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Biographical Sketch

of

George Cunningham

Pioneer Year 1856

Captain James Willie's handcart company

by Pearl Loveless

Born 17 Aug. 1840 in Dysort, Fifeshire, Scotland

Married 10 Jan. 1863 American Fork

Died 15 Mar. 1913

Cromwell, it is said, spoke these words; "Paint me as I am." The subject of this biography, George Cunningham, was born in Dysort, Fifeshire, Scotland, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August, 1840.

He was the son of James Cunningham, whose ancestors hailed from the Highlands of North, and Elizabeth Nicholson Cunningham, whose ancestors were of the South or Middle part of Scotland. From them he inherited those characteristics of sturdy integrity and sense of right and wrong that makes worth in every man.

At the age of seven he commenced work in a coal pit, laboring from twelve to fourteen hours a day, for six years, at times not even seeing the light of heaven for a whole week. His parents home was also a home for the Mormon elders, and many times the good mother has borrowed money to help these missionaries, when she saw no earthly chance to pay it back, but she was so full of faith she would always say that the Lord would open up a way for her to get it, and he did so.

The following paragraphs were taken from his life-history written by him when he was thirty years of age.

"My parents were the first to embrace the gospel around our district but later nearly half of the citizens joined, probably twenty or thirty families. Mormonism seemed to take the sway for a long time, the gifts and blessings following them that believed; and the Lord poured his spirit out upon them. Under those circumstances I was raised, in the strictest sense of the word, a Mormon. The faith, religion and piety that was then implanted in my mind in my infancy, hath never been eradicated."

"In the spring of 1856 the chance opened up for us to emigrate to this country, for which I was truly thankful. We sold out our small effects and bade our friends farewell, took train for Glasgow and from there by steamboat to Liverpool, experiencing a very rough passage on the Irish Channel. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of May embarked on board American ship Thornton bound for New York."

"There were seven hundred passengers on board, nearly all of which were Latter Day Saints, five-hundred of this number were bound for Salt Lake City the same season. The sea journey took six

weeks. I enjoyed the passage very well. The large icebergs towering up like huge mountains, on this northerly route was a sight to me. Arriving at the mouth of the Hudson, a steam tug towed us up the river; having on board a custom house officer and an inspector, a subscription was drawn up amongst the passengers for said officials, which was all they wanted and we were allowed to land in New York without being asked a single question."

"How well I remember the first step that I took on American soil! How thrilled was I! The land of the free! The land of promise! I had been taught to believe it was a land of promise blessed above all other lands, and although only a small boy of fifteen years, I felt like thanking God for the blessings I then enjoyed."

"After a few days in New York we sailed up the river to Albany then by rail road train about three hundred miles; embarked on the Great lakes sailing for two or three days, then again by railroad for Iowa, via. Chicago, Rock Island and Davenport, arriving the latter part of June."

"We went to the Mormon camp ground which was about two miles out of the city, where six or seven emigrants were encamped. We stayed here for five or six weeks, some of the time experiencing some very stormy weather which went hard with us on account of our shortage of tents to shelter us and of proper clothing."

"At length we were appointed to continue our journey with Captain James Willie's handcart company which consisted of about six hundred persons - 100 Scotch - 200 Danish and 300 English. A captain was appointed over each one-hundred, chosen from the returning missionaries; also one team for each one-hundred to haul provisions. This meant a three-hundred-mile trip through the state of Iowa before reaching the permanent starting place at Winger Quarters or Florence, where we arrived after several weeks of pulling, hauling and praying. People along the way would sneer and deride us on every occasion, laughing at us and crying out gee-haw, etc. But this did not discourage us in the least; we knew that we were on the right track and that was enough."

"I can remember of being at a meeting one night when Bro. Levi Savage, a returning missionary spoke. He counseled the old and sickly to remain until another spring. The tears rolled down his cheeks as he prophesied that if such took the journey at that late season of the year, their bones would strew the way. At length we started but the number was greatly reduced, about one-hundred remaining. I must state here that there was not one of hundred remained for which we received great praise."

"The ox teams were heavily loaded and we were delayed much by having to wait on them. We strove along daily and when we arrived at Wood River we came across a large camp of Omaha Indians who invited us to camp with them for the night. We did so and they were very friendly. We resume our journey the next day."

"One night about this time, after a long and tiresome day's travel, we turned out the oxen and the cows to feed and a large herd of buffalo came running towards them and the oxen ran off with the buffalo, and although we stopped and hunted the country over for miles we never found them – not one of our cows however, left. It happened when one of those terrible prairie storms blew up as soon as we had formed camp and every man was needed to help put up the tents. It was as dark as pitch and all hands had to hold on to the tents to keep them from going up like balloons. The heavy rain soon flooded the prairie and the thunder roared most deafening accompanied by vivid flashes of lightening which seemed to electrify everything. When morning came all the able bodied men and boys again turned out to look for the cattle. We scourged the country for miles around but even their footprints could be seen because of the heavy rain. The search was kept up for a week and often when we thought we could see old Brin and Nig or Buck and Bright they would invariably take to their heels and prove to be nothing but the ugly old buffalo. I have heard the song sung, "Through the Wildwood I'll Wander and Chase the buffalo," but I never expected to experience it in this shape."

