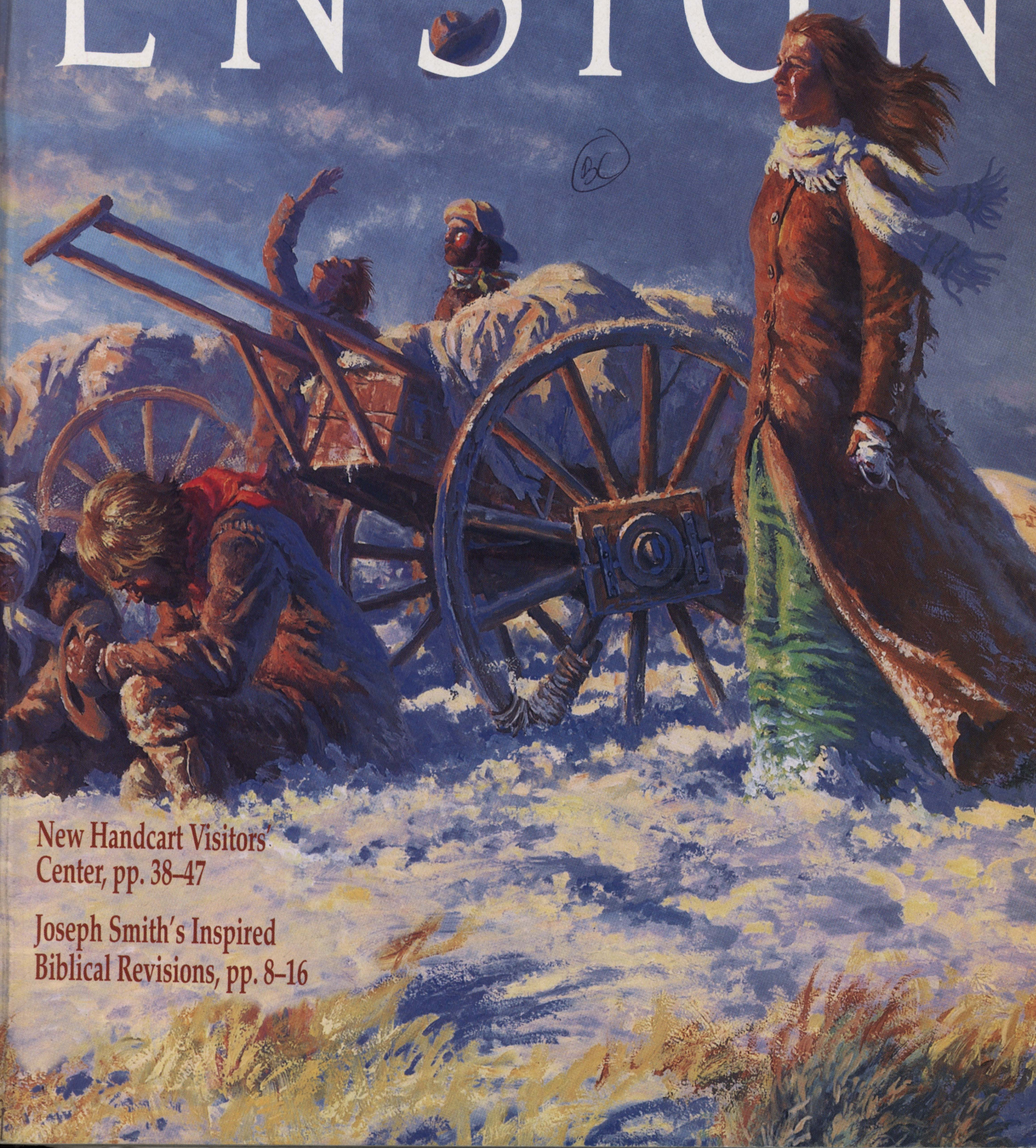


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THE ENSIGN OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS • AUGUST 1997

ENSIGN



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THEY CAME

BY PAUL H. PETERSON

With high hopes, handcart pioneers left Iowa City, Iowa, or Florence, Nebraska, and headed west to the Salt Lake Valley.

The year 1997 marks the 150th anniversary of the arrival of President Brigham Young's advance, exploratory company into the Salt Lake Valley. Large companies with ox-drawn teams soon followed, and in 1856 the first handcart company began the trek west. Those resolute early Saints followed a route that has become known as the Mormon Trail. Why is it called the Mormon Trail? After all, for the most part, Latter-day Saints were not trailblazers; they followed established routes. The Mormon Trail is named after our people for at least two reasons.

