

The Pioneer Story

“We cannot begin to understand the journeys made by those who laid the foundation of this dispensation until we understand their spiritual underpinnings. Once we make that connection, however, we will begin to see how their journeys parallel our own. There are lessons for us in every footstep they took - lessons of love, courage, commitment, devotion, endurance, and, most of all, faith.



“Handcarts were heavily laden with faith – faith in God, faith in the restoration of His Church through the Prophet Joseph Smith, and faith that God knew where they were going and that He would see them through.

“And how will we feel then, as we stand shoulder to shoulder with the great pioneers of Church History? How will they feel about us? Will they see faith in our footsteps? I believe they will.

“We will learn, as did our pioneer ancestors, that it is only in faith – real faith, whole-souled, tested and tried – that we will find safety and confidence as we walk our own perilous pathways through life.”

– Elder M. Russell Ballard

The story of the Pioneers coming by wagon train and handcarts to the Great Salt Lake valley is a story of faith, courage, and commitment. It was also a time of great testing both spiritually and physically.

It started with the Saints being forced to leave their beautiful city, Nauvoo, which they had built from the swamp lands along the Mississippi river. There was much persecution and many of the Saints were being threatened, beaten, and even killed. The exodus, or as some call it, the Mormon migration, started in February 1846 and ended in the late 1860's.

There were several routes that the pioneers took but most came by land in either wagons or pulling a handcart. With people traveling west for land, gold, or a new beginning they established trails through the unknown west. They were the California Trail, the Oregon Trail, and the saints established the Mormon Trail. There were several reasons that the saints did not follow the Oregon and California trails. One was so there would be enough grass for their cattle to eat. Another was that they would have different places to camp where there was water. And another was due to their fear of persecution. The leaders did not want that so through Nebraska, with the Oregon and California trails on the south side of the Platte River, the Mormon Trail stayed on the north side of the river where there were not a lot of other travelers on the trail. Sometimes the trails crossed, but only for a short distance.

At Fort Laramie, Wyoming, the trails ran together and they followed the Oregon Trail to Fort Bridger, about 397 miles. From Fort Bridger they followed the Donner-Reed Party trail into the Salt Lake Valley. You may wonder why they crossed the Sweetwater River nine times. They wanted to take as straight a westward path as possible and the Sweet Water winds a lot in this area.

How did they get to Salt Lake? Some traveled by boat around Cape Cod, others traveled by covered wagon, but many pushed and pulled handcarts. Brigham Young knew that for as many saints as there were who wanted to go to Zion, having them all travel by wagon would not be possible. He was inspired to create the handcart mode of travel. This was an inexpensive way for more pioneers to reach their destinations. The Perpetual Emigrating Fund would be used to get the Saints to the United States and to Nauvoo, but from there they would have to use handcarts to get to Utah.



The Handcart Company by Torlief Knaphus
(1926, life sized bronze) Temple Square

There were ten handcart companies that came west between 1856 and 1860. The number of pioneers that traveled by handcart numbered about 2700. Many of the groups had minor problems getting to Salt Lake but two of the companies, the Edward Martin and James Willie handcart companies, and the Hunt and Hodgett Wagon Train companies, had many trials.

Many believe the Willie and Martin companies traveled together. This is a common misconception. The Willie handcart company left Winter Quarters in early August 1856 and the Martin handcart company left on August 25, 1856. The Willie Company was about 150 miles ahead of the Martin Company which was about 20 days travel. The only time they were together is when they were in Iowa City, Iowa, when both companies were getting ready for the rest of the trip. However, all four companies, the Willie Company, the Martin Company, and the Hunt and Hodgett wagon trains were caught by the same early winter storm that hit Wyoming.

Another misconception is that these companies had weathered the storms and all of the pioneers who died on the trip died before the rescue parties found them, and after the rescuers had arrived all was OK. This is not true. The rescuers reached the Willie Company on October 20, right at the start of the first storm, but they did not have enough food and wagons with them to help much. The rescuers were able to give these weary pioneers hope and told them more help was on the way, but they could not stop the deaths of those who were too exhausted and weak.

The rescuers reached the Martin Company eight days later, at Red Buttes. The small group of rescuers helped them get to Devil's Gate and then to Martin's Cove, where they were stranded for about five days through another horrendous snowstorm. The saints had to cross the Sweetwater River to get to Martin's Cove and cross it again to get out. It was during this time that many of the pioneers died due to exposure, lack of food, and exhaustion.

