

## **JAMES G. WILLIE**

Born: November 1, 1814 in England

Age 42

Captain of the Willie Handcart Company

James Willie came to America from England when he was 21 years old. He first heard the gospel preached in Connecticut. He was baptized in 1842 and served his first mission in 1843, traveling and teaching in Vermont, Connecticut and New York. He was gone during the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, and joined the exiled Saints at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, in 1846. He married and had a family. In 1852 he returned to England, again as a missionary. . . .

James inherited a large sum of money while on his mission, due to the death of his brother, John, who owned a shipping business. James used a small amount of this to defray his mission expenses and gave the rest (about 200 English pounds) to the PEF in order to pay passage for many of these emigrants. President Franklin D. Richards appointed James to be the President of the group of Saints on the ship "Thornton."

Brother Erastus Snow had been at Florence, Nebraska, assisting the returning missionaries and the late handcart companies. An excerpt of a letter Elder Snow wrote to President John Taylor tells a little of what it was like for Elder Willie and his Handcart Company: 'Notwithstanding the hurry and bustle of starting off the last companies and closing up the complicated business of the season, it was a joyful termination of the laborious summer work, and a happy meeting with those faithful men of God, who after long years of separation from home and kindred dear, and of faithful toil and labor in foreign lands, are now about to be released from their labors and rest themselves while they journey across the Plains.'

The returning Elder Willie surely did not have a restful journey ahead of him! Continuing, Brother Snow writes of Elder Willie and the other returning missionaries, "May the choice blessings of Israel's God, whom they serve, abide upon them, and speed them on their way to the embrace of their anxious and loving families and friends. May they ever live in the affection of the Saints of God, and the memory of their noble deeds never perish."

James then became the Captain of the Fourth Handcart Company, consisting of about 500 people. They had 120 handcarts, five wagons, 24 oxen and 45 beef cattle and cows. It would be a big responsibility and challenge to lead this group of Saints to Utah so late in the season. (They left Florence, Nebraska, about August 18.) James Willie had been over the plains and knew the road. He was a fluent speaker and was well liked by the people.

Near Grand Island, Nebraska, they lost about 30 head of cattle due to a buffalo stampede. Not only did the people lose beef rations and milk cows, they didn't have enough oxen left to pull all of the provisions. The flour had to be divided and each handcart had to carry another 100 pounds of flour.

At Fort Laramie, provisions were not waiting there as expected. Captain Willie called a meeting to decide what could be done. They were still many miles from Salt Lake and, at their present rate of consumption, all the food would be gone before they reached their destination. The flour allowance was cut from one pound to 3/4 of a pound per day and every effort was made to travel faster.

At Independence Rock it became necessary to reduce the rations even further. The workingmen were to receive 10 /: to 12 ounces, women and old men 9 ounces, children from 4 to 8 ounces, according to age and size, and infants 3 ounces. John Chislett, one of the sub-captains, writes, "Our captain did his utmost to move us forward and always acted with great impartiality."

On October 20, 1856, the Willie Company had come to a grinding halt with the severe snowstorm. The last of the meager rations had been given out the night before. James Willie knew that he must go ahead to find the relief wagons he was sure were out there. He was weak and half starved, but knew he must save his company. He chose Joseph B. Elder to go with him.

Joseph Elder writes of this, "Brother Willie, who was the Captain of the Company, left the charge of the camp in the hands of Brother Atwood and we started ahead in search of our brethren. We rode 12 miles where we expected to find them but they [were] not there. We ascended Rocky Ridge. The snow and an awful cold wind blew in our faces all day. We crossed the Rocky Ridge and upon the west bank of the North Fork of the Sweetwater [probably a reference to Rock Creek] we found a friendly guide post which pointed us to their camp down upon the Sweetwater in amongst the willows. When they saw us, they raised a shout and ran out to meet us. Great was their joy to hear from us for they had long been in search of us. They could scarcely give us time to tell our story they were so anxious to hear all about us, their camp being 27 miles from ours."

Captain Willie now had the awesome task of traveling back over the 27 miles he had just come to bring relief to his beloved company. John Chislett (24), wrote: "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 en masse 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 the brethren with kisses . . . that evening . . . 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."

Somewhat revived, the Willie company pushed on, as the relief wagons with more provisions were waiting at Rock Creek. On October 23, 1856, the company had their greatest trial, the crossing of Rocky Ridge. It took 27 hours to get everyone to Rock Creek, a distance of 12 miles through deep snow and a raging storm. At about 11:00 p.m., it was reported by Chislett that there were many people that had still not arrived into camp. Captain Willie and others "immediately got up some horses, and the boys from the Valley started back about midnight to help . . ." The brave and courageous Captain Willie went back again! The very last of his company was not brought in until 5:00 a.m. Thirteen people had died and were buried in a common grave at Rock Creek that morning. Two men who helped dig the grave died a few hours later and were buried nearby.

Captain James Willie was truly a great leader who showed genuine concern for his fellow travelers. George Cunningham wrote the following as a tribute to James Willie, "Our Captain showed us all a noble example. He was furnished a mule to ride on our start from Iowa City, but he said, 'I will never get on its back I will show the example, you follow it.'" He did so and the Captains of hundreds followed him. They would crowd on ahead to be the first into the streams to help the women and children across. They waded every stream, I might say, a dozen times between Iowa City and Green River . . . Their feet were worn and bleeding, they became exhausted and had to be hauled the balance of the way, some of them not being able to stand on their feet."

The Willie Company continued on and with the help of the rescuers, arrived in the Valley on November 9, 1856. In 1859 James moved to Cache Valley, Utah, where he was active in the community. He died in 1895 at the age of 85.