First, it was because Church members followed the trail in such large numbers for such an extended period—at least 70,000 Saints traversed it for some 23 years. It was for these members their pathway to the promised land.

Second, it was because of what trail historian Stanley Kimball called the high drama of the exodus.¹ This was hardly a typical group of western-bound

Between 1856 and 1860, nearly 3,000 Latter-day Saints traveled by handcart from Iowa and Nebraska to the Salt Lake Valley in a total of 10 handcart companies.



BY HAND CART

emigrants seeking fortune, or land, or adventure in the fertile valleys of Oregon or Washington, or later in an earthly paradise called California. This was, for the most part, a migration of families hoping to find refuge from religious persecution in an isolated portion of the Great Basin. Here they came by the thousands, often at great sacrifice, to live gospel teachings and to build the kingdom of God.

For many 19th-century Saints, the trail was a schoolhouse of faith and learning. Somehow, as they trekked across the lowlands of Iowa or eastern Nebraska or wound through the middle Rockies, they sharpened their religious focus. They gained greater faith and grew closer to God. And for later generations the story of the pioneer trek serves as a connective link to a storied past and a glorious future.

Symbols of the pioneer trail emerge easily and naturally from our minds.² We think of sturdy men yoking ox teams, of determined women giving birth under the protective white canopies of covered wagons, or of



Pioneers struggled to push and pull their handcart over mountainous terrain.

HANDCART PIONEERS, BY MINERVA K. TEICHERT, COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF CHURCH HISTORY AND ART

THE 10 LATTER-DAY SAINT HANDCART COMPANIES

No.	Year	Captain	Persons	Handcarts	Wagons	Left Iowa City	Left Florence	Arrived SLC	Deaths en route
1	1856	Ellsworth	274	52	5	9 June	20 July	26 Sept.	13
2	1856	McArthur	221	48	4	11 June	24 July	26 Sept.	7
3	1856	Bunker	320	64	5	23 June	30 July	2 Oct.	7 or less
4	1856	Willie	500	120	6	15 July	17 Aug.	9 Nov.	67
5	1856	Martin	576	146	7	28 July	27 Aug.	30 Nov.	135-150
6	1857	Evans	149	31	1	22 May	20 June	11,12 Sept.	[?]
7	1857	Christiansen	330	68	3	13 June	7 July	13 Sept.	6 [?]
8	1859	Rowley	235	60	6	—	9 June	4 Sept.	5 [?]
9	1860	Robinson	233	43	6	—	6 June	27 Aug.	1
10	1860	Stoddard	124	21	7	—	6 July	24 Sept.	0
Totals			2962	653	50				about 250

circled congregations praying in the early morning for a safe day's journey ahead. We think of those light-hearted occasions when youth played tag as their families moved westward along the Platte or Sweetwater Rivers. We think of solemn times, when loved ones buried loved ones in scattered graves along the trail. We think of long, irregular trains of handcarts. We think of determined men and women and children pulling and tugging at those carts, sometimes under happy but arduous conditions and sometimes in situations that strained the human spirit to the utmost as they endeavored to reach Zion.

GATHERING TO ZION

One cannot understand 19th-century Latter-day Saint history without understanding the concept of gathering to a central location. It was, simply, part and parcel of the conversion package. If, for example, a family embraced the gospel in England, as soon as their affairs were in order and as soon as they could obtain necessary funds, they left their homeland and journeyed to Zion. It was the actual physical gathering of covenant Israel to a designated location where they would build a temple and establish Zion.

But it was not easy to gather to Zion. Willing and even anxious converts didn't necessarily translate into financially able ones. Most members, whether located on the banks of the Missouri River or in urban Liverpool, England, were poor.

