



The Rocky Avenue



Rocky Ridges Trail

Both the Willie and Martin handcart companies suffered greatly at these places. On October 23, 1856, the Willie Company struggled up through the Rocky Ridges in the face of a fierce winter storm, and, further east on October 29, the Martin Company slogged up through snow and mud from the North Platte to a bleak camp at the Rocky Avenue.

Weather, Disaster, and Responsibility: An Essay on the Willie and Martin Handcart Story

Arguably the most heroic and the most tragic episode of the westering experience, the handcart trek of late 1856 is a magnificent story of individual faith in the midst of serious mistakes.

Howard A. Christy

It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.

—2 Nephi 25:23

On October 4, 1856, a warm, calm day in Great Salt Lake City, Franklin D. Richards, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, accompanied by twelve other returning missionaries, arrived after a fast trip across the plains. This should have been a moment for rejoicing; Elder Richards's "Swiftsure Train" arrived eight days after the jubilant arrival of the Ellsworth and McArthur handcart companies and just two days after the Bunker handcart company, supposedly the last group of emigrants for the year.

The happy arrival of Elder Richards and the other missionaries, most of whom had worked hard to bring the first "poor Saints" to Utah via handcart, would therefore have been a fitting cap to an extremely successful season that had, among other things, proved the viability of using handcarts in place of the slower and much more expensive ox-drawn wagons. But Richards brought startling news: at least four more companies, two of which were handcart companies, all together numbering more than a thousand Saints, were still out on the plains. Further questioning of the returned missionaries revealed that the members of those companies were badly equipped, seriously short of supplies, and were so far back on the trail that they would surely experience severe cold weather.

The next morning, after what may have been a restless night, Brigham Young resolutely called up and ordered out one of the most massive resupply efforts in western history—an effort that, when a terrible storm struck throughout the region two weeks later, became a desperate rescue operation that barely averted total catastrophe. The disaster that befell the Willie and Martin handcart companies and an analysis of what was responsible for that disaster will be the focus of this essay.¹

Narrative Methods

Before turning to the particulars, a word about scope and method will set the stage. Wherever possible, I have restricted all details regarding dates, places, persons, road and weather conditions, and descriptions of events to information gleaned from accounts of eyewitnesses²—not that I am convinced that they are necessarily the most accurate or the least biased. Rather, I emphasize eyewitness accounts in the belief that those who suffered through the disaster deserve to be studied first, the most thoroughly, and with the most sensitivity. I quote secondary sources sparingly except where they give valuable background or are the depositories of important primary accounts such as that of John Chislett. Further, I briefly present evidence and observations on geographic and climatic conditions, which played such a major role in the disaster.

The narrow time frame imposed by the seasons—and evidence of clear prior knowledge of that time frame—begins the essay, followed by a discussion of geographic and health factors that in combination wore the emigrants down. Then follows an abbreviated chronology of the Willie and Martin handcart companies' trek west from Florence—and to some extent the Hodgett and Hunt wagon companies that accompanied the Martin Company—along that sector of the trail where the trouble developed and disaster ultimately occurred. The essay concludes with an observation on faith and responsibility.

At the outset, I admit to a particular perspective—or bias if you will. From experience as a career infantry officer who participated in several disastrous and tragic events on the battlefield, and

from more than twenty years of reading and pondering military history with a recent emphasis on moral leadership, I have become convinced that, when grave risk is involved, some leaders lack the practical experience and sense of responsibility to adequately protect the lives and welfare of those they have been called to serve. I believe that the Willie and Martin handcart disaster presents a compelling example of this lack, and, if so, there may be a timely lesson in it for us all.³

The Handcart Plan

The belief that emigrants could walk across the plains of America was neither farfetched nor unique to the Mormon faithful. Most of those who were knowledgeable of the westward migration well knew how expensive and slow ox-drawn wagons were, and at least a few pioneers determined to attempt the long trip on foot with carts or wheelbarrows.⁴ They also knew that, regardless of what transportation was used, most individuals would walk much of the distance, but that walking, though tedious and exhausting, if carried out during the warmer seasons of the year tended to have a toughening effect on those who were otherwise healthy and strong. This knowledge, coupled with the Church's serious lack of funds and the extreme poverty of many of the European converts, made the handcart "experiment" justifiable as well as feasible. The Saints proceeded with their handcart plan beginning in 1856, and by 1860, when the plan was discontinued, they had clearly proved its feasibility by the fact that eight of the ten emigrant handcart companies had made the trip as successfully as any wagon company.⁵

Although neither feasibility nor justifiability were ever much in question, the handcart plan was feasible only if great care were taken as to timing and provisioning. But in 1856 these aspects were insufficiently known or considered. Many details were notably lacking, such as availability and procurement of seasoned wood with which to build the carts, availability and commitment of experienced craftsmen, availability of trained oxen to pull the supply wagons, and proper initial provisioning and arranging for resupply en route on the overland trek. Additionally, it is apparent that few

Church leaders, if any, in the United States knew how many “poor Saints” were coming—and they prepared for too few of them. Further, the lack of practical experience of those in charge of the handcart operation—a scheme that had never been attempted or tested by the Church before 1856⁶—and the difficulty of supervising such a complicated undertaking involving so many people over such vast distances importantly influenced the outcome for Willie and Martin. This inexperience had another serious effect—an absence of prudence sufficient to allow for alternatives in case of unforeseen misfortune or breakdown, imprudence that was heightened by an apparent belief that God would directly intervene, if necessary, to assure success. And, looming above all, was a seeming unawareness of, or unconcern for, the serious limitations for safe travel imposed by the time and the seasons. The combination—not any single aspect—resulted in a disaster that only great individual courage and faith on the part of the emigrants, and extreme and heroic measures in the nick of time on the part of the rescuers, saved those involved from total destruction.⁷

Although shortcomings in the planning in Europe and provisioning in the Eastern United States figured importantly in the ultimate outcome and deserve careful study and description, they are not discussed here owing partly to limitations of space and to the lack of available documentation, but also because they did not in fact cause the disaster, since all that was needed to have averted the tragedy, once the appropriate departure date to assure a safe passage had passed, was to have postponed to the next spring the overland travel of the last several emigrant companies leaving Florence, Nebraska. Rather, I begin this essay with a discussion of those aspects of the journey that had an immediate and continued effect on the disaster once organizers in the East decided to proceed in the face of the known risk.

The Time Frame

The narrow seasonal time frame or window for safe travel across the plains was well known in 1856. Having studied large-scale overland emigration since its inception in 1843 and having organized the provisioning and transportation to Utah of thousands

of emigrant Saints since 1847, Church leaders were as well informed about the time frame as anyone.⁸ The First Presidency published several annual epistles that warned emigrant Saints to start early enough to avoid the challenging fall weather of the mountains and high plateaus of Wyoming and Utah. The essential element of that time frame—the latest safe departure date from Winter Quarters (Florence, Nebraska)—could be readily adduced from these statements. The matter was pointedly reiterated by Brigham Young in November 1856⁹ when it became clear that a disaster was under way in Wyoming.

For example, the first known epistle from Church leaders in the Salt Lake Valley, published in December 1847, warned the Saints to both leave early and to carry clothing to protect against cold weather en route. To be safe, a May departure was advised (to avert severe coldness in the West), and it might also have been the earliest safe date (to allow grass for the animals at the start of the trek), making the window of opportunity for departure relatively narrow:

Gather yourselves together speedily, near to this place, on the east side of the Missouri River, and, if possible, be ready to start from hence by the first of May next, or as soon as grass is sufficiently grown, and go to the Great Salt Lake City, with bread stuff sufficient to sustain you until you can raise grain the following season. . . . All Saints who are coming on this route, will do well to furnish themselves with woolen or winter, instead of summer clothing, generally, as they will be exposed to many chilling blasts before they pass the mountain heights.¹⁰

The epistle dated October 9, 1848, clearly indicated the weather hazard of late summer along the trail in Wyoming and the need for resupply from the valleys of Utah:

On the 28th of August last, we wrote you an epistle from the Sweetwater . . . considering it wisdom that they should have an early start, make the best of their way while the weather and feed were in tolerable condition, so that they may reach their destination before the severity of the weather would be likely to set in upon them—while we remained at the Sweetwater with our goods and families on the ground, exposed to the keen frosty nights and storms that are so prevalent in that country.

On the 30th of August we were glad to meet with a number of the brethren from the Valley, with 47 wagons and 124 yoke of oxen,

being three yoke of cattle over and above replacing the wagons and teams that we had previously sent back to the Saints in Iowa, towards filling the vacancy of the great number of cattle, that had unfortunately died on our hands, and been left by the wayside to feed the ravenous wolves and birds, that inhabit the desolate country through which we are obliged to travel. Yet, not withstanding so inadequate assistance, our hearts fainted not; but relying on the arm of Jehovah, we reloaded our wagons and continued our journey.