The pioneers usually carried about 400 to 500 pounds of items which included flour, bedding, clothing, cooking items, and a tent. Around five people were assigned to a handcart and about 20 shared a tent. Each person was allowed 17 pounds, (this is why we limit you to 17 pounds) which included bedding, clothing and cooking items. A member of the first handcart company in 1856 wrote: "Some wanted to take more than the allotted portion and put on extra clothes; thus many who were really thin became suddenly stout, and as soon as the weighing was over, put their extra clothes back on the handcarts. But that did not last long. In a few days we had to have all weighed again and many were found with much more weight on the carts than allowed. One old sister carried a teapot and colander on her apron string all the way to Salt Lake. Another carried a hat box full of things, but she died on the way."

Breakdown of Pioneer Handcart Companies

There was a total of 10 handcart companies. Most stopped first at Iowa City then proceeded to Florence, (Omaha) Nebraska, where after further preparation left for Salt Lake. The total trip from Iowa City was 1300 miles.

No.	Year	Captain	Persons	Handcarts	Wagons	Left Florence	Arrived SLC	Deaths
1	1856	Ellsworth	274	52	5	June 9	Sep 26	13
2	1856	McArthur	221	48	4	June 11	Sep 26	7
3	1856	Bunker	320	64	5	July 30	Oct 2	7 or less
4	1856	Willie	500	120	6	Aug 17	Nov 9	67
5	1856	Martin	576	146	7	Aug 25	Nov 30	135-150
6	1857	Evans	149	31	1	June 20	Sep 11	?
7	1857	Christiansen	330	68	3	July 7	Sep 13	6 ?
8	1859	Rowley	235	60	6	June 9	Sep 4	5 ?
9	1860	Robinson	233	43	6	June 6	Aug 27	1
10	1860	Stoddard	124	21	7	July 6	Sep 24	0
Totals			2962	653	50			About 250



Handcart Company, by C. C. A. Christensen (1900, oil on canvas, 25" x 38").

Two of the handcart pioneers, C. C. A. Christensen and his wife, sailed to the United States in 1857, made their way to Iowa City, purchased hickory handcarts, and set out on their walk to the Great Salt Lake Valley. Over thirty years later he painted this scene from the more than 1,300 mile journey. Church Museum of History and Art.

Martin's Cove – A handcart company under the direction of Edward Martin sought shelter from an early winter blizzard in a small cove in the flank of the Sweetwater River Rocks about two miles west of Devil's Gate. The Martin Handcart Company was the last handcart expedition to attempt to go to Salt Lake in 1856. This company of English emigrants left Iowa City, Iowa, on 28 July 1856. There were "576 [people], with 146 carts, 7 wagons, 30 oxen, and 50 cows and beef cattle" (LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion* [1960], 93).



They reached Fort Laramie, Wyoming, 8 October. After leaving Fort Laramie their food rations had to be cut. Because of their growing weakness, they had to lighten the loads they were pulling, so they discarded blankets and clothing. On 19 October they crossed the North Platte River. As soon as they crossed, it started to snow. The company pushed on until they came to the Sweetwater River. For many, crossing the river seemed more than they could manage, but men from the rescue party bravely carried several of the pioneers across. The campgrounds became graveyards as the Martin Company buried their dead.



When they moved on, they left most of the handcarts behind. The rescuers loaded the sickest and weakest into wagons, but the rest had to walk. The storms had forced some rescuers back, while others waited to try again. One of these, Ephraim Hanks, left his wagon and went on with two horses. One day he killed a buffalo and loaded his horses with the meat. That evening he reached the Martin Handcart Company. The meat was welcomed by the starving pioneers. On 11 November Ephraim Hanks and members of the handcart company camped on Bitter Creek.

Looking back on the suffering of the Willie and Martin companies, and the courage of those who rescued them, serves to strengthen us. The words of one survivor of the Martin Company experience—Elizabeth Horrocks Jackson Kingsford, widow of Aaron Jackson, who died after crossing the Platte River—reflects that strength: “I have a desire to leave a record of those scenes and events, through which I have passed, that my children, down to my latest posterity, may read what their ancestors were willing to suffer, and did suffer, patiently for the gospel’s sake. And I wish them to understand too, that what I now [write] is the history of hundreds of others, ... who have passed through many like scenes for the same cause. I also desire them to know that it was obedience to the commands of the true and living God [to gather to the Salt Lake Valley], and with the assurance of an eternal reward—an exaltation to eternal life in His kingdom—that we suffered these things. I hope, too, that it will inspire my posterity with fortitude to stand firm and faithful to the truth, and be willing to suffer, and sacrifice all things they may be required to pass thru for the kingdom of God’s sake” (“Leaves from the Life of Elizabeth Horrocks Jackson Kingsford,” Utah State Historical Society, Manuscript A 719).