To facilitate the gathering of distant members to Zion, President Young and the Brethren created the Perpetual Emigrating Fund (PEF) in the fall of 1849. Essentially the PEF was a revolving fund. Latter-day

Saints with means would donate funds, which were quickly funneled to converts waiting to gather. Then, upon arrival, the gathering converts would work on public work projects, repay their loan in cash, commodities, or labor, and thereby replenish the fund. By 1852 PEF monies, initially used to bring in Church members from the middle and eastern United States, were made available to thousands of European Saints.³

But with all the successes of the PEF (and they were notable), funding the emigration remained a challenge. There was simply not enough money to go around. By the early 1850s, nearly everyone in the United States who wanted to gather had received the opportunity, yet there were thousands of converts waiting in Great Britain and Scandinavia. "We should hardly judge that

there were a hundred families among the Saints in Great Britain who are able to go direct from this to the Salt Lake basin," wrote European Mission president Orson Pratt in 1849. "We are in hopes that the time will soon come when there will be capital sufficient to enable the Saints to pass on to the place of their destination without any delay."⁴



THE ORIGINS OF HANDCART TRAVEL

The handcart plan was born of this concern and hope—concern about the plight of thousands of European converts and hope that a method could be devised to enable them to gather. "I have been thinking how we should operate another year," President Young wrote in 1855 to Elder Franklin D. Richards of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who was then president of the European Mission. "We cannot afford to purchase wagons and teams as in times past, [and] I am consequently thrown back upon my old plan—to



Between 1856 and 1860, many Saints from Scandinavia and the British Isles sailed in the hold of a ship to America (left) and then pulled handcarts west.

make hand-carts and let the emigration foot it, and draw upon them the necessary supplies, having a cow or two for every ten [handcarts].” President Young went on to indicate that handcart travel would likely be quicker and cheaper and ultimately would “become the favourite mode of crossing the plains.”⁵ Later in the year, President Young brought the plan to fruition. He instructed gathering Latter-day Saints in Europe to sail from Liverpool to New York, take the train from New York to Iowa City, and “walk and draw their luggage” overland to Utah.⁶

Handcarts across the plains? “And would we actually pull them across turbulent rivers, up mountain passes, and drag them down ravines?” some Church members must have inquired. For many, the word *handcarts* probably conjured up images of the large carts used by porters and street sweepers in large eastern cities.⁷ Clearly it was a novel and intriguing idea to use such vehicles to transport thousands of people 1,300 miles across terrain that was sometimes less than hospitable.

The handcarts, with wheels as far apart as normal wagon wheels, were constructed of wood, usually Iowa oak or hickory. There were regular carts and slightly larger family carts. The larger family cart

often had axles of iron rather than of hickory. Ideally, at least two people pulled them; by journey’s end sometimes it was but one. Not surprisingly, supply rationing was severe. Adults were allowed only 17 pounds of baggage, largely clothing and bedding; children were allowed 10. Larger carts sometimes were loaded down with as much as 400 to 500 pounds of food, bedding, clothing, and cooking utensils.

The captains of handcart companies were as rugged as they were faithful. All had considerable trail experience. Each company had accompanying ox-drawn baggage and commissary wagons—about one wagon for every 20 handcarts. Handcart groups also took along public tents, each tent sheltering about 20 people.⁸

THE ERA OF HANDCARTS

The actual period of handcart migration was brief—from 1856 to 1860. That beginning year of 1856, five companies were organized to make the trek. The benefits of President Young’s plan were apparent with the arrival of the first two groups, consisting of just under 500 emigrants. Led by Captains Edmund L.

CROSSING NEAR DEVIL'S GATE

The Sweetwater River winds through the Sweetwater Valley of southern Wyoming. "Its beauty is beyond description," wrote Solomon F. Kimball in his account of the rescue of the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies ("Belated Emigrants of 1856," *Improvement Era*, Jan. 1914, 209). Devil's Gate is the valley's most spectacular landmark. Under most conditions, the first view of the walls of Devil's Gate rising 400 feet above the river—with its 900-foot-long and 150-foot-wide chasm—awakens a sense of

wonderment in the eyes of those who behold it.

But during the first few days of November 1856, amid the harsh winter snows, the starving and freezing survivors of the Martin Company had little strength left to react to nature's beauty as they struggled to the site.

Rescue party leader Captain George D. Grant described the scene to President Young in a letter sent by courier on the morning of 3 November 1856: "You can imagine between five and six hundred men, women and children, worn down by drawing

carts through mud and snow, fainting by the wayside, children crying with cold, their limbs stiffened, their feet bleeding, and some of them bare to the frost. The sight is too much for the stoutest of us, but we go on doing our duty, not doubting, nor despairing. Our party is too small to be of much of a help. . . . We have prayed without ceasing, and the blessings of the Lord have been with us" (as quoted in *Improvement Era*, Jan. 1914, 209).

