

= Mormon handcart pioneers =

The Mormon handcart pioneers were participants in the migration of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as the LDS Church) to Salt Lake City, Utah, who used handcarts to transport their belongings. The Mormon handcart movement began in 1856 and continued until 1860.

Motivated to join their fellow Church members in Utah but lacking funds for full ox or horse teams, nearly 30,000 Mormon pioneers from England, Wales, Scotland and Scandinavia made the journey from Iowa or Nebraska to Utah in ten handcart companies. The trek was disastrous for two of the companies, which started their journey dangerously late and were caught by heavy snow and severe temperatures in central Wyoming. Despite a dramatic rescue effort, more than 210 of the 980 pioneers in these two companies died along the way. John Chislett, a survivor, wrote, "Many a father pulled his cart, with his little children on it, until the day preceding his death."

Although fewer than 10 percent of the 1846-68 Latter-day Saint emigrants made the journey west using handcarts, the handcart pioneers have become an important symbol in LDS culture, representing the faithfulness and sacrifice of the pioneer generation. They continue to be recognized and honored in events such as Pioneer Day, Church pageants, and similar commemorations.

= Background to the migration =

The Latter Day Saints were first organized in 1830. Early members of the Church often encountered hostility, primarily due to their practice of withdrawing from secular society and gathering in locales to practice their distinct religious beliefs. Their neighbors felt threatened by the Church's rapid growth in numbers, its tendency to vote as a bloc and acquire political power, its claims of divine favor, and, later, the practice of polygamy. Violence directed against the Church and its members caused the body of the Church to move from Ohio to Missouri, then to Illinois. Despite the frequent moves, Church members were unable to escape opposition, which culminated in the extermination order against all Mormons living in the state by Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs in 1838 and the death of their leader Joseph Smith in 1844. Brigham Young said that he had received divine direction to organize the church members and head beyond the western frontier of the United States.

= Need for handcart companies =

Soon after the first Mormon pioneers reached Utah in 1847, the Church began encouraging its converts in the British Isles and elsewhere in Europe to emigrate to Utah. From 1849 to 1855, about 16,000 European Latter-day Saints traveled to the United States by ship, through the eastern states by rail, and to Utah by ox and wagon. Although most of these emigrants paid their own expenses, the Church established the Perpetual Emigration Fund to provide financial assistance for poor emigrants to trek west, which they would repay as they were able. Contributions to expand the fund were encouraged.

When contributions and loan repayments dropped off in 1855 after a poor harvest in Utah, President Young decided to begin using handcarts because the Latter-day Saints who remained in Europe were mostly poor. Young also believed it would speed the journey.

Young proposed the plan in a letter to Franklin D. Richards, President of the European Mission, in September 1855. His letter was published in the *Millennial Star*, the Church's England-based periodical, on December 22, 1855, along with an editorial by Richards endorsing the project. The cost of the migration was expected to be reduced by one-third. The response was overwhelming. In 1856 the Perpetual Emigration Fund supported the travel of 2,012 European emigrants, compared with 1,161 the year before.

= Outfitting =

Emigrants departed from an English port ( generally Liverpool ) and travelled by ship to New York or Boston , then by railroad to Iowa City , Iowa , the western terminus of the rail line , where they would be outfitted with handcarts and other supplies .

Built to Brigham Young 's design , the handcarts resembled a large wheelbarrow , with two wheels five feet ( 1 @. @ 5 m ) in diameter and a single axle four and a half feet ( 1 @. @ 4 m ) wide , and weighing 60 pounds ( 27 kg ) . Running along each side of the bed were seven @-@ foot ( 2 @. @ 1 m ) pull shafts ending with a three @-@ foot ( 0 @. @ 9 m ) crossbar at the front . The crossbar allowed the carts to be pushed or pulled . Cargo was carried in a box about three feet by four feet ( 0 @. @ 9 m by 1 @. @ 2 m ) , with 8 inch ( 0 @. @ 2 m ) walls . The handcarts generally carried up to 250 pounds ( 110 kg ) of supplies and luggage , though they were capable of handling loads as heavy as 500 pounds ( 230 kg ) . Carts used in the first year 's migration were made entirely of wood ( " Iowa hickory or oak " ) ; in later years a stronger design was substituted , which included metal elements .

