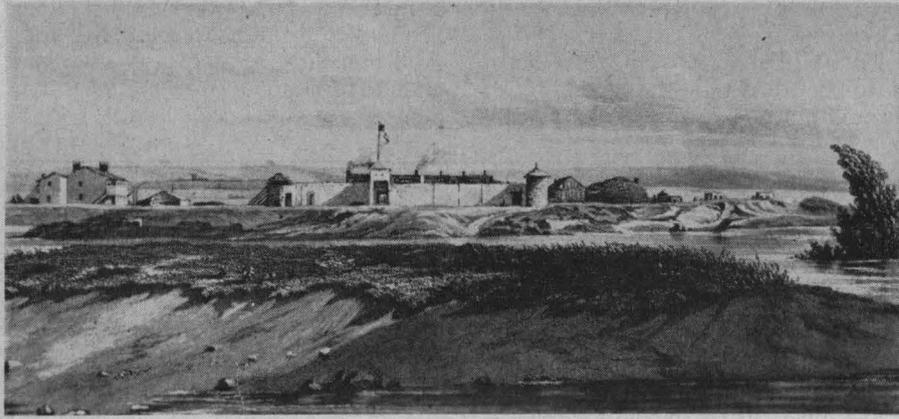


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FORT LARAMIE

"I saw the Stars and Stripes waving above the fort, and there I found my brother."

By Howard R. Driggs*

FORT Laramie! Fort Laramie! Boy, one of the prettiest pictures of my life comes back to me when you said, *Fort Laramie!*"

It was "Beefsteak Harrison," landlord of the popular Harrison House on Main Street in Springville, Utah, speaking. I had found him and his gracious wife—a real daughter of the Mayflower, I was told—on the train.

Someone had said that George Harrison had a wealth of rich stories to tell of his pioneer days. This was the first time I had been able to start him going with promise. In his hotel he was always too busy serving guests beefsteak, done to a queen's taste, with all the other good things that made his meals so wonderful.

"Why did you ask me whether I'd ever been to Fort Laramie?" he questioned.

"Oh, I've just had my first trip—mostly by train—over the old Mormon Trail, and I spent an unforgettable day at the old trapper and army post."

"Is Sutler's store still there and the barracks and officers' quarters?" he asked.

"They are, but pretty badly run down. Still, with the help of those in charge, I got rather close to the spirit of the historic place."

Hungry, Wobbly Lad

"It all brings back stirring memories to me," the veteran returned "I went there first with the Handcart Pioneers in 1856. I was a hungry, wobbly lad after a siege of the 'chills and fever' I caught while swimmin' with a pal in a slough near old Winter Quarters on the Missouri. That kept the both of us freezin' and burnin' most of the way across the plains.

"We had to ride in one of the few covered wagons. Well, you can guess how I looked when we reached Fort Laramie. One of the Indians there called me a white skeleton.

"We all were down to scant rations by then—about two ounces of flour a day with what meat our hunters might get. My brother, Aaron, about 18, tried to buy some food from the army quartermaster, but he couldn't get any for us. Finally, with the consent of Father and Mother and the captain of the handcarts, he enlisted in the army. They gave us some of his rations.

Theirs Was the Handcart Way to Zion

"On we went westward—too late to make it across the mountains before heavy snows of late fall came.

"I was not caught with the struggling handcart folk in these storms, though," he added.

"How did you escape them?"

Extra Luggage Jettisoned

"Oh, when we reached Deer Creek about 100 miles west of Fort Laramie, our captain ordered the handcarts with wobbly wheels left behind and all extra luggage burned. It was to be a hurried march on to the valleys.

"Well, I was too weak to go faster or do any pulling or pushing of our cart, so I decided by myself I wouldn't go any farther. I hid in the nearby willows and, when the last handcart disappeared, I staggered to my feet and went back to an Indian camp I'd seen. Fortunately a kind Indian mother took me in and began to feed the 'white skeleton.'"

The story had me on the edge of my seat listening for more but the trainman broke in with "Provo!" That was where I had to get off. I did manage, however, to arrange to meet genial George Harrison several times afterward to hear of his adventures. After living with the Indians, he made his way the next year with Johnston's army (in which his brother, Aaron, was a soldier) to a joyous reunion in Springville where his parents and sisters had settled.

The Harrison family is typical of most of the good folk who joined in the handcart migration of 100 years ago. Three to four thousand fathers, mothers and children used the "handcart way" to get to far-off Zion in the tops of the mountains.