Solomon F. Kimball continues: "Those of the handcart people who were unable to walk were crowded into the overloaded wagons, and a start was made; the balance of the company hobbling along behind with

their carts as best they could.

"When [they] came to the first crossing of the Sweetwater west of Devil's Gate, they found the stream full of floating ice, making it dangerous to cross, on account of the strong current. However, the teams went over in safety. . . . When the people who were drawing carts came to the brink of this treacherous stream, they refused to go any further . . . , as the water in places was almost waist deep, and the river more than a hundred feet wide. . . . [They] remembered that nearly one-sixth of their number had already perished from the effects of crossing North Platte, eighteen days before. . . . They . . . cried mightily unto the Lord for help.

"After . . . every apparent avenue of escape seemed closed, three eighteen-year-old boys belonging to the relief party came to the rescue, and to the astonishment of all who saw, carried nearly every member of that ill-fated handcart company across the snowbound stream. The strain was so terrible, and the exposure so great, that in later years all the boys died from the effects of it. When President Brigham Young heard of this heroic act, he wept like a child, and later declared publicly, 'that act alone will ensure C. Allen Huntington, George W. Grant and David P. Kimball an everlasting salvation in the Celestial Kingdom of God, worlds without end'" (*Improvement Era*, Jan. 1914, 209–11; *Improvement Era*, Feb. 1914, 287–88). □



As members of the rescue team, three 18-year-old boys—C. Allen Huntington, George W. Grant, and David P. Kimball—carried nearly all of the members of the Martin Handcart Company across the icy Sweetwater River.

Ellsworth and Daniel D. McArthur, they arrived in Salt Lake City on 26 September 1856. It had been a strenuous but safe journey. Along the way they had occasionally struck up a chorus of the well-known "Handcart Song"; they had also quietly tolerated random harassment from amused onlookers and had endured a fair bit of privation and fatigue. Sometimes they even had occasion to resolve petty quarrels among themselves. But these were relatively minor interludes. For the most part, they had never lost sight of their ultimate goal. "We waded streams, crossed high mountains and

pulled through heavy sand," wrote participant Mary Ann Jones, "leaving comfortable homes, father, mother, brother and sister to be where we would hear a prophet's voice and live with the Saints of Zion."⁹

Understandably, the day of arrival, 26 September 1856, was viewed as a day of triumph—a day for both solemn reflection and gala celebration. The First Presidency met the dusty and bedraggled but full-filled pioneers at the mouth of Emigration Canyon with a band and a military escort. The *Deseret News* reported that men, women, and children gathered from

everywhere to greet their fellow members, "the numbers rapidly increas[ing] until the living tide lined and thronged South Temple Street."¹⁰ For many it was a poignant moment in time. "I shall never forget the feeling that ran through my whole system," noted one observer, "as I caught the first sight of them."¹¹

Within one week, a third group of some 300 Welsh Saints arrived, led by Captain Edward Bunker. And as had the first two groups, they completed the journey without undue hardship. Altogether, the first three companies had completed the journey from Iowa City to Salt Lake City in less time and with equal or possibly fewer casualties than the typical wagon train. It would seem the "most remarkable travel experiment in the history of western America" was a success.¹²

But the triumph soon turned to tragedy. On 4 October President Young received heart-stopping news from Elder Franklin D. Richards who had just arrived in town. There were yet two other groups—the James G. Willie and Edward Martin Companies, consisting of around 1,000 persons—on the plains. Elder Richards, handcart company organizer, traveling by horseback and light carriages with a group of returning missionaries, passed the two companies on the trail in early September.¹³

President Young was stunned. He had thought the last two companies would winter somewhere in the Winter Quarters, Nebraska, area.¹⁴ Indeed, the last resupply wagons that were regularly dispatched to meet incoming emigrants had returned to the valley. Thus, some 1,000 Saints were traveling somewhere in Nebraska or Wyoming with winter fast approaching.