"At length the command came to Move On. Provisions were getting very short and with a six or seven hundred mile journey before us, we knew that we must do so or perish in the mountain

snows. We transferred our provisions from the wagons to the hand carts and hitched the thirty milch cows to the wagons to haul the sick and the children who were not able to walk, and we plodded along through the mud with all the courage we could muster up."

"We traveled along, slowly and after a few weeks arrived at Fort Laramie. As our provisions were very nearly exhausted our captain went into Fort Laramie and bought a ton or two of flour for which he had to pay \$20 per hundred pounds."

"After leaving here we met a company of missionaries going to the states. Elder Parley P. Pratt came and talked to us trying to encourage us. The nights now began to be very cold and feed was poor, also our provisions were running out fast. Starvation looked us in the face. We were put on rations of six ounces of flour each, per day and nothing else. The old and weak began to die from want of proper food, and a great many of the young and strong ones soon followed suit. I, myself, have helped to bury ten to fifteen in a single day. We who could stand it were barely kept alive and after several weeks of this ration it was reduced to half that amount. I, however, stirred my three ounces with some water and gulped it down. To make things worse we were caught in a heavy snow storm on the Sweet Water and it was extremely cold and the last of our flour was now gone. Nothing was left but a scant supply of crackers reserved for the sick and small children. The captain ordered that every critter in the train be killed off as needed but they were nearly as poor we, however, we used to boil the bones and drink the soup. Every particle that could be used was taken care of, even the hid was rationed out and after scorching the hair off, we would roast it a little over the coals and cut it in small pieces and it made what we then considered a delicious supper. Towards the last the weather was so cold that all but five or six men in camp had been severely froze, and let me add, right here is where the great test came in – some would sacrifice by giving their food and clothing to their friends, relatives and children, while others who seemed to be void of natural affection would let their companion and family members die off merely for the sake of getting their few mouthfuls of food or perhaps an old blanket that covered them."

“In these trying times with eighteen inches of snow and very cold weather, I remember how we built large fires with willows which were abundant at this place. Everybody stood around the fire with gloomy faces, as if in a death trap, when all at once flashed into my mind my dream of the previous night as follows: That a number of wagons loaded with provisions were soon to meet us. How joyfully I related my last night’s dream in detail. My mother told them that she knew it would come true, as I was promised that gift in my blessing. And to our great pleasure every word was literally fulfilled. I can recollect that I was in the lead of the crowd, feeling quite inspired by my dream. At their approach I road out, See! See them coming over that hill! We soon met the wagons with provisions and were very kindly treated all felt to thank God.”

“Now the great difficulty was by eating too much. The feelings and sense of our people were dull and benumbed. No one feared death now. Nearly everybody seemed indifferent or stupefied, and as the old saying that is written in the Great Book (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. Chap. 16) where “Death is swallowed up in victory:” “O, death where is thy sting, O, grave where is thy victory.” It had gone too far to dread death for the thread of life had by this time been nearly exhausted. Neither had the grave much victory to boast of for many did not feel like going one step out of its way.”

“Our Captain showed us a noble example,. He was furnished a mule to ride on but he said, “I will never get on its back,” I will set the example – you follow it.”

“And thus, our captains set the example. They would crowd ahead and be the first in the streams to help others across – the last one out – and would hurry ahead again for the same purpose. They waded every stream, I might say, a dozen times, between Iowa and Green River with the exception of the Missouri 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. Among these heroic leaders were: James Willey (my captain); Milen Atwood, Levi Savage and Wm. Woodard also another, a Danish brother whose name I have forgotten.”

“At our arrival at Salt Lake City we were kindly cared for and well treated and when we had rested up a bit were sent to the various settlements. We were sent to American Fork where my home has been ever since. Here we met with many old acquaintances and soon made friends with others who helped us and ere long found employment and thus were removed from our very straightened circumstances, financially. I soon forgot my troubles and found myself in the bloom of youth, hunting for worldly pleasures and vanities. At the age of twenty-one years I admit I had sown a great deal of “wild oats” and reaped quite a crop of the same worthless seed. I began to look back on the course I had been pursuing, and before long came to the conclusion, like one of old, that it was all vanity and vexation of spirit, the hunted pleasures were all phantom and folly. About this time I formed the acquaintance of Grace Mary Wrigley and after two years of bitter animosity towards me her parents willingly and cheerfully consented to our marriage which was on January 10, 1863.”

During their union a family of thirteen were born to them.

George Cunningham’s life was full and replete with personal sacrifices for the good of others, for the growth and advancement of the community in which he lived and the church of which he formed a part. He was always a public man.

He was one of the stockholders (one of the first) of the American Fork Co-Op. Inst., holding the position of Treasurer and member of the board of directors. He was alderman of American Fork City in 1882-1886; Mayor 1891-1892; member of Constitutional Convention 1895; member of first State Legislature; Justice of the peace for many years and for twenty-eight years was member of the school board. It was through his shrewdness that our city was the first to adopt free schools in the state of Utah, which was carried on for seventeen years with local taxation. He was a member of the bishopric for many years, before the town was divided into wards.

For more than forty years he labored as a public servant in many offices and all were conscientiously filled in the interest of the people. Ever in public life his work was open for inspection. He was

always fearless in sustaining the right, pronounced in his expression, true to his convictions, sound in his judgment, a philosopher in reason and firm in his religion, true to his friends, loving to his family, he was in every sense a man.

That his life's work was appreciated was shown at this death on March 15, 1913, when for three days the city and the school flags were raised at half mast.