Edward Martin. The Willie Company, which was about two weeks ahead of the Martin Company, had difficulties right from the start of their journey. They had trouble with the handcarts made from green wood, buffalo stampedes, shortage of food, and finally with early unexpected winter storms. The Willie Company arrived at Fort Laramie about October 1, the time that they should have been arriving in Salt Lake.

They struggled on, knowing that they would run out of supplies still hundreds of miles from the Salt Lake Valley. However, because some missionaries returning from England had passed them in Nebraska and promised to send back supplies, they knew that a rescue would be organized and they believed that they would meet a relief party from Salt Lake somewhere near South Pass.

The missionaries had arrived in Salt Lake on Oct 4 and went immediately to inform Brigham Young of the two handcart companies still on the plains. He was stunned! Although he may have known of the two late shiploads of immigrants, he thought they would winter at Winter Quarters or nearby, certainly not begin the journey so late in the season. The next two days were General Conference and Brigham's message, and that of others, was to go save the handcart people. On Oct 7 22 wagons loaded with supplies started on the rescue effort. When they hadn't met the Willie Company by the time they reached the Green River crossing, they sent an express party of four men ahead in a lightly loaded wagon to see if they could find them.

Meanwhile, back at the Willie Company, many days during the early part of October began or ended with the death of one or more of their company. They made it to Fifth Crossing of the Sweetwater on October 18, camped for the night and prepared for the next day's journey, which was known as one of the more difficult sections along the trail because it was over sixteen miles long and lacked good animal forage and water along the way.

The company was exhausted, virtually out of food, and was almost unable to continue on. To make matters worse, they were hit by the season's first major winter storm near Ice Slough, about ten miles east of Sixth Crossing. The following journal entry describes the day:

.....Sunday, October 19, 1856 Willie Company Journal, William Woodward:

*Rolled on in the morning, weather very cold. Some of the children were crying with cold. Passed Ice Springs; just after we were passed the springs. A snow storm came on, which lasted for about half an hour. The company rolled on again and soon was met by Cyrus H. Wheelock and Joseph A. Young and two other brethren from the valley, bringing us the information that supplies were near at hand. The camp halted, a meeting was called. Brother Wheelock informed us of the liberality of the Saints in the Valley, of Brother Brigham Young's kindheartedness in speaking in behalf the handcart companies now on the plains, and of himself fitting up ten teams and wagons and supplying with flour, etc., and others in proportion. During the day Eliza Smith, from Eldersfield, Worcestershire, England, aged 40 years, died; also John Knockles, from Norwich, Norfolk, England, died; also Daniel Osborn, from Norwich, Norfolk, England, died; also Rasmus Hansen, from Falster, Denmark, died. Traveled through the day about 16 miles; camped at dark on the banks of the Sweetwater.*

They had begun the day with the death of a small child and ended the day with the death of four more members of the company. The good news of the day was the encounter with the advance party from the relief company. This provided hope and encouragement for the company and they continued their journey.

On the morning of 20 of October, Captain Willie and Joseph Elder left the camp and headed west on saddle horses or mules in search of the main rescue group. They expected to find them within about 10-12 miles, but the rescuers weren't where they had expected. Their only choice was to continue westward in search of the relief camp. They found them on Willow or Rock Creek, about 27 miles west of Sixth Crossing.

Because the relief party had pulled over a mile off the trail to have protection from the storm among some willows, a member of the party [Harvey Cluff] had walked back and put up a sign on the main trail so that anyone who might be looking for them would be able to find them. In the dark and in the snow storm, Captain Willie and Brother Elder found the sign and were then able to find the camp of the relief party.

Captain Willie and Brother Elder told them of the desperate circumstances of the handcart company and early the next morning, October 21, they led a number of wagons on the return trip back across Rocky Ridge to where the Willie Company was bogged down in the snow. They arrived just at sunset and got their first view of the Willie camp from a low hill about a mile to the west. It was with great gladness the struggling Willie Company greeted the rescue wagons led by Captain George D. Grant and W. H. Kimball.

John Chislett, a member of the Willie Company, wrote of the arrival:

*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 toward us. The news ran through the camp like wild fire, and all who were able to leave their beds turned en masse to see them. Shouts of joy rent the air; strong men wept till tears ran freely down their furrowed and sunburnt 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 the brethren with kisses.*

One of the rescuers, Daniel W. Jones, described the condition of the Willie camp in these words: "Upon arriving we found them in a condition that would stir the feelings of the hardest heart. They were in a poor place, the storm having caught them where fuel was scarce. They were out of provisions and really freezing and starving to death."

Aid was delivered to the company but just as important, the relief party brought hope and encouragement. Some of the rescuers and wagons stayed with the Willie Company, the others continued East to find the Martin Company. The Willie Company, now under the leadership of W. H. Kimball, left camp on the morning of October 22nd and continued the journey to Salt Lake. Their difficulties weren't over, however. Their next challenge was going over Rocky Ridge which is about a 3 mile long hill with layers of rocks at the top over which they had to traverse. Because of their weakness, the length of the hill, the deep snow and the wind, it took some of them 27 hours to get to the next camp at Rock Creek/Willow Creek. Thirteen of the Company died as a result of that experience, and while digging a grave for them, two other men died. (Names of the 15 and some biographical information included at the end.)