The handcart companies were organized using the handcarts and sleeping tents as the primary units . Five persons were assigned per handcart , with each individual limited to 17 pounds ( 7 @. @ 7 kg ) of clothing and bedding . Each round tent , supported by a center pole , housed 20 occupants and was supervised by a tent captain . Five tents were supervised by the captain of a hundred ( or " sub @-@ captain " ) . Provisions for each group of one hundred emigrants were carried in an ox wagon , and were distributed by the tent captains .

= = 1856 : First three companies = =

The first two ships departed England in late March and mid @-@ April and sailed to Boston . The emigrants spent several weeks in Iowa City , where they constructed their handcarts and were outfitted with supplies before beginning their trek of about 1 @, @ 300 miles ( 2 @, @ 093 km ) .

About 815 emigrants from the first two ships were organized into the first three handcart companies , headed by captains Edmund Ellsworth , Daniel D. McArthur , and Edward Bunker . The captains were missionaries returning to their homes in Utah and were familiar with the route . Most of the sub @-@ captains were also returning missionaries .

Across Iowa they followed an existing road about 275 miles ( 443 km ) to Council Bluffs , following a route that is close to current U.S. Route 6 . After crossing the Missouri River , they paused for a few days at a Mormon outpost in Florence , Nebraska ( now part of Omaha ) , for repairs , before beginning the remaining 1 @, @ 030 @-@ mile ( 1 @, @ 658 km ) journey along the Mormon Trail to Salt Lake City .

Initial problems with the carts occurred because the wood used to construct them was said to have been " green timber " , with many more breakdowns than anticipated . When the First Handcart Company reached Winter Quarters , Edmund Ellsworth had a member of the company " tin " the wooden axles and also installed " thick hoop iron skeins " which enabled the handcart axles to turn more easily and resist breakage much better . This feature became a standard part of handcarts in following years , including frequent greasing to keep the wheels lubricated .

The companies made good time , and their trips were largely uneventful . The emigrant companies included many children and elderly individuals , and pushing and pulling handcarts was difficult work . Journals and recollections describe periods of illness and hunger . Like other companies traveling on the Emigrant Trail , deaths occurred along the way . Hafen and Hafen 's Handcarts to Zion lists 13 deaths from the first company , seven from the second , and fewer than seven from the third . Journal entries reflect the optimism of the handcart pioneers , even amid their hardships :

The first two companies arrived in Salt Lake City on September 26 and the third followed less than a week later . The first three companies were regarded as having demonstrated the feasibility of emigrating using handcarts .

= = 1856 : Willie and Martin handcart companies = =

The last two handcart companies of 1856 departed late from England . The ship Thornton , carrying the emigrants who became the Willie Company , did not leave England until May 4 . The leader of the Latter @-@ day Saints on the Thornton was James G. Willie . Another three weeks passed before the Horizon , carrying the emigrants who formed the Martin Company , departed . The late departures may have been the result of difficulties in procuring ships in response to the unexpected demand , but the results would be tragic .

With slow communications in the era before the transatlantic telegraph , the Church agents in Iowa City were not expecting the additional emigrants and had to make frantic preparations for their arrival . Critical weeks were spent hastily assembling the carts and outfitting the companies . When the companies reached Florence , additional time was lost making repairs to the poorly built carts . Emigrant John Chislett describes the problems with the carts :

Prior to the Willie Company departing Florence , the company met to debate the wisdom of such a late departure . Because the emigrants were unfamiliar with the trail and the climate , they deferred to the returning missionaries and Church agents . One of the returning missionaries , Levi Savage , urged them to spend the winter in Nebraska . He argued that such a late departure with a company consisting of the elderly , women and young children would lead to suffering , sickness and even death . All of the other Church elders argued that the trip should go forward , expressing optimism that the company would be protected by divine intervention . Some members of the company , perhaps as many as 100 , decided to spend the winter in Florence or in Iowa , but the majority , about 404 in number ( including Savage ) continued the journey west . The Willie Company left Florence on August 17 and the Martin Company on August 27 . Two ox @-@ wagon trains , led by captains W.B. Hodgett and John A. Hunt , followed the Martin Company .