How could this have happened? With the advantage of historical hindsight it is relatively easy to pinpoint problems along the way. The emigrants had difficulty procuring boats in Liverpool, thus postponing their Atlantic voyage. Agents in Iowa City and Florence were not ready for such a large group, and there were not sufficient stockpiles of carts and tents.¹⁵ Nearly all the eager emigrants, despite the delays and disappointments, clamored to get to Zion that very year. And finally, some well-intentioned but inexperienced leaders encouraged them to move ahead. One subcaptain of the Martin Company, Levi Savage, thought otherwise, and advised the emigrants to "not cross the mountains with a mixed

company of aged people, women, and little children, so late in the season." When Brother Savage was outvoted, he said, "Brethren and sisters, what I have said I know to be true; but seeing you are to go forward, I will go with you, will help you all I can, will work with you, will rest with you, will suffer with you, and, if necessary, I will die with you. May God in his mercy bless and preserve us."¹⁶

Preservation of the Willie-Martin emigrants became President Young's top priority. Concerned about early storms, he immediately dispatched relief teams. The first group, led by George D. Grant, left on 7 October with the first 16 of what eventually amounted to 200 wagons and teams. Several of the rescue party were missionaries who had just arrived with Elder Richards days before. Since they knew many of the



Though late in the season, both the Willie and the Martin Companies chose to go west rather than wait until spring.



INTO THE STORM, BY BYRON PIXTON

emigrants, they were understandably anxious about their condition. Other rescuers were drawn from various city militias.¹⁷ As a group, they can only be described as daring and courageous.

Rescuers reached the Willie Company on 21 October and the Martin Company on 28 October. What they found melted the stoutest heart. Severe winter weather had overtaken the companies. There had been untold suffering, agony, and death. Nearly all were starving, many were frozen, and several were unable to walk. Eighteen-year-old Sarah James reported being "cold all the time." Mary Hurren Wight had eaten her daily

three ounces of flour, but it had hardly sufficed. In an effort to thwart hunger pains, she and her sister and brother had chewed on pieces of rawhide stripped from the wheels of their handcart.¹⁸ The Martin Company, with some 576 people, many of them elderly, was in an especially pitiful condition, some of them seemingly having lost all verve and direction.¹⁹

There was a certain gallantry, however, that attended the unspeakable horror. There were accounts of strong men who quietly sliced up portions of their rations to give to their children.²⁰ Some Church members, mostly husbands and fathers, pulled carts up to the very day they died.²¹ And the women, as more than one writer has noted, were magnificent.²² Without their quiet resourcefulness, their meticulous efficiency, their steadfastness and dutifulness under inhumane conditions, it is difficult to fathom how any could have survived.

Weeks later, the weary, hungry handcart pioneers straggled into the valley. The Willie Company arrived on 9 November. Of an original group of about 500, 67 had died. The Martin Company arrived three weeks later on 30 November. Of the 576 members, at least 145 had died. Upon arriving they were immediately taken into the homes of various families and friends who caringly administered to their varied needs.

To assist Martin Company emigrants, President Young canceled afternoon worship on 30 November. "Prayer is good," he told the Saints at morning worship service, "but when baked potatoes and pudding and milk are needed, prayer will not supply their place on this occasion; give every duty its proper time and place."²³ For the next several days, outlying villages sent donations of food, clothing, and blankets. In actuality, residents in Salt Lake City and nearby villages had little to give. The drought of 1855–56 had left them with scanty supplies. But this was Zion, and it was expected that everyone would give all they could.²⁴

Indeed, regarding the Willie-Martin experience, heroic status should be attached to at least three different clusters of people. First, of course, we must look to the handcart pioneers themselves. A noted historian praised their "human kindness and helpfulness and brotherly love in the midst of raw horror."²⁵ By and large, those who died, died with dignity and faith. Second, we must recognize the rescue parties who risked life and limb to save their fellow Saints. Their contribution cannot be overestimated; without rescue parties there would probably have been no survivors. Handcart pioneers for the rest of their days talked and wrote gratefully of these stalwart, intrepid Saints who came to their rescue.²⁶ Third, we must honor the

resident Saints in the valley who cared for the emigrants, sharing liberally of their modest (and in some cases, almost depleted) stores of food and supplies.