John Chislett was appointed to go around the camp and collect the dead. He took with him two young men to assist in this sad task. They collected thirteen corpses of all ages and both sexes, all stiffly frozen. They had a large square hole dug in which they buried these thirteen people. They covered them with willows and then with the earth, and some shale rocks from a nearby hill. When they buried those thirteen people, according to John Chislett, some of their relatives refused to attend the services. They manifested an utter indifference about it. Brother Chislett states further, "The numbness and cold in their physical natures seem to have reached the soul and to have crushed out natural feeling and affection. Had I not myself witnessed it, I could not have believed that suffering would have produced such terrible results."

Another account states the following:

By October 24, they crossed the Windriver Pass [Rocky Ridge] and were camped at Rock Creek in the shelter of a hill. During the night of severe cold, thirteen of the company perished. The men were weak but all helped to dig a shallow grave, round in shape, and the bodies were placed in it with feet to the center. They were laid away in the clothing they wore. One child told of her father holding her out to see her playmate lying among the dead as they were placed in the grave. Slender willow boughs were placed over them, then dirt, and finally thin shale was taken

from the hill to cover the spot to keep the wolves from disturbing the remains. Two men who helped dig the large grave perished that night and were placed in another grave nearby the side of the other.

Between the Fifth Crossing of the Sweetwater and South Pass, a total of 29 members of the Willie Company died in just over a week. It is hoped that this information will help everyone to understand why it is felt that the area around Sixth Crossing, Rocky Ridge, and Rock Creek are respected as hallowed ground. Among the following, the notes about Bodil Mortensen and James Kirkwood are particularly poignant, and their stories are retold often.

### **Those of the Willie Company who are buried at Rock Creek Hollow**

**James Gibb, age 67.** He and his wife were some of the first converts in Edinburgh, Scotland. They left Scotland to come to Salt Lake. He was buried at Rock Creek on her 53 birthday.

**Chesterton Gillman, age 66,** from England. A coal miner and a sailor. Father of eleven children. He and his wife joined the Church against the wishes of their children and emigrated to Salt Lake City.

**William James, age 46** from England. He was a farmer and a laborer. It is said that he was not very robust. Upon his death at Rock Creek, he left a wife and seven young children to fend for themselves.

**Elizath Bailey, age 52** from England. Traveling with her husband and a child. Her husband died shortly before they reached Salt Lake, leaving their child an orphan.

**Samuel Gadd, age 10** from England. He was preceded in death at Rock Creek by his father and younger brother who died before they reached Rock Creek.

**Lars Wandelin, age 60** from Sweden. He was a watchmaker. He joined the Church in Denmark. He did not want to be buried with his treasured silver watch, so it was taken and turned over to the Perpetual Emigration Fund to assist other in immigrating to America.

**Ella Nielsen, age 22** from Denmark. Traveling with the Wickland family, she was exhausted somewhere near Radium Springs, was wrapped in a buffalo robe and left along the trail. Brother Wickland returned and brought her to Rock Creek. The next morning she had died. Before they could move her to the common grave at Rock Creek, she needed to be cut from the frozen ground.

**Jens Nielsen, age 6** from Denmark. His father's feet were frozen and he had to be pulled by his wife in their handcart. This left young Jens to the stewardship of Bodil Mortensen, who insured that he arrived at Rock Creek safely, but the extreme exposure claimed his life.

**Bodil Mortensen, age 9** from Denmark. She was traveling with the Nielsen family and taking care of the smaller children. She was to take care of them over Rocky Ridge in the forced march.

She likewise struggled for twenty-seven hours, not understanding the language, being in a foreign country, not having any family, but going to Salt Lake City to be with her sister, Margaret, in Zion. When she got to Rock Creek in the early hours of the morning of October 24, 1856, she fulfilled her responsibility of going out and collecting firewood. All Bodil could find was sagebrush. The next morning she was found dead, leaning up against the wheel of a handcart, her arms full of sagebrush, frozen to death, but still fulfilling her duty.

**James Kirkwood**, age 11 from Scotland. He was traveling with his widowed mother, Margaret, age 47, and three brothers, Robert, age 21; Thomas, age 19, and Joseph, age 4. When the rescuers came to the Willie rescue site, Joseph's feet were frozen. The Kirkwood family was told that they would have to wait for other wagons or someone would have to carry Joseph. Thomas had to ride in the handcart, as he was a cripple. That left Sister Kirkwood and Robert pulling Thomas, and little James Kirkwood, who carried his brother for many hours to Rock Creek Hollow, where, after faithfully fulfilling his duty, laid down and died. But he had saved his little brother.

**Neils Andersen**, age 41 from Denmark. A sturdy farmer who carried his fourteen year old daughter in his handcart over Rocky Ridge.

**Anne Olsen**, age 46 from Denmark.

**Ole Maden**, age 41 from Denmark. A farmer and a laborer who left four children and a wife.

**Thomas Gurdlestone**, age 62 from England. Father of eleven children. His wife died four days after they left Rock Creek.

**William Groves**, age 22 from England.