Near Wood River , Nebraska , a herd of bison caused the Willie Company 's cattle to stampede , and nearly 30 cattle were lost . Left without enough cattle to pull all of the wagons , each handcart was required to take on an additional 100 pounds ( 45 kg ) of flour .

In early September , Franklin D. Richards , returning from Europe where he had served as the Church 's mission president , passed the emigrant companies . Richards and the 12 returning missionaries who accompanied him , traveling in carriages and light wagons pulled by horses and mules , pressed on to Utah to obtain assistance for the emigrants .

= = = Disaster and rescue = = =

In early October the two companies reached Fort Laramie , Wyoming , where they expected to be restocked with provisions , but no provisions were there for them . The companies had to cut back food rations , hoping that their supplies would last until help could be sent from Utah . To lighten their loads , the Martin Company cut the luggage allowance to 10 pounds ( 4 @. 5 kg ) per person , discarding clothing and blankets that soon would be desperately needed .

On October 4 the Richards party reached Salt Lake City and conferred with president Brigham Young and other Church leaders . The next morning the Church was meeting in a general conference , where Young and the other speakers called on the Church members to provide wagons , mules , supplies , and teamsters for a rescue mission . On the morning of October 7 the first rescue party left Salt Lake City with 16 wagon @-@ loads of food and supplies , pulled by four @-@ mule teams with 27 young men serving as teamsters and rescuers . The party elected George D. Grant as their captain . Throughout October more wagon trains were assembled , and by the end of the month 250 relief wagons were on the road .

Meanwhile , the Willie and Martin companies were running out of food and encountering bitterly cold temperatures . On October 19 a blizzard struck the region , halting the two companies and the relief party . The Willie Company was along the Sweetwater River approaching the Continental Divide . A scouting party sent ahead by the main rescue party found and greeted the emigrants , gave them a small amount of flour , encouraged them that rescue was near , and then rushed onward to try to locate the Martin Company . The members of the Willie Company had just reached the end of their flour supplies . They began slaughtering the handful of broken @-@ down cattle that still remained while their death toll mounted . On October 20 Captain Willie and Joseph Elder went

ahead by mule through the snow to locate the supply train and inform them of the company's desperate situation. They arrived at the rescue party's campsite near South Pass that evening, and by the next evening the rescue party reached the Willie Company and provided them with food and assistance. Half of the rescue party remained to assist the Willie Company while the other half pressed forward to assist the Martin Company. The difficulties of the Willie Company were not yet over. On October 23, the second day after the main rescue party had arrived, the Willie Company faced the most difficult section of the trail – the ascent up Rocky Ridge. The climb took place during a howling snowstorm through knee-deep snow. That night 13 emigrants died.

On October 19, the Martin Company was about 110 miles (177 km) further east, making its last crossing of the North Platte River near present-day Casper, Wyoming. Shortly after completing the crossing, the blizzard struck. Many members of the company suffered from hypothermia or frostbite after wading through the frigid river. They set up camp at Red Bluffs, unable to continue forward through the snow. Meanwhile, the original scouting party continued eastward until it reached a small vacant fort at Devil's Gate, where they had been instructed to wait for the rest of the rescue party if they had not found the Martin Company. When the main rescue party rejoined them, another scouting party consisting of Joseph Young, Abel Garr, and Daniel Webster Jones was sent forward. The Martin company remained in their camp at Red Bluffs for nine days until the three scouts finally arrived on October 28. By the time the scouts arrived, 56 members of the company had died. The scouts urged the emigrants to begin moving again. Three days later the main rescue party met the Martin Company and the Hodgett and Hunt wagon companies and helped them on to Devil's Gate.