On the 1st of September, going through the South Pass to the waters that flow into the Pacific . . . had a miserable evening's journey of it; the next day we had a mizzling rain, and only removed about a mile in order to find feed to sustain our cattle, at night a snow storm passed over us, and on Sunday, the 3d of September, the entire of the Wind River chain of mountains, was covered with snow, the weather was then severe, but afterwards cleared up with pleasant days and frosty nights, which continued with us nearly the whole of our journey.¹¹

The epistle dated September 22, 1851, is especially illuminating because it is the first known discussion of the handcart experiment to come five years later. As in most of these early epistles, the First Presidency claimed the feasibility of overland travel but once again urged early departure from the Missouri River:

Elder Richards will continue to ship the Saints by way of New Orleans to Kaneshville, as hitherto, only be particular to start them earlier in the season, so that they can be at Pottawatamie in season to build their hand-carts, and walk or ride over the mountains as they may have means, before snow falls. . . .

Elder Richards will also appropriate so much of the Emigrating Fund in his possession, as may be necessary to forward two ship loads of the Saints to Kaneshville, where they should be in April, ready to prepare for their journey over the mountains.¹²

The epistle dated April 18, 1852, speaks of bad weather—the recollection of which may have weighed on Brigham Young's mind on the night of October 4, 1856, and may have haunted his memory in mid-November 1856, when knowledge of the disaster became clear. Speaking of the arrival to the valley in 1851, the Seventh General Epistle of the Brethren reported:

The last company of the emigrating Saints arrived October 24th. The mountains and table lands were covered with snow, for the first time, last fall, November 10th, followed the next day by the severest gale of wind ever known in our Valley.¹³

The October 1852 epistle gives some highly interesting information. Not only does it once again point up the need for early departure, but it also recalls an early winter storm that impeded the emigrants in Wyoming, who were rescued by a resupply train of the same magnitude or greater than the emergency rescue mission of 1856:

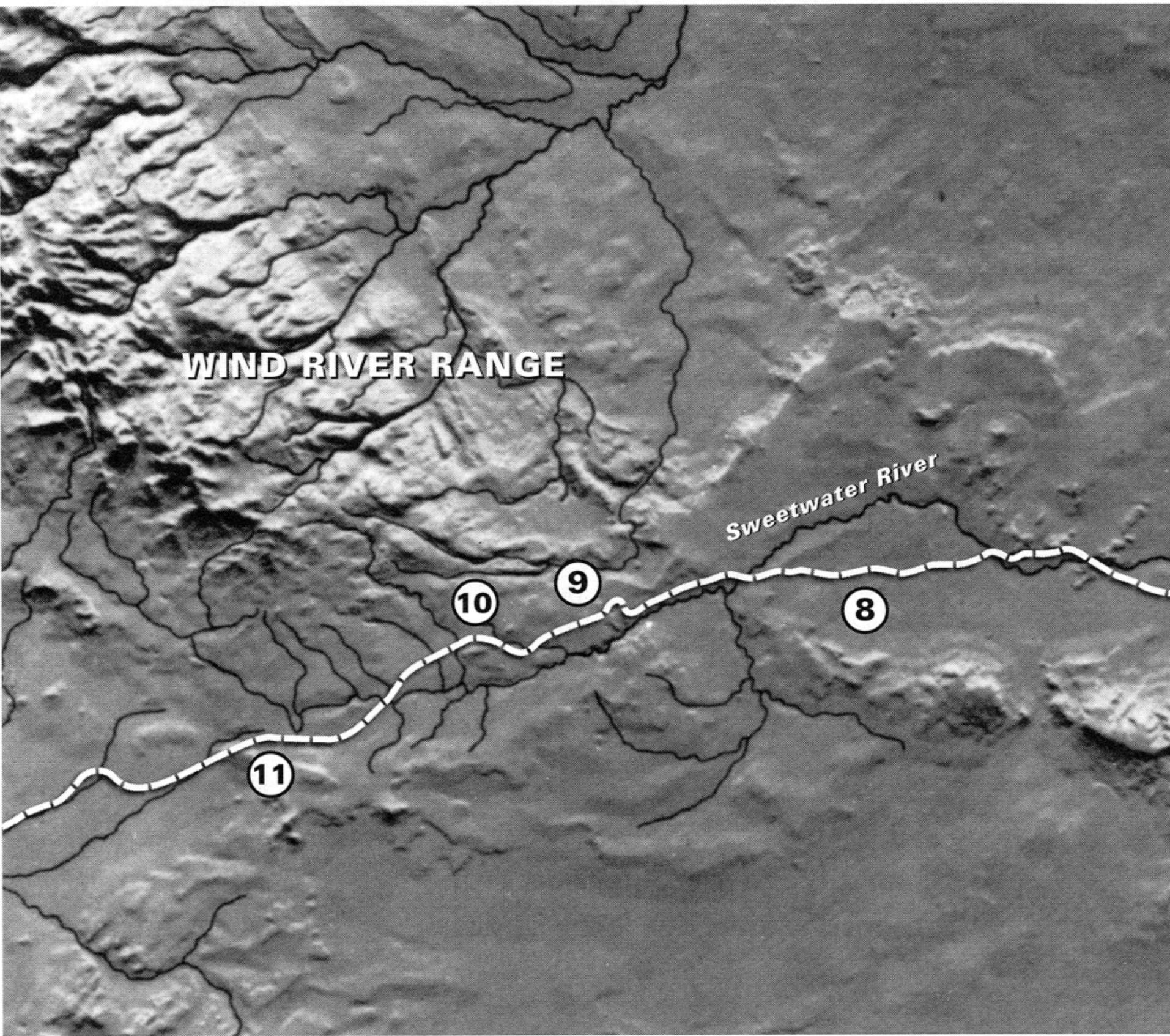
The Saints were late in their emigration this year, and for the last two or three weeks [mid-to-late September], have suffered from occasional snow storms in the mountains, which retarded their progress, and helped to make them short of provisions; but some two hundred or more teams and wagons went from the Valley to their assistance, taking to the various camps some forty or fifty thousand pounds of flour, and large supplies of vegetables, which enabled them to come in, in safety.¹⁴

The Willie and Martin Timetable

The ship *Thornton*, which carried the Willie Company, did not set sail from Liverpool until May 3. These Saints reached Iowa City on June 26 and were held up until July 15 in order to build their carts and obtain provisions for the trek across Iowa and over the plains to Utah. They arrived in Florence on August 11 and finally struck westward from the Missouri River on August 18, a departure date that assured a late October arrival in Great Salt Lake City.

The Saints who formed the Martin Company departed Liverpool aboard the *Horizon* on May 25 and arrived at Iowa City on July 8. Like the Willie Company, they were detained there for three weeks to build carts and collect provisions. They departed Iowa City on July 28, arrived in Florence on August 22, moved to the staging area at nearby Cutler Park, and recommenced the westward trek on August 27, assuring an arrival in Great Salt Lake City no earlier than November 1.¹⁵

Both companies were therefore more than two months late in their departure from Florence if they were to avoid exposure to the severe fall weather conditions that were well known to prevail on the high plateaus of Wyoming and Utah. A disaster of some proportions was probable at the outset. Little did anyone know, however, that a terrible winter storm—like that of 1852—might strike to make disaster a surety in 1856.¹⁶



① Deer Creek (5,009 ft.)

Here, two days before the October 19 storm, members of the Martin Company, exhausted and on short rations, abandoned as much as 40 percent of their individual belongings, including clothing and bedding.

② Crossing of the Platte (5,120 ft.)

Martin, Hodgett, and Hunt companies forded the North Platte River near the old Mormon Ferry (at present-day Casper) just minutes before the blizzard struck on October 19. Earlier that day they passed by Richard's Bridge, about 10 miles north of the site of the ford, because they did not have enough money to pay the toll.

③ Red Buttes (5,200 ft.)

Martin, Hodgett, and Hunt companies, suffering greatly from the effects of cold, wind, and wet, camped for nine days on the west bank of the North Platte River after fording the river about

5 miles further downstream. The advance express of the Grant Rescue Party found them here, almost out of food.

④ Prospect Hill (6,588 ft.)