HANDCART TRAVEL, AN EVALUATION

Yet the Willie-Martin tragedy did not stop handcart travel. A missionary company going east in 1857 traveled using handcarts, and between 1857 and 1860 five additional emigrant companies took carts west across the plains. Their success demonstrated that President Young's handcart plan, while demanding, was an effective way to move large groups at minimal cost over long distances. Altogether, nearly 3,000 people reached Zion using handcarts. About 250 of that number died along the way; and about 210 of those pioneers were in the Willie and Martin Companies.²⁷

Certainly there was an element of risk to handcart travel. There is little doubt that if the Saints in the late 1850s had had sufficient resources, handcart travel would probably not have been the transportation mode of choice. But clearly Latter-day Saints in 1856 did not have the means. And were it not for the inexperience of immigration officials, coupled with a capricious climate (the storms were unseasonably early in 1856), the entire venture would have been counted an unmarred success.

It is interesting to note that the Willie-Martin survivors chose not to dwell on the suffering and death; very few expressed bitterness.²⁸ While sometimes it is said that no one in the Martin Company ever apostatized or left the Church, this statement requires qualification. Almost all retained a vibrant faith in the gospel, and for some the ordeal resulted in their gaining "the absolute knowledge that God lives for we became acquainted with him in our extremities."²⁹

In retrospect, it is clear that many Saints in 1856 were determined to come to Zion at almost any cost. Those who have been in the Church for some years may recall that in a 1970 general conference address, President Gordon B. Hinckley movingly recounted the experience of his wife's grandmother, Mary Ann Goble Pay, who at age 13 left England with her family and ultimately joined up with the Martin Handcart Company. Before journey's end, she lost two brothers, a sister, and finally her mother, who died just before they reached the valley. Years later, in her personal history Sister Pay reflected on the spirit that prompted her family to become handcart pioneers: "I have thought often of my mother's words before we left England. 'Polly, I want to go to Zion while my children are small, so they can be raised in the Gospel of





In spite of the tragedies of the Willie and Martin Companies, handcart pioneers in the other eight handcart companies successfully accomplished the journey (left) and were grateful for this inexpensive means of travel to the Salt Lake Valley (above).

Christ, for I know this is the true church."³⁰

Mary Anne Goble Pay, of course, made it to the valley. Others did not. Blessed be the names of all of them. Those who came to the West by handcart and those who sacrificed their all found the joy and peace promised to Saints who endure suffering for the Savior's sake. The story of their tragedies and triumphs and their legacy of courage and conviction will never die. □

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Gospel topics: courage, faith, handcart companies, pioneers

NOTES

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2. Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (1971), 2.
3. LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856-1860* (1960), 23-24.
4. "An Epistle of Orson Pratt," *Millennial Star* 11 (15 Sept. 1849): 278.
5. As quoted in *Millennial Star*, 17 (22 Dec. 1855): 813.
6. Quoted in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:571.
7. Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 53.
8. Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 54-55; *Utah History Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan Kent Powell (1994), 242-43.
9. As quoted in Kate B. Carter, ed., *Heart Throbs of the West* (1944), 6:359.
10. *Deseret News*, 26 Sept. 1856.

11. Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 29 Sept. 1856.

12. Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 11.

13. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:571. The Richards group passed the Martin Company on 7 September and the Willie Company on 12 September. Both groups were traveling across Nebraska.

14. Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 91; Rebecca Bartholomew and Leonard J. Arrington, *Rescue of the 1856 Handcart Companies*, (1992), 2.

15. Brigham Young to Orson Pratt, printed in *Millennial Star*, 14 Feb. 1857, 99.

16. Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 96-97; Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*, 240. Stegner claims that Levi Savage performed invaluable service along

the way and that some survivors owed their very lives to him.

17. Bartholomew and Arrington, *Rescue*, 7-8.
 18. Bartholomew and Arrington, *Rescue*, 15.
 19. Bartholomew and Arrington, *Rescue*, 22.
 20. Bartholomew and Arrington, *Rescue*, 15.
 21. Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 102.
 22. Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*, 13; *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:573.
 23. As quoted in *Deseret News*, 10 Dec. 1856.
 24. Bartholomew and Arrington, *Rescue*, 39-40, 42.
 25. Wallace Stegner, "Ordeal by Handcart," *Collier's*, 6 July 1956, 83.
 26. Bartholomew and Arrington, *Rescue*, 3.
 27. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:573.
 28. Bartholomew and Arrington, *Rescue*, 3.
 29. As quoted by Gordon B. Hinckley, *ENSIGN*, Nov. 1991, 54.
- According to President Hinckley, Francis Webster made the observation.
30. *Improvement Era*, June 1970, 41.