George D. Grant, who headed the rescue party, reported to President Young:

At Devil's Gate the rescue party unloaded the baggage carried in the wagons of the Hodgett and Hunt wagon companies that had been following the Martin Company so the wagons could be used to transport the weakest emigrants. A small group led by Daniel Webster Jones remained at Devil's Gate over the winter to protect the property. On November 4 the company had to cross the Sweetwater River, which was about 2 feet (0.6 m) deep and 90 to 120 feet (27 to 37 m) wide. The stream was clogged with floating ice. Some of the men of the rescue party spent hours pulling the carts and carrying many of the emigrants across the river. However, many members of the company crossed the river themselves, some even pulling their own handcarts across. The severe weather forced the Martin Company to halt for another five days at Martin's Cove, a few miles west of Devil's Gate.

The rescue parties escorted the emigrants from both companies to Utah through more snow and severe weather while their members continued to suffer death from disease and exposure. The Willie Company arrived in Salt Lake City on November 9; 68 members of the company had lost their lives.

Meanwhile, a backup relief party of 77 teams and wagons was making its way east to provide additional assistance to the Martin Company. After passing Fort Bridger the leaders of the backup party concluded that the Martin Company must have wintered east of the Rockies, so they turned back. When word of the returning backup relief party was communicated to Young, he ordered the courier to return and tell them to turn back east and continue until they found the handcart company, but several days had been lost. On November 18 the backup party met the Martin Company with the greatly needed supplies. At last all the members of the handcart party were now able to ride in wagons. The 104 wagons carrying the Martin Company arrived in Salt Lake City on November 30; at least 145 members of the company had lost their lives. Many of the survivors had to have fingers, toes, or limbs amputated due to severe frostbite.

After the companies arrived in Utah, the residents generously opened their homes to the arriving emigrants, feeding and caring for them over the winter. The emigrants would eventually go on to Latter-day Saint settlements throughout Utah and the West.

== Responsibility for the tragedy ==

American West historian, Wallace Stegner, described the inadequate planning and improvident

decisions leading to the tragedy when he wrote ,

In urging the method upon Europe 's poor , Brigham and the priesthood would over @-@ reach themselves ; in shepherding them from Liverpool to the valley , the ordinarily reliable missionary and emigration organization would break down at several critical points ; in accepting the assurances of their leaders and the wishful importunities of their own hope , the emigrants would commit themselves to greater sacrifices than even the Nauvoo refugees ; and in rallying from compound fatal error to bring the survivors in , the priesthood and the people of Mormondom would show themselves at their compassionate and efficient best .

As early as November 2 , 1856 , while the Willie and Martin companies were still making their way to safety , Brigham Young responded to criticism of his own leadership by rebuking Franklin Richards and Daniel Spencer for allowing the companies to leave so late . However , many authors argued that Young , as author of the plan , was responsible . Ann Eliza Young , daughter of one of the men in charge of building the carts and a former plural wife of Brigham Young , described her ex @-@ husband 's plan as a " cold @-@ blooded , scheming , blasphemous policy . " Stegner described Richards as a scapegoat for Young 's fundamental errors in planning , though Howard Christy , professor emeritus and former senior editor of scholarly publications at Brigham Young University , noted that Richards , as the highest @-@ ranking official in Florence , Nebraska area , was , in fact , the official who would have had the authority and capability to have averted the tragedy by halting their late departure . Christy also pointed out that Brigham Young and the other members of the First Presidency had consistently pointed out that departure from what is now Omaha , Nebraska needed to happen by the end of May to safely make the journey .