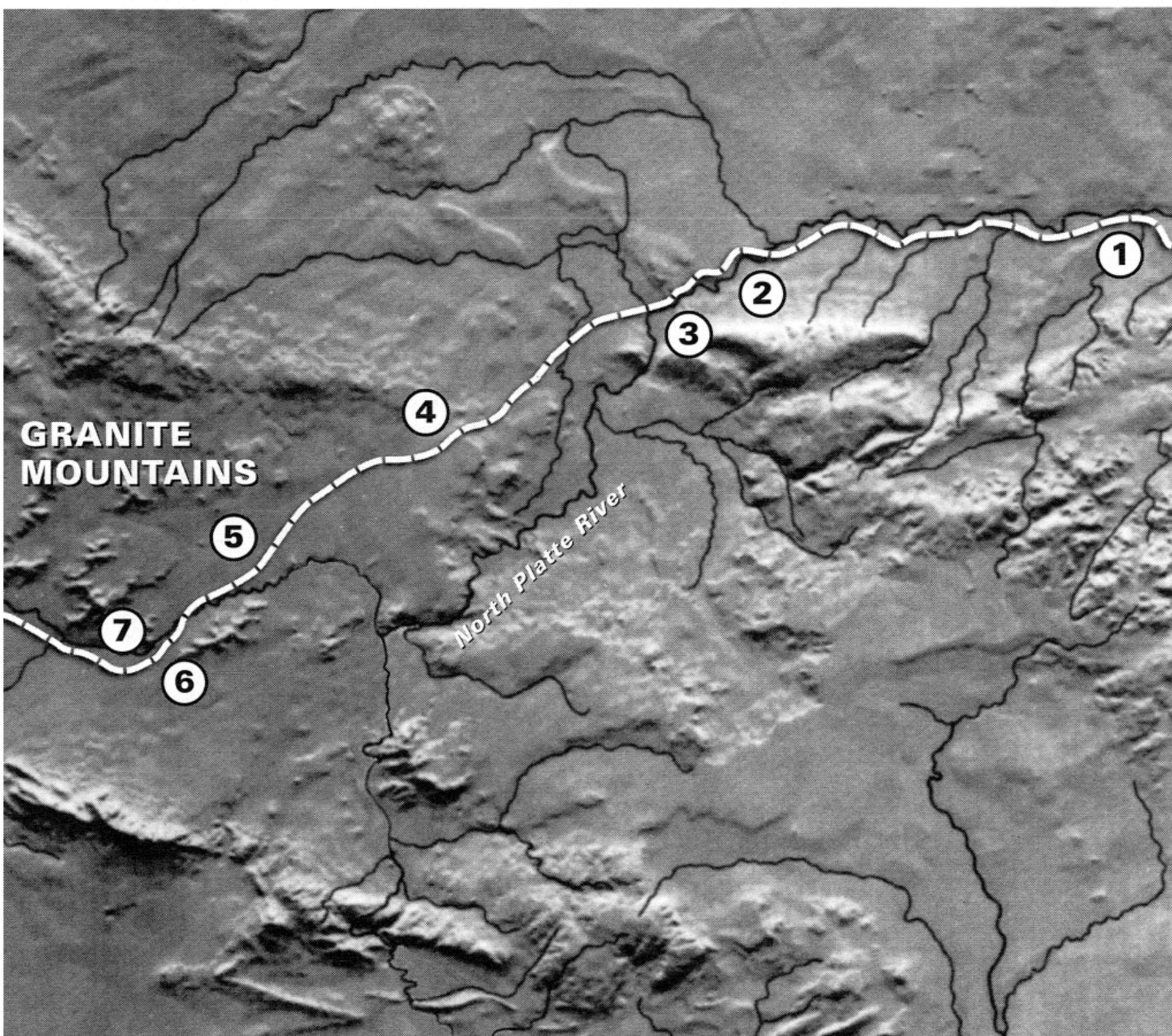
Martin, Hodgett, and Hunt companies struggled up and over Rocky Avenue and Prospect Hill through snow and mud.

⑤ Greasewood Creek (6,000 ft.)

At this camp the Martin, Hodgett, and Hunt companies received their first supplies of food and clothing provided by the Grant Rescue Party.

⑥ Devil's Gate (5,960 ft.)

Martin, Hodgett, and Hunt companies camped here for five days with the Grant Rescue Party in miserably crowded conditions, bitter cold, and piercing wind.



NORTH ▲

⑦ Martin's Cove (6,200 ft.)

Owing to the crowding and cold, the Martin Company forded the Sweetwater River and moved into this more-sheltered location, which is 2½ miles from Devil's Gate.

⑧ Sixteen-Mile Drive (6,700 ft.)

The October 19 blizzard struck the Willie Company as it was crossing this unprotected and waterless place. They went into camp near Sweetwater Station, on the Sweetwater River, about 12 miles west of here, at which camp the advance express of the Grant Rescue Party found them. The Willie Company, which was entirely out of food when found, suffered greatly at this camp.

⑨ Rocky Ridges (7,300 ft.)

The Willie Company struggled up through this difficult terrain during a fierce resurgence of the storm. High winds, driving snow, and extreme cold produced windchill conditions of as much as 70 degrees below zero.

⑩ Rock Creek (7,400 ft.)

At this camp, the Willie Company buried fifteen who had succumbed to the terrible conditions of the Rocky Ridges the day before.

⑪ South Pass (7,550 ft.)

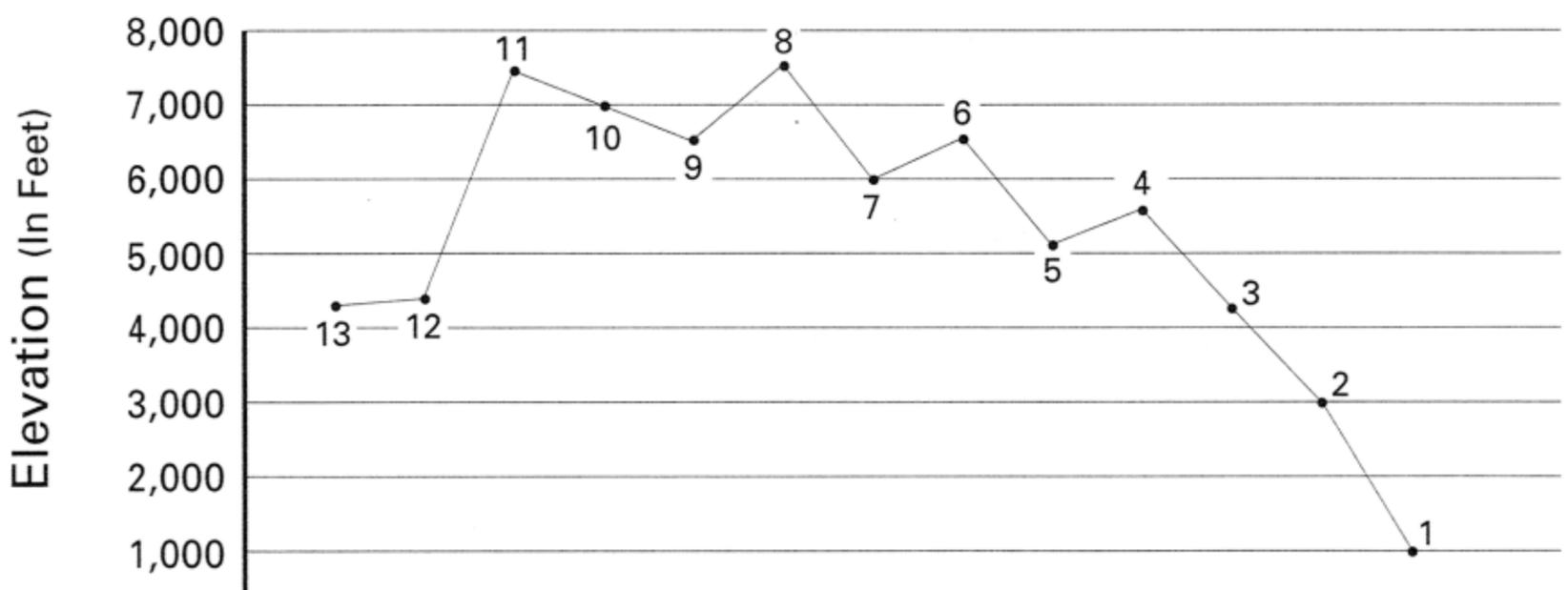
By the time they reached South Pass, the Willie and Martin companies, resupplied and riding in wagons, were largely out of danger.

The Trail and the Climate

The Trail. The route taken by the 1856 handcart companies was little different than that taken by the first Mormon wagon company in 1847. Map reconnaissance, photographs, and direct observation show that the route through Wyoming has no particularly dramatic features. The trail is relatively flat and follows major rivers most of the way. The region where the disaster occurred, however, has features that, at that late season, had a decidedly unfavorable influence on the Willie and Martin Companies. Between Fort Laramie to the east at an elevation of 4,230 feet and Great Salt Lake City to the west at 4,366 feet, elevations are high throughout, one of the primary reasons for cold fall weather in that region.