By Ship, Train and Foot

First it was an ocean voyage. "We came on the good ship *Horizon*," related George Harrison. "Started from Liverpool and landed in Boston. After that, we boarded a train. We managed to get to the end of the line at Iowa City, Iowa. Then it was push and pull our way with handcarts 1,300 miles.

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"Worst of it was our handcarts were not ready when we reached the end of the railroad. It took several weeks before we could get the caravan on its way. There were some 200 carts and a few covered wagons for the added supplies and to help with the sick.

"Folks called us the 'ill-fated' handcart companies because of misfortune on the way. Out there in the mountains—after I left the party—blizzards caused disaster in the company. Before the mountain boys with their teams—sent out by President Brigham Young—reached the people straggling through the snow, a great many died. I learned all about their hardships when I finally reached home."

"You said one of your most thrilling memories came with the mention of Fort Laramie," I suggested. "What was that?"

"It was the day I went back to the old post with my Indian friends. I saw the *Stars and Stripes* waving above the fort. And there I found my brother, Aaron."

Other Handcart Veterans

While I was gathering the full story of this handcart pioneer, I took him one day in my automobile to Pleasant Grove, my old home town, to meet some other veterans of the handcart days, Mrs. Patience Rosza Archer and her brother, Robert Loader. The Loader and the Harrison families came to America on the ship *Horizon*. They were in the same ill-fated handcart company and shared the same type of hardships crossing the plains and the mountains.

Bob Loader was then about ten years old. He helped to drive the loose cattle and had a pony so the journey for him was not without some fun. Patience, his eldest sister, did her full share helping push and pull the family handcart. Their father died on the plains.

"We did all we could to save him," said Mrs. Archer. "He was courage itself till the last. On the morning he died, he said, 'I am going on to Zion.' With that he stepped into the shafts of the cart and started to get it going with the caravan, but suddenly he stopped and fell to the ground. We all crowded around him, anxious to help, but he passed away. The caravan halted and a grave was made for our beloved father.

"We laid him away tenderly, covering his dear body with what we had. Then we dedicated his grave and went on with grief-stricken hearts. Mother bore the loss bravely and inspired us all with faith and hope. Her strength was our stay through the storms and other difficulties which lay ahead."

Another of the handcart veterans who helped bring the soul-stirring experience of 100 years ago to life for me was Samuel S. Jones of Provo, Utah. Many may still recall the store he developed in that city.

He was a stalwart in the community and of princely bearing. When I was privileged to visit him, he had lost his sight, but spiritual light shone in his face and through his words.

One incident he told of the handcart trip remains vividly with me. During the blizzard in the uplands, Charley Twelves, a fine young man, was struggling to pull his cart—"staggering along with it," said Brother Jones. "I saw him drop between the shafts and called to his father and mother. They hurried back to their son, but God had called him home. It was another heart-rending test of faith and courage.

"All we could do for our loved Charley was to make a grave in the snow drift. His body, wrapped in blankets, was laid in it, and brush piled above. It was just cold storage for the wolves, we felt, as we struggled on not knowing who next would fall by the way.

"God, however, had not forsaken us. Help finally did come. Stout mountain-trained boys with strong teams and wagons laden with food and comforts arrived to carry us frostbitten folk that had lived through the bitter hardships on to the warmer valleys. And blessings manifold have been showered on us through the years."

Frozen Feet Amputated

Another touching story was told to me while I was serving as an instructor in the old Branch Normal School in Cedar City, Utah. One of the delightful homes—a log cabin, as I recall—was a picture of beauty and suggestive of comfort and love. Through spring, summer and autumn it seemed to be buried in home-grown flowers. It was the home of Brother and Sister William Unthank.¹

The dear mother there had both her feet amputated. They were frozen when she was 10 years old during the trip with the ill-fated Captain Edward Martin Company of handcart pioneers. With courage sublime and unwavering faith she reared her family. Her life was an inspiration to all. God bless her memory!

This centennial year will no doubt bring out a wealth of like stories of enduring courage and faith. Not all the Saints who took the handcart trail did get to the valleys of the mountains. Many of them lie in unmarked graves along the way. What they have bequeathed to us—not alone to the descendants of the handcart pioneers but to all—is something beyond price, a heritage ever to be treasured.

I esteem it a rare privilege to have had much of the stories firsthand from some of the splendid men and women who lived through the soul testing experience. It is a stirring epic of America's making.

¹For Ellen Pusell Unthank's story, see the article by William R. Palmer on page 196.



Courtesy of the American Legion Magazine.

Drawing by Lowell L. Balcom.