Many survivors of the tragedy refused to blame anyone . Survivor John Jacques wrote , " I blame nobody . I am not anxious to blame anybody ... I have no doubt that those who had to do with its management meant well and tried to do the best they could under the circumstances . " Another survivor , Francis Webster , was quoted as having said , " Was I sorry that I chose to come by hand cart ? No . Neither then nor any minute of my life since . The price we paid to become acquainted with God was a privilege to pay and I am thankful that I was privileged to come in the Martin Hand Cart Company . " On the other hand , survivor John Chislett , who later left the Church , wrote bitterly of Richards promising them that " we should get to Zion in safety . "

In May 2006 , a panel of researchers at the annual conference of the Mormon History Association blamed the tragedy on a failure of leadership . Lyndia Carter , a trails historian , said Franklin D. Richards " was responsible , in my mind , for the late departure " because " he started the snowball down the slope " that eventually " added up to disaster . " Christy agreed that " leadership from the top , from the outset , was seriously short of the mark . " Robert Briggs , an attorney , said " It 's almost a foregone conclusion ... there is evidence of negligence . With leaders all the way up to Brigham Young , there was mismanagement . " On the other hand , Rebecca Bartholomew and Leonard J. Arrington wrote , " Memories of what was perhaps the worst disaster in the history of western migration have been palliated by what could also be regarded as the most heroic rescue of the Mormon frontier . "

= = 1857 ? 60 : Last five companies = =

A number of lessons had been learned from the 1856 disaster that allowed the Church to continue the handcart system while avoiding another disaster . Never again would a handcart company depart Florence later than July 7 . The construction of the handcarts was modified to strengthen them and reduce repairs . The handcarts would now be regularly greased . Arrangements were made to replenish supplies along the route .

By 1857 the Perpetual Emigration Fund was exhausted ; almost all of the handcart emigrants that year and in subsequent years had to pay their own way . With the increased cost , the number of handcart emigrants dropped from nearly 2 @, @ 000 in 1856 to about 480 in 1857 . Nevertheless , in 1857 two companies made the trek , both arriving in Salt Lake City by September 13 . Perhaps the most notable incident was when a captain of the U.S. Army 's Utah Expedition , on its way to Utah to confront Young and the Mormons , donated an ox to the hungry emigrants .

With the uncertainty caused by the Utah War , the Church called off all European emigration for 1858 . In 1859 one handcart company crossed the plains . The emigrants were now able to travel by rail to Saint Joseph , Missouri , after which they went by riverboat to Florence where they were outfitted with handcarts and supplies . When the 1859 company reached Fort Laramie , they discovered their food was running dangerously short , so they cut back on rations . When they reached Devil 's Gate the last flour was distributed . Emigrant Ebenezer B. Beesley recalled an incident in which a group of rough mountain men fed the hungry emigrants . One of the mountain men then asked a young woman from the company to stay with him , which the tired woman agreed to do . ( William Atkin recalled another version of the story in which two young women married two mountain men . ) The hunger worsened when expected supplies were not available when they reached the Green River . Three days later wagons from Utah carrying provisions finally rescued the famished emigrants .

The last two handcart companies made the journey in 1860 , again following the route through St. Joseph . Although the journey proved to be difficult for the emigrants , these companies had relatively uneventful trips and experienced little loss of life .

After 1860 handcarts were no longer used . The Church implemented a new system of emigration , in which wagon trains travelled east from Salt Lake City in the spring and returned with emigrants in the summer . The transcontinental railroad was being constructed , and the railroad terminus gradually moved westward , shortening the trip .

= = Legacy = =

Handcart pioneers and the handcart movement are important parts of LDS culture , music and fiction . Arthur King Peters described the importance of this part of Mormon history in *Seven Trails West* :

Wallace Stegner praised the examples of those of the handcart companies , particularly in comparison to other pioneer parties :

= = = Reenactments = = =

Reenactments , in which a group dressed in 19th century garb travels for one or more days pushing and pulling handcarts , have become a popular activity among LDS wards , youth groups , and families . The reenactments have been lauded by LDS leaders ; for example , M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said , " Through music , drama , and stirring reenactments , we will be reminded of incredible pioneer journeys , both temporal and spiritual . " The reenactments have become so popular that the Bureau of Land Management is studying the impact on the trail and its environment , especially in the area around Rocky Ridge , Wyoming . According to the *Casper Star @-@ Tribune* , the BLM has had to impose a fee to offset the costs of monitoring the impacts of reenactors and other campers on the trail .

A re @-@ creation of the 1856 handcart disaster was featured on the History Channel show , *Wild West Tech* .

= = = 150th anniversary = = =

A number of events were held during 2006 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the 1856 handcart companies :

The 2006 conference of the Mormon History Association was held in Casper , Wyoming from May 25 ? May 28 and featured a specially commissioned concert opera by Harriet Petherick Bushman , " 1856 : Long Walk Home , " as well as several research papers on the handcart trek .

From June 9 ? June 11 , a symposium and festival were held in Iowa City on the anniversary of the departure of the first company . Gordon B. Hinckley , the then @-@ current president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter @-@ day Saints , spoke at the closing ceremony fireside .

A musical called 1856 , produced by Cory Ellsworth , a descendant of Edmund Ellsworth , was

performed in Mesa , Arizona and Salt Lake City in July 2006 .

Filmmaker Lee Groberg and writer / historian Heidi Swinton created a documentary for PBS , Sweetwater Rescue : The Willie & Martin Handcart Story , which features reenactments of the rescue . The one @-@ hour film was shown nationally in the United States on December 18 , 2006 . A companion book was also published .

Brigham Young University created a daily journal of the Willie Handcart Company on its Web site .

= = = Artistic depictions = = =

#### Film

Handcart . Directed by Kels Goodman . 2002 . Made as part of the wave of Mormon films in the early 2000s .

17 Miracles . Directed by T. C. Christensen , distributed by Excel Entertainment Group . June 2011 . About the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies , especially Levi Savage .

Ephraim 's Rescue Directed by T. C. Christensen , distributed by Excel Entertainment Group . May 2013 . The story of the rescue of the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies , primarily told from the point of view of Ephraim Hanks .

#### Theater

Handcarts West . Play , by Nathan & Ruth Hale .

The Trail of Dreams . Musical , written by James Arrington , Steven Kapp Perry , and Marvin Payne. premiered at Utah Valley State College in 1997 . Also played at the SCERA Center for the Arts in Orem , Utah . The cast recording won the 1999 Pearl Award for " Best Soundtrack of the Year , " and Steven Kapp Perry was nominated as " Songwriter of the Year " for his work on this project .

#### Music

The handcart treks were a familiar theme in 19th @-@ century Mormon folk music .

#### Fiction

George the Handcart Boy . By Howard R. Driggs . Aladdin , 1952 . Young adult novel .

Fire of the Covenant . By Gerald N. Lund . Deseret Book , 1999 . ISBN 1570086850 OCLC 42892048

Charlotte 's Rose . By Ann Edwards Cannon . Random House , 2002 . Young adult novel .

Miracles of the Martin Handcart Company . By JoAnn Mellor Felix , 2006 . Teen , Young Adult and Adult novel .

Independence Rock . By Debra Terry Hulet . Cedar Fort , 2011 . Young adult novel .

True Sisters . By Sandra Dallas . St. Martin 's Press , 2012 . Adult novel .

In the Company of Angels . By David Farland .

" West " . By Orson Scott Card . Science @-@ fiction short story .

= = = Notable handcart pioneers = = =

Edward Bunker ? Captain of the third company .

C. C. A. Christensen ? Sub @-@ captain of the seventh company and an artist known for his illustrations of LDS history .

John Jaques ? Member of the Martin Company , missionary , and company historian .

Levi Savage Jr . ? Sub @-@ captain of the Willie Company who argued against the late departure .

Jens Nielson , Danish entrepreneur that later settled several communities in the Cedar City Historic District .

Nellie Unthank ? Member of the Martin Company .

Emily H. Woodmansee ? Member of the Willie Handcart Company and one of the most influential Mormon poets in the 19th century .

= = = Notable members of the rescue parties = = =

Ephraim Hanks ? Scout , member of the second rescue party .

Daniel Webster Jones ? Member of advance party who found the Martin Company . Jones spent the winter at Devil 's Gate guarding the equipment that was left there .

Hosea Stout ? Member of the second rescue party who carried messages to and from Salt Lake City .

Joseph Angell Young ? Son of Brigham Young and member of the advance rescue party that found the Martin Company .