The elevation where the emigrants last forded the North Platte River (present-day Casper, Wyoming) is 5,120 feet, only a few hundred feet higher than the prevailing elevations along the Wasatch Front in Utah. But immediately southwest of the last crossing of the Platte, the trail climbs quite steeply to the Rocky Avenue and on to the crest of Prospect (Ryan) Hill, where the elevation is 6,588 feet. Beyond Prospect Hill, the trail drops down

Trail Elevation Graph



- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 Florence (1,000') | 8 South Pass (7,550') |
| 2 North Platte (3,000') | 9 Big Sandy (6,580') |
| 3 Fort Laramie (4,230') | 10 Fort Bridger (6,995') |
| 4 Black Hills (5,600') | 11 Big Mountain Pass (7,420') |
| 5 Crossing of the Platte (5,120') | 12 Great Salt Lake City (4,366') |
| 6 Prospect Hill (6,588') | 13 West Desert (4,270') |
| 7 Devil's Gate (5,960') | |

toward Independence Rock and Devil's Gate but remains comparatively high. At Greasewood (Horse) Creek, the elevation is 6,000 feet, and Devil's Gate is at 5,960 feet. From Devil's Gate, the trail remains above 6,000 feet but is relatively flat, climbing very slightly over the sixty miles to Sweetwater Station, where the elevation is 6,544 feet. From just past Sweetwater Station, the trail climbs steeply through the Rocky Ridges to 7,300 feet, then continues across a high, open plateau to Rock Creek, at 7,400 feet, and on to South Pass, at 7,550 feet.¹⁷

All along this route, but especially across the high plateau between the Rocky Ridges and South Pass, there is a distinct atmosphere of loftiness and a keenness in the air. Open and flat though the high plateau is, it is also extremely bare. Whereas normal fall conditions in such places as Fort Laramie and Salt Lake City are bracing but pleasant, fall conditions in the high, windy plains of Wyoming are much colder—and much more dangerous.

The Campsites. From the first, pioneers understood the crucial importance of the campsites along the trail. These places had to have readily accessible pure water, grass for the animals, wood for fires, and, hopefully, some protection from the wind. Campsite locations and descriptions were the most important part of any good emigrants' guide, and William Clayton's famous guide, compiled in 1847 (acclaimed by most trailmen to be the best), was an important reference for all Mormon emigrant trains.¹⁸

Deer Creek (present-day Glenrock, Wyoming), one good day's travel east of the last crossing of the Platte, was the best example of an ideal campsite. Virtually everyone praised it as abundantly providing all the necessities—and ample wild game to augment the limited food supply to boot.¹⁹ But it also had another important attribute, though perhaps less tangible: it was a pleasant, comfortable-looking place, and it was the first campsite on the Platte after the long and relatively difficult cross-country pull through Wyoming's Black Hills. The campsites beyond Deer Creek—at the big bend of the Platte (between present-day Casper, Wyoming, and nearby Red Buttes), Greasewood Creek, Independence Rock/Devil's Gate/Martin's Cove, Sweetwater Station, Rock Creek/Willow Creek, and Pacific Springs—had similar attributes in most cases.²⁰ Unfortunately, most of these were places of tragedy

and sorrow for the Willie and Martin Companies. Red Buttes, Devil's Gate, Sweetwater Station, and Rock Creek are the most notable examples. These campsites, and the troubles experienced there, are described in the following chronological narrative.²¹

The Climate. Beyond the obviously difficult climbs—through the Black Hills, up through the Rocky Avenue and on to Prospect Hill, and up through the Rocky Ridges—the relative flatness and openness, although giving a feeling of height and remoteness, can otherwise be deceiving as to apparent comfort and ease of travel, especially when observed in warm, clear weather. But when the Willie and Martin Companies and the Grant rescue party came through in October and November 1856, much of the trail was covered with snow or mired in mud,²² the rivers were either frozen over or flowing with ice chunks, and for many days the temperatures hovered near zero—and the wind was blowing.

The wind always blows in Wyoming. A calm day is rare anywhere at any season of the year, but calmness for any significant length of time is extremely rare in the general vicinity of the Sweetwater River.²³ Most secondary historical accounts make little or no mention of it, but wind, in combination with cool or cold temperatures, produces an extremely dangerous effect. The accompanying simplified chart shows that effect.²⁴

Note that as the wind increases and the temperature drops, the equivalent windchill drops geometrically. For example, on a thirty-degree day an accompanying wind of thirty miles per hour creates an equivalent windchill of zero degrees, or thirty degrees colder than what would be experienced on a calm day. But on a *zero-degree* day, the same thirty-miles-per-hour wind will produce a windchill of fifty degrees below zero—*fifty* degrees colder than what would be experienced on a calm day.

In late October and early November, both the Willie and Martin handcart companies experienced equivalent windchill conditions of as low as seventy degrees below zero, generated by heavy, piercing winds and reported temperatures of as much as eleven degrees below zero. People who are experienced with windchill warn that accompanying temperatures do not have to be uncomfortably low to produce life-threatening windchill. That is, a person comfortably walking along on a cool day, clad in a good shirt

Chart for Determining Equivalent Windchill Temperatures
(expressed in °F)

Air Temperature (°F)	Wind Speed (mph)			
	10	20	30	40
40	30	20	10	10
30	15	5	0	-5
20	5	-10	-20	-20
10	-10	-25	-30	-35
0	-20	-35	-50	-55
-10	-35	-50	-65	-70
-20	-45	-65	-80	-85

Equivalent windchill temperatures are rounded but are within five degrees of the several charts consulted. Wind speeds in excess of forty mph have little increased effect on equivalent windchill. Equivalent windchill temperatures below -30 are likely to produce freezing of the flesh within one minute. Temperatures below -60 are likely to produce freezing of the flesh within thirty seconds. If the victim is wet, the chilling effect is far worse. Most of the equivalent windchill temperatures shown here are likely to dramatically lower core body temperatures, bringing on hypothermia.

or light sweater or jacket, can become dangerously cold—cold enough to experience hypothermia—if even a moderate wind begins to blow. Hypothermia had a terrible effect on the Willie and Martin Company emigrants, as will be seen as their saga unfolds.

Preliminaries to the Disaster

The Late Start. That the last emigrant companies of 1856 started far too late to assure a safe trek over the plains is clear. The evidence, especially that provided by eyewitnesses, overwhelmingly indicates that a fatal mistake was made in allowing the Willie and Martin handcart companies and the Hodgett and Hunt wagon companies to continue any further than Florence. But the mood of those supervising the handcart migration was to push on, even at

high cost, including considerable risk to the lives of all. This attitude was clearly manifest at Florence by those supervising the effort there. Although at least two experienced leaders of the Willie Company, Levi Savage and Millen Atwood, were against moving forward, the main organizers were in strong agreement that the handcart companies should continue West.

On August 12, Savage wrote in his journal that he was “much opposed to taking women & children through, destitute of clothing, when we all know, that we are bound to be caught in the Snow, and Severe colde w[e]ather, long before we reach the valey. I have expressed my fe[e]lings, in part, to Brothers McGaw, Willey; & Atwood.”²⁵ On August 13, Savage wrote that

Willey Ex[h]orted the Saints to go forward regardless of Suffering even to death; after he had Spoken, he gave me the opportunity of Speaking. I Said to him, that if I Spoke, I must Speak my minde, let it cut where it would. He Said Certainly do so. I then related to the Saints, the hard Ships that we Should have to endure. I Said that we were liable to have to wade in Snow up to our knees, and Should at night rap ourselv[e]s in a thin blanket, and lye on the frozen Ground without a bed; that was not like having a wagon, that we could go into, and rap ourselves in as much as we liked and ly down. No, Said I, we are with out waggons, destitute of clothing, and could not cary it if we had it. We must go as we are.²⁶

Then, at an open meeting that day, members of the Willie Company debated whether or not to go on so late in the season, and most voted to go. But Savage importantly commented in his journal that, after he “warmly” voiced his objection, “the people, judging from appearance and after expressions, felt the force of it, (but yet, the most of them, determon[e]d to go forward if the Authorities Say go).”²⁷ Savage went on to write that on August 15 another meeting was held, and “Elders McGaw; Kimble; Grant [and] Vancott addressed the Saints; exhorted them to Go forward regardless of concequenses.”²⁸

The above scenario was largely repeated immediately prior to the departure of the Martin Company. In this instance, however, Franklin D. Richards was present, and, according to at least two eyewitnesses, he warned the emigrants of the probability of cold weather, then called for a vote. In his autobiography, Benjamin Platt stated that “Apostle Franklin D. Richards called a meeting and

advised us to stop at Florence until the next season.”²⁹ Josiah Rogerson, in an account published half a century later in the *Salt Lake Herald*, described the scene:

I can hear, even now, the voice of President Richards, as he stood there and reasoned with us in his fatherly and gentlemanly manner, as to the lateness of the season, as to the possibility of the storms coming on earlier than usual, that no doubt many of the infants and aged might fall by the way, and some other through disease and from the impurities of the water in the streams, fatigue and exhaustion; and that it was left for us now to decide, whether we would go on and take the risks and chances of these possible and probable fatalities; or remain there and around Florence. . . .

Elder John T. D. McAllister . . . spoke afterward at that meeting for going on, and Cyrus H. Wheelock, General George D. Grant and others; but Brother Webb urged that we should not start, but stay there for the winter. His remarks were Webb’s alone. Some others spoke and then President Richards, arising at last, advised all to vote with their free agency and responsibility. The vote was called, and with uncovered heads and uplifted hands to heaven and an almost unanimous vote, it was decided to go on.³⁰

Richards recalled that “when we had a meeting at Florence, we called upon the Saints to express their faith to the people, and requested to know of them, even if they knew that they should be swallowed up in storms, whether they should stop or turn back. They voted, with loud acclamations, that they would go on.”³¹ John Jaques later recorded that “owing to the lateness of the season, the important question was debated, whether the emigrants should winter in that vicinity [of Florence] or continue the long and wearisome journey to Salt Lake. Unfortunately, warm enthusiasm prevailed over sound judgment and cool common sense, and it was determined to finish the journey the same season.”³²

Obviously, it is hard to determine who was responsible for the decision to go. Assuming that Platt’s and Rogerson’s recollections are accurate, Richards strongly warned the Martin Company emigrants of the probable dangers of such a late start. But his judgment in calling for and abiding by the vote of the emigrants is questionable. It was well within his authority to have ordered the Martin Company to winter over at or near Florence and to have ordered the Willie Company to turn back—irrespective of the company votes.

On November 2, 1856, after first reports of the disaster in the making arrived in Great Salt Lake City, both Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young strongly addressed the fatal error made at Florence in August. President Young opened the November 2nd meeting at the Bowery with a short sermon indicating his continuing deep concern about those still out on the trail. Then President Kimball came to the stand and rebuked those who had begun to complain that the late start was a mistake that was affecting the fortunes of everyone, those providing for the resupply and rescue as well as the emigrants. Kimball somewhat mockingly paraphrased detractors as claiming, “‘What an awful thing it is! Why is it that the First Presidency are so unwise in their calculations? but it falls on their shoulders,’” and then went on to say:

Well, the late arrival of those on the plains cannot be helped now, but let me tell you, most emphatically, that if all who were entrusted with the care and management of this year’s immigration had done as they were counseled and dictated by the First Presidency of this church, the sufferings and hardships now endured by the companies on their way here would have been avoided. . . .

If the immigration could have been carried on as dictated by br. Brigham, there would have been no trouble.³³

President Kimball’s remarks regarding criticism brought President Young abruptly back to the stand. Among much else, he rebuked Franklin D. Richards and Daniel Spencer for not having terminated further emigration beyond Florence while they were there in late August.³⁴

On August 21, Richards and his party had clattered into Florence by stagecoach from St. Joseph, Missouri—this after crossing the Atlantic aboard the steam packet *Asia*. They traveled overland by train to St. Louis and up the Missouri to St. Joseph by powered riverboat.³⁵ The party made the trip, in relative comfort, from Liverpool to Florence in a remarkable twenty-six days.³⁶

Members of Richards’s party mixed with members of the Martin Company in Florence between August 22 and 27, when most of that company departed with their handcarts. Then the Richards party, on horseback and with carriages, departed Florence on September 3, passed the Hunt Company on September 6, the Martin and Hodgett Companies on September 7, the rear

element of the Willie Company on September 9, and the main part of that same company on September 12. This Swiftsure Train then proceeded rapidly onward and arrived in Great Salt Lake City on October 4, having averaged thirty-two miles per day.³⁷ It may have been too rapid—too comfortable to have allowed proper reflection on the risk of permitting the last handcart companies to leave Florence so late.³⁸

Knowledge of this quick and comfortable journey may have influenced President Young's remarks on November 2. First he informed his audience that the future "penalty, to be suffered by any Elder or Elders who will start the immigration across the plains after a given time . . . shall be that they shall be severed from the Church."³⁹ Then he rightly claimed that several previous epistles to the Church had strongly urged the earliest possible departure from the Missouri River.⁴⁰ He then turned his attention to Elder Richards and Daniel Spencer, who together had organized the handcart project—Richards in England and Spencer in Iowa City.

But if, while at the Missouri river, they had received a hint from any person on this earth, or if even a bird had chirped it in the ears of brs. Richards and Spencer, they would have known better than to rush men, women, and children on the prairie in the autumn months, on the 3d of September, to travel over a thousand miles. I repeat that if a bird had chirped the inconsistency of a course in their ears, they would have thought and considered for one moment, and would have stopped those men, women and children there until another year.⁴¹

The Shortage of Food. Malnutrition and ultimately starvation, another major contributor to the disaster, was probably the result of what turned out to be a second fatal mistake that was almost as significant as the late start.

Wheat flour was the staple upon which the health and energy of every handcart pioneer depended. Although the formula varied somewhat between companies, the basic daily food ration was built around one pound of flour per person per day, to be augmented primarily by meat provided by beef cattle that were to accompany each train and by whatever wild game that could be hunted along the way. The total amount of flour that was to be pre-loaded was apparently calculated by multiplying the number of

emigrants by the number of days required to make the trip across the plains and applying that product to one pound of flour per person per day.⁴² Further, all evidence indicates that the food plan provided that the emigrants would preload virtually the entire allotment at Florence, since resupply stations could not be counted on along the trail.

This may have led to a serious miscalculation. Since the emigrants could not carry such a large amount of flour on their handcarts, ox-drawn supply wagons would have to be attached to each company. Such attachments slowed the handcart companies to roughly the same pace as wagon companies, which called for basing the estimate of the number of days for the trek not so much on how fast the emigrants could pull their handcarts, but rather on how fast oxen could pull the heavily loaded supply wagons.

Sixty days was set for the 1,031-mile trek from Florence to Great Salt Lake City, which would require that each company would have to move at least seventeen miles per day, or, if the Sabbath was to be observed, almost twenty miles per day. None of the ten handcart companies between 1856 and 1860 matched that pace. For example, the Ellsworth Company needed sixty-nine days, and both the McArthur and Bunker Companies needed sixty-five days.⁴³ The sixty-day assumption alone shorted both the Willie and Martin Companies more than 2,000 pounds of flour each.⁴⁴

However, the sixty-day assumption was first suggested, not in Liverpool, but in Great Salt Lake City. Brigham Young, in his September 30, 1855, instruction to Franklin D. Richards, stated that he “should not be surprised” if the handcart emigrants “should make the trip in sixty or seventy days.” Later in the letter, he commented that “fifteen miles a day will bring them through in 70 days, and after they get accustomed to it they will travel 20, 25, and even 30 [miles a day].”⁴⁵ This confident estimation could well have influenced Richards to decide on the most optimistic estimate suggested—a sixty-day crossing, which estimate was clearly set forth in an editorial printed in the December 22, 1855, issue of the *Millennial Star*.⁴⁶ Still, in his September 30, 1855, letter, President Young also stated that the handcart emigrants would “only need 90 days’ rations from the time of their leaving the Missouri river,” which at least hints that he was allowing for contingencies.

Nevertheless, resupply along the route was also planned for, to be provided by all the means available and affordable. These included Church provisions and private stocks sent out from the Wasatch Front for free issue or sale and for procurement by purchase from entrepreneurs at settlements, forts, and trading posts along the way. Further, plans for wheat farms along the trail in Nebraska were under discussion. But it appears that the resupply plan was not pursued with sufficient clarity or urgency to generate proper action in either the West or East. From the sketchy evidence at hand, it is apparent that the entire food plan was short of the mark because of a tragic combination of things: slow and poor communications generally; mild, perhaps overly subtle and ambiguous instructions from the West; overoptimism; and too little knowledge or accountability in either the West or East regarding the number of emigrants actually involved.⁴⁷

Continuous resupply from Great Salt Lake City was promised as early as July 1856. In a letter to Orson Pratt, who had by then replaced Franklin D. Richards as president of the European Mission, President Young stated that “we expect to start out fifteen wagons loaded with flour to meet the hand-cart train on the 28th inst. Our harvest is now commencing and that [July 28] will be as soon as we can get flour ready. . . . We shall follow up sending out detachments of teams with flour every week so long as may be necessary.”⁴⁸ These and other communications indicate that, although not integral to the food plan, such resupply was being heavily counted upon in Liverpool, Iowa City, and Florence.⁴⁹ For example, Daniel Spencer, in a letter to Brigham Young dated June 19, 1856, reported that the first three handcart companies, which had just departed west from Iowa City, “were fitted out with provisions to Florence. There, in anticipation of assistance from the valley, they will be provided with scanty supplies for 60 days.”⁵⁰

Resupply en route was in fact made available, apparently for cash or voucher, at Deer Creek and South Pass. Journals of both the Ellsworth and McArthur handcart companies reported the purchase of significant amounts of flour at Deer Creek, where a resupply train of five wagon loads with a total of five thousand pounds of flour was stationed, and other records indicate that as many as two resupply parties were at South Pass. For example, the

McArthur handcart company of 222 people purchased 1,000 pounds of flour at Deer Creek, east of the last crossing of the Platte, and another 1,000 pounds at Pacific Springs, just beyond South Pass.⁵¹ For that company, the resupply plan seemed to have worked. The thousand pounds of flour at Deer Creek almost exactly made up for the shortfall owing to the sixty-day assumption, and, further, the additional thousand pounds at South Pass assured the McArthur Company full rations all the way into Great Salt Lake City, with perhaps some to spare.

But somehow, information that at least four more companies of emigrants were on the way either was never sent, never arrived, or was misinterpreted in Great Salt Lake City, and the resupply promised by Brigham Young was shut down on the assumption that whatever more emigrants there might be would be detained in the East until the next season, a matter that President Young later made clear.⁵² On June 11, William Woodward, who at the time was postmaster at the emigrant camp at Iowa City, wrote a letter to President Heber C. Kimball from Iowa City reporting the departure of the Ellsworth, McArthur, and Bunker handcart companies, but went on to state that “we have heard that another ship of immigrants have arrived at New York by the ship ‘Thorton,’ numbering when they left Liverpool 764 souls. . . . We expect them at this point by the 16th or 17th of June.”⁵³ This letter was received in Great Salt Lake City on July 30.

In his June 19 report to Brigham Young, Daniel Spencer then wrote, “I am looking every day for the arrival of the Thorton company, and in a few days for the last of the Fund Passengers by the Horizon. They will together have nearly 1200 souls to go by hand carts. . . . The wagon companies will be ready to move in a few days.” This letter was published in the *Deseret News* on August 6, 1856. Although further westward advance of “the wagon companies” was indicated by Spencer, neither the Woodward nor Spencer letters indicate that the *Thornton* and *Horizon* emigrants would in fact be sent on west at that time. Nor, however, do they say that a decision had been made that those emigrants would be wintering over in the East.

Silence in these regards apparently led both leaders in the East and West to make dangerous assumptions, those in the East

assuming significant resupply from the Valley, and those in the West assuming that the emigrants were wintering over in the East. The tragic result was, in the East, sending out handcart companies with “scanty” provisions and, in the West, shutting down the resupply effort.

The shortage of food was not limited just to travel west of Florence. Both John Chislett and Levi Savage reported that members of the Willie Company were allotted less than two-thirds of the ration calculated by the planners for the pull across Iowa. It must be supposed that, absent any contrary evidence, the company left Iowa City as much as 4,000 pounds short of its flour allotment. On July 24, Savage quietly entered into his trail journal that “our rations are very Short, *viz* 10 *oz* flour per one day, 10 *oz* pork per 28 days. Short rations of tea, coffee, Sugar, rice and aples. It is not enough.”⁵⁴ After the disaster, Chislett was much more critical:

“Our rations consisted of ten ounces of flour to each adult per day, and half that amount to children under eight years of age. Besides our flour we had occasionally a little rice, sugar, coffee, and bacon. But these items (especially the last) were so small and infrequent that they scarcely deserve mentioning. Any hearty man could eat his daily allowance for breakfast. In fact, some of our men did this, and then worked all day without dinner, and went to bed supperless or begged food at the farmhouses as we travelled along. . . .

“I do not know who settled the amount of our rations, but whoever it was, I should like him, or them, to drag a hand-cart through the State of Iowa in the month of July on exactly the same amount and quality of fare we had. This would be but simple justice.”⁵⁵

Lastly, since there were no contingency plans, any delays were sure to seriously exacerbate the problem. As long as the basic ration was one pound of flour per person per day, the emigrants in the Willie and Martin Companies consumed about a thousand pounds of flour each day.⁵⁶ Accordingly, a three-day delay of the Willie Company between September 4 and 7 cost them more than a thousand pounds of flour—an amount that would have supplied them for the three days before they reached South Pass, during which time they had no food.

In summary, the shortage of food, although all handcart companies suffered from it to some extent, especially robbed the Willie and Martin emigrants of the extra energy they needed to generate

the necessary body heat to maintain internal body functioning in the face of the increasingly cold weather occasioned by the late start. Responsibility for the food shortage is hard to pin down, but surely among the prime reasons were insufficient practical experience, lack of a viable resupply plan, miscommunication, and the failure to allow for contingencies. And surely, the responsibility for these causes was not solely that of those leaders in the East. Whatever the reasons, both the Willie and Martin Companies left Florence with significant shortages, and both companies ran out of food far short of Great Salt Lake City.

Exhaustion. By October 19, the Willie Company had pulled their handcarts 760 miles from Florence, the Martin Company, 649 miles—or 1,037 and 926 miles, respectively, if the pull across Iowa is included.⁵⁷ Not only was the length of the trek overwhelming, but the trail had become increasingly tougher as all pulled through heavy stretches of sand along the North Platte, made the ascents through the Black Hills, and, in the case of the Willie Company, the difficult ascent over Prospect Hill west of the Platte. Again, this was expected, but in combination with malnutrition and cold, exhaustion was all the more serious.

The combination of malnutrition and cold nights, for example, produced an increased incidence of sickness, and increasingly the sick had to ride on the wagons and on handcarts. The extra weight pulled by both the animals and the emigrants increased the incidence of exhaustion. (There are numerous entries in trail journals regarding growing exhaustion of both people and animals; as in other discussions, evidence in this regard is presented where and when it occurred in the following chronological narrative.)

Insufficient Clothing and Bedding. Few if any of the handcart emigrants had sufficient clothing to protect them from the cold weather that increasingly prevailed after October 1, especially at night. The seventeen-pound overall weight limitation placed on all adult emigrants by the handcart organizers at Iowa City, although it made sense for summer travel, would greatly exacerbate the situation the Willie and Martin Companies found themselves in after passing Fort Laramie and entering the higher country further west in October.⁵⁸

In addition to the severely restricted amount of clothing and bedding imposed by the seventeen-pound individual maximum, the

emigrants' clothing had become ragged by the time they reached the last crossing of the Platte, and the shoes of many had become badly worn or had completely come apart.⁵⁹ Blankets were also ragged and in short supply, which became even shorter when some clothing and bedding was burned in mid-October, to further lighten the loads. The seventeen-pound limit allowed no replacements.

Hypothermia. The colder weather, especially in combination with the wind that prevails in the high country along the western portion of the North Platte and throughout the length of the Sweetwater and beyond, dangerously worsened the condition brought on by the malnutrition and exhaustion. Now all these difficulties worked together to break down resistance, and, most dangerous, bring on hypothermia and apathy.

Descriptions of the horrors of frostbite by many eyewitnesses are legendary. Because the malady is so visible, and because so many who lost limbs lived to exhibit and tell about it, frostbite is the only malady due specifically to cold mentioned in any detail.⁶⁰ Nothing was said about hypothermia, that invisible killer, which probably caused most of the deaths experienced by the Willie and Martin Company Saints. Quickly defined, hypothermia occurs when the core temperature of a person's body drops below ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit.⁶¹ Alan Fry, in his *Wilderness Survival Handbook*, following an excellent description of hypothermia, goes on to list "rules for the trail" to guard against hypothermia that read as if he were using the Willie and Martin handcart disaster as his prime real-life example:

The first rule for the prevention of hypothermia: *wear and have with you . . . all the clothing you will need for the most adverse weather you could encounter. . . .*

. . . You produce the energy for your day's excursion and the heat necessary for healthy body function from the food you eat.

Eat well and go well. Eat poorly and go poorly. Therein lies the second rule for the prevention of hypothermia: *eat well of food which will provide fuel for heat and energy.* Eat well before you set out and carry good food with you to eat during your travels. . . .

. . . The third rule for prevention of hypothermia: *know your limits and do not push yourself to the point of exhaustion. . . .*

In summary, prevent hypothermia by being *well clothed, well fed*, and by *avoiding exhaustion.*⁶²

It is appropriate now to fit the above factors into a brief chronology of events as told by eyewitnesses in both the Willie and Martin handcart companies. Also woven into the narrative are actions and observations of other important players in the saga—the leadership in Great Salt Lake City, members of the Richards Swiftsure Train, and members of the Grant rescue party.

Chronology of the Disaster

That the Willie Company departed Florence short of food is initially indicated by Levi Savage, who on August 17 wrote in his journal that “our wagons are loaded with 35 or 40 Hundred of provisions and we yet want 25 Hundred or more and have no wagon, nor cant purchase one to hall it in.” As a probable result of this shortage of transportation, a ninety-eight-pound sack of flour was added to every handcart—effectively doubling the load.⁶³

Nevertheless, the emigrants maintained good morale, and, since they ate the flour on the carts first, after twenty days their loads would have returned to normal weight. But on the nineteenth day, they ran into trouble. On September 4 (169 miles out from Florence), a buffalo stampede carried away most of the oxen, which could not be recovered even though three days’ delay and much energy were expended in the effort to do so.⁶⁴ The emigrants were therefore required to harness up their much weaker and totally untrained milk cows and beef cattle, which could not haul as much, and a second ninety-eight-pound bag of flour was placed on each handcart.⁶⁵

In addition to the delay,⁶⁶ the continued extra weight on the handcarts had a serious wearing effect. John Chislett observed that the “axles and boxes being of wood, and being ground out by the dust that found its way there in spite of our efforts to keep it out, together with the extra weight put on the carts, had the effect of breaking the axles at the shoulder.”⁶⁷ The extra loads also wore on the emigrants, and the added fatigue became increasingly severe when food rationing was imposed and colder weather set in. In the meantime, the Martin Company, with fewer supply wagons per capita than any other 1856 party, also departed Florence with a ninety-eight-pound bag of flour on each handcart.⁶⁸

Franklin D. Richards knew something of this weight problem, since he spent several days with the Martin Company in Florence and passed both companies on the trail at a time when they were laboring under the extra burden. But he seemed not to be much concerned. Richards did, however, take the opportunity to openly rebuke Levi Savage, one of the team captains of the Willie Company, upon overtaking that company on September 12. John Chislett claimed that Richards “rebuked” Savage “very severely in open meeting for his lack of faith in God” for honestly—and, as things turned out, rightly—objecting to leaving Florence so late in the season.⁶⁹

Richards, again according to Chislett, then “told Captain Willie they [the Richards party] wanted some fresh meat, and he [Willie] had our fattest calf killed for them.”⁷⁰ Richards also seems to have favorably interpreted the fact that the company had withstood the loss of most of their cattle and took the occasion to exhort the people to be even more strictly obedient to counsel. The author of the company’s trail journal had this to say about Richard’s remarks on that occasion:

Prest. Richards then addressed the Saints expressing his satisfaction at their having journeyed thus far & more especially with handcarts and congratulating them on the loss of their cattle which he knew had proved and would prove their salvation if they would hearken to and diligently obey counsel to the letter in which event he promised in the name of Israel’s God and by the authority of the Holy Priesthood that no obstacle whatever should come in the way of this Camp but what they should be able by their united faith and works to overcome God being their helper and that if a Red Sea would interpose they should by their union of heart & hand walk through it like Israel of old dryshod. On the same conditions he promised that though they might have some trials to endure as a proof to God and their Brethren that they had the true “grit” still the Lamanites heat nor cold nor any other thing should have power to seriously harm any in the Camp but that we should arrive in the Valleys of the Mountains with strong and healthy bodies.⁷¹

Upon parting company with the Willie Company on September 14, Richards apparently promised that he would “leave . . . provisions, bedding, etc., at Laramie, if he could, and to secure . . . help from the valley as soon as possible.”⁷² Savage would record on October 10 that Richards had been able to leave thirty-seven buffalo robes for them at the Platte bridge.⁷³

Beginning September 8, both the Willie and Martin Companies began to experience heavy head winds, and on September 15 "sharp frosts" were reported at night, although the days continued warm.⁷⁴ On September 17, Savage recorded that "just before the camp got under way, a colde, and Strong wind arose from the N.W. This together with the hea[v]y Sand, made our progress very Slow, and exstreamly laborious. Several were obliged to leave their carts, and they with the infirm, could Scarcely Get into camp. Our teams also, at times, could Scarcely moove."⁷⁵ On September 23, Savage wrote that

This morning was cold and foggy. The Saints dilatory in rising and geting Brake fast early, notwithstanding Brother Willies repeated order to arise at the Sound of the horn (daylight) apparently not realizeing the nessesity of our makeing as much distance as possible, in order to reache the valey before too severe colde weather. Some comeplaing of hard treatment, because we urge them along. Many hang to the wagons.⁷⁶

On September 27, Savage reported that "the olde appear to be failing con[s]iderably."⁷⁷

Upon their arrival at Fort Laramie on October 1, the Willie Company found none of the promised resupply of food, nor were any oxen available to replace the losses of September 4.⁷⁸ An inventory of food still on hand revealed that the company was so short of flour that without significant rationing they would probably run out somewhere near the crossing of the Platte, some 350 miles short of Great Salt Lake City.

Levi Savage wrote in his journal that "Brothers Willey; Atwood; myself; and others went to the Fort and perched provisions. They are exstreamly costly."⁷⁹ The most important item purchased was 400 pounds of "hard bread" or biscuit. Apparently, no flour was available.⁸⁰ The company headed into the Black Hills the next day or the day after. William Woodward reported that "about 8 miles west of Laramie we issued flour as follows: 14 ounces to each man; 12 ounces to each woman; 8 ounces to each child; and 4 ounces to each infant per day."⁸¹ The Willie Company journal reported at about the same time that "many of the company are sick & have to ride in the wagons."⁸² Additionally, deaths had begun to occur with increasing frequency. Six had died during September, but at least six more died in the first week of October alone.⁸³

Still in Nebraska, the Martin Company moved along regularly and without notable incident during this same period, but also began to experience hunger, exhaustion, and an increased incidence of death. Nine had died in September, six in the last week of that month, and, like the Willie Company, six more died in the first week of October.⁸⁴

Another debility began to occur in both companies as the flour rations were reduced. Apparently, as the emigrants increasingly relied on beef for sustenance (especially the beef of lean animals that themselves were starving), they became ill with dysentery and diarrhea, a condition that, in addition to being the most miserable form of sickness, can be life-threatening. Many eyewitnesses complained of this misery, and numerous entries gave it as the cause of death.⁸⁵

On October 4, the day the Richards party arrived, the citizens of Great Salt Lake City were enjoying a classic Indian summer week of warm sun and quiet breezes.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, President Young, obviously worried about trouble ahead owing to both the lateness of the season and the fact that no resupply had been planned, especially for so many, on October 5 ordered out the vanguard of what would ultimately become the first wave in a massive resupply effort. George D. Grant, with “22 teams—two span of mules or horses to each wagon loaded to the bows,” left Great Salt Lake City on October 7 and over the next few days moved smartly through the Wasatch and on toward the Wyoming plains, expecting to meet the lead element of the emigrants somewhere in the vicinity of Fort Bridger.⁸⁷ But the nearest company was still about 240 miles—more than two weeks’ travel—further east.

By the second week of October, conditions were worsening rapidly in both the Willie and Martin Companies as hunger, fatigue, and increasingly cold temperatures during the night wore everyone down. Levi Savage observed on October 8 that at Deer Creek “our olde people are nearly all failing fast.”⁸⁸ William Woodward added that “Many of our men now began to get weak; some had died. This made the duties of the camp to fall on a few and began to weaken the rugged and the strong.”⁸⁹

On October 10, after crossing the North Platte and as the company worked its way up through the Rocky Avenue and on to

Prospect Hill, Savage stated that “our teams are very weak,” and on October 11, “3 of our working cows gave out and one died and the remainder of our oxen were nearly over cum.”⁹⁰ On October 15, Savage, with apparent foreboding, wrote in his journal that, although the company had traveled over fifteen miles that day, “the people, are geting weak, and failing very fast, a grate many Sick. our teams are als[o] failing fast and it requires great exertion to make any progress. our rations were reduced, last night, one quarter bringing the mens to 10 1/2 oz, womens to 9 oz and the children, some to 6 and others to 3 oz each.”⁹¹ This was at Independence Rock. Then on October 16 he wrote, “This morning we had three deaths and one birth.”⁹²

The next sentence in his journal comments that the heavy loading of the wagons “increased daly by the weak and Sick.”⁹³ John Chislett stated that at Independence Rock:

“Captain Willie received a letter from apostle Richards informing him that we might expect supplies to meet us from the valley by the time we reached South Pass. An examination of our stock of flour showed us that it would be gone before we reached that point. Our only alternative was to still further reduce our bill of fare. The issue of flour was then to average ten ounces per day to each person over ten years of age, and to be divided thus: working-men to receive twelve ounces, women and old men nine ounces, and children from four to eight ounces, according to age and size.”⁹⁴

Then, on beyond Devil’s Gate, Chislett went on to observe:

“Many of our men showed signs of failing, and to reduce their rations below twelve ounces would have been suicidal to the company, seeing they had to stand guard all night, wade the streams repeatedly by day to get the women and children across, erect tents, and do many duties which women could not do. . . .

“We had not travelled far up the Sweetwater before the nights, which had gradually been getting colder since we left Laramie, became very severe. . . . In our frequent crossings of the Sweetwater, we had really “a hard road to travel.” The water . . . when we waded it time after time at each ford to get the carts, the women, and the children over . . . lost to us its beauty, and the chill which it sent through our systems . . . left a void, a sadness, and—in some cases—doubts as to the justice of an overruling Providence.”⁹⁵

The Willie Company, already suffering badly from malnutrition and exhaustion but nevertheless having once again to drastically

reduce individual rations and struggle on as food rapidly ran out, had reached the breaking point.

The same pattern unfolded in the Martin Company. John Jaques wrote that

up to this time the daily pound of flour ration had been regularly served out, but it was never enough to stay the stomachs of the emigrants, and the longer they were on the plains and in the mountains the hungrier they grew. . . .

. . . [A]t this time when the great appetite was fairly roused up and had put on its strength and was still further strengthened and sharpened by the increasing coldness of the weather, the extra pinching time commenced. Soon after Fort Laramie was passed, it was deemed advisable to curtail the rations in order to make them hold out as long as possible. The pound of flour fell to three-fourths of a pound, then to a half pound, and subsequently yet lower. Still the company toiled on through the Black Hills, where the feed grew scarcer for the cattle also. As the necessities of man and beast increased, their daily food diminished, at the time when it was, as the emigrants might have said, with Sir Walter Scott, "like a summer-dried fountain, when our wants were the sorest."⁹⁶

On October 14, at Black's Fork, just past Fort Bridger, George D. Grant sent an express led by Cyrus Wheelock out ahead of the resupply train with instructions to find the handcart emigrants, expecting to find the Willie Company somewhere west of South Pass. But he had either miscalculated or had been misinformed: the company was at Independence Rock, 101 miles east of South Pass, and the Martin Company was still in the Black Hills.⁹⁷

Then on October 17, at Deer Creek, members of the Martin Company carried out a tragically unfortunate decision. In a later reminiscence, John Jaques explained that

Owing to the growing weakness of emigrants and teams, the baggage, including bedding and cooking utensils, was reduced to ten pounds per head, children under 8 years, five pounds. Good blankets and other bedding and clothing were burned, as they could not be carried further, though needed more than ever, for there was yet 400 miles of winter to go through. Again might the emigrants have said, with the Scotch poet, "Like a summer-dried fountain, when our wants were the sorest."⁹⁸

The burning of precious warm clothing and blankets because of exhaustion clearly indicates that, like the Willie Company, the Martin Company had also reached the breaking point.

Hypothermia, which was brought on by the combination of malnutrition, exhaustion, and windchill, was now bringing members of both companies down, one by one and in small groups, with grim regularity. Eyewitness accounts describe the process. John Chislett's eloquently tragic account of conditions before October 19 is an appropriate example:

"Our *seventeen pounds of clothing and bedding* was now altogether insufficient for our comfort. Nearly all suffered more or less at night from cold. Instead of getting up in the morning strong, refreshed, vigorous, and prepared for the hardships of another day of toil, the poor 'Saints' were to be seen crawling out from their tents looking haggard, benumbed, and showing an utter lack of that vitality so necessary to our success.

"Cold weather, scarcity of food, lassitude and fatigue from over-exertion, soon produced their effects. Our old and infirm people began to droop, and they no sooner lost spirit and courage than death's stamp could be traced upon their features. Life went out as smoothly as a lamp ceases to burn when the oil is gone. At first the deaths occurred slowly and irregularly, but in a few days at more frequent intervals, until we soon thought it unusual to leave a campground without burying one or more persons.

"Death was not long confined in its ravages to the old and infirm, but the young and naturally strong were among its victims. Men who were, so to speak, as strong as lions when we started on our journey, and who had been our best supports, were compelled to succumb to the grim monster. These men were worn down by hunger, scarcity of clothing and bedding, and too much labour in helping their families."⁹⁹

John Jaques of the Martin Company put it this way:

Worn down by the labors and fatigues of the journey, and pinched by hunger and cold, the manliness of tall, healthy, strong men would gradually disappear, until they would grow fretful, peevish, childish, and puerile, acting sometimes as if they were scarcely accountable beings. In the progress of the journey it was not difficult to tell who was going to die within two or three weeks. The gaunt form, hollow eyes, and sunken countenance, discolored to a weather-beaten sallow, with the gradual weakening of the mental faculties, plainly foreboded the coming and not far distant dissolution, though the limbs and faces of some were swelled or bloated. Many, whose lives were saved by their arrival in this valley, would have died as sure as fate if they had been subjected to two or three weeks more of exposure, fatigue and privation. Nothing could have saved them.¹⁰⁰

Some of the classic indicators of severe hypothermia are clearly present in these descriptions.¹⁰¹

On October 18, the Willie Company, moving as quickly as they could along the Sweetwater, ran completely out of food, still more than two days short of the hoped-for resupply at South Pass. By the end of October 18, the combined death count from Florence for the Willie and Martin Companies had reached at least thirty-nine—twenty in the Willie Company and nineteen in the Martin Company.¹⁰² The Grant resupply party reached South Pass and, with ugly storm clouds looming, moved quickly into camp to wait out the coming storm.¹⁰³

On October 19, the Willie Company emigrants, their stomachs empty, struggled out over the bleak and waterless Sixteen-Mile Drive, while the Martin Company, having passed by the well-made Platte Bridge (apparently because they had no money to pay the toll), plunged into and across the wide, deep, cold, and rapidly flowing river and emerged on the other side with many soaked to the skin.¹⁰⁴ All the emigrants were now staggering on the brink.

And then the storm struck.

Much has been said about the early-season winter storm that struck so savagely throughout the region on Sunday, October 19.¹⁰⁵ It largely overwhelmed the collective memory of many of the eyewitnesses—to the extent that some historians seem to blame the storm almost entirely for the disaster.¹⁰⁶ The storm was indeed terrible, and it caused much of the death and suffering, but disaster was already at hand, and unnecessarily severe breakdown and loss of life had already occurred or was well under way.¹⁰⁷

Brigham Young was not anticipating such a devastating early-season storm when, on that warm and calm October day two weeks before, he so forcefully precipitated the resupply effort. He was worried, and he felt the urgency to act quickly because he knew that suffering from routinely expected fall cold weather was beyond question and that starvation was also a distinct possibility since no organized resupply, especially for so many, had been planned, prepared, or sent out. In a way, the storm, among other things, had the effect of turning a major resupply effort already underway into a desperate rescue operation.

President Young's immediate action nevertheless had a miraculous affect. Had he allowed the amount of time that could have been reasonably expected to prepare for such a major undertaking—the distant resupply of as many as 1,400 starving people—as indicated above, death resulting from the combination of normal cold weather, exhaustion, and especially starvation would have been great had *no* storm occurred. The miracle is that, without the immediate dispatch of the lead resupply element under Grant, the storm, which so cruelly and ironically struck when it did, would probably have killed hundreds who were already tottering at the brink. Further, a later start might have prevented the rescue entirely. One must be reminded that the storm struck Grant's party (just as they crossed South Pass, fully exposed and at an elevation of 7,550 feet) as hard as it struck the emigrant companies. Had Grant been a day or more short of the pass when the storm struck, out of concern for his own men he might well have given up and turned back, as did many others of the follow-up resupply groups.¹⁰⁸

When the storm *did* strike, Grant immediately left the trail at Willow Creek, just east of South Pass, and escaped to the protection of the thick willows and embankments where the creek enters the Sweetwater River, fully two miles south of the trail. There he began to wait out the storm—and probably to worry about what was happening further east to the handcart emigrants and to his advance express.

Perhaps of equal importance, the earliest departure of the rescue party may have assured barely enough time for all those on the trail, emigrants and rescuers alike, to break back through the Wasatch before the deep snows in late November and early December closed the high passes until the next spring.¹⁰⁹ The rescue, although it was too little too late for many, came just in the nick of time for the rest. At least in its timing, therefore, the rescue was a miracle in the best sense of the term.

But the storm took a heavy toll. The Willie Company was struck head on while fully out in the open on the waterless and desolate Sixteen-Mile Drive. Fortunately, they were almost simultaneously met by the advance express of the Grant rescue party, which, although it had no food, at least promised hope for relief soon ahead. They staggered on to a partially sheltered camp at the

Sixth Crossing of the Sweetwater (present-day Sweetwater Station) and, for three days, awaited the resupply wagons, which seemed never to arrive. Chislett's account of "those three days" is plaintive.

"We killed more cattle and issued the meat; but, eating it without bread, did not satisfy hunger, and to those who were suffering from dysentery it did more harm than good. This terrible disease increased rapidly amongst us during these three days, and several died from exhaustion. Before we renewed our journey the camp became so offensive and filthy that words would fail to describe its condition, and even common decency forbids the attempt. Suffice it to say that all the disgusting scenes which the reader might imagine would certainly not equal the terrible reality. It was enough to make the heavens weep. The recollection of it unmans me even now—those three days! During that time I visited the sick, the widows whose husbands died in serving them, and the aged who could not help themselves, to know for myself where to dispense the few articles that had been placed in my charge for distribution. Such craving hunger I never saw before, and may God in his mercy spare me the sight again."¹¹⁰

Daniel W. Jones, a member of the Grant advance express, corroborated Chislett, and in the process gave information regarding the importance of the rescue party beyond merely bringing hope and, ultimately, desperately needed provisions. At Sweetwater Station, he later recalled:

we found them in a condition that would stir the feelings of the hardest heart. They were in a poor place, the storm having caught them where fuel was scarce. They were out of provisions and really freezing and starving to death. The morning after our arrival nine were buried in one grave. We did all we could to relieve them. The boys struck out on horseback and dragged up a lot of wood; provisions were distributed and all went to work to cheer the sufferers. Soon there was an improvement in camp, but many poor, faithful people had gone too far, had passed beyond the power to recruit. Our help came too late for some and many died after our arrival.¹¹¹

Back at the crossing of the Platte, the Martin Company could not have been hit by the storm at a worse time. The killing affect of hypothermia under dry conditions has already been discussed, but here the members of the Martin Company had to deal with something far more threatening. The driving wind, rain, and snow burst upon them when many were dripping wet after having just waded and swum across the bitterly cold river. These people had to go into camp immediately to survive.

Descriptions of the difficulties of that day and night are difficult to read. The severity of their condition and the inability to do anything about it except to suffer through it makes one wonder how so many could have survived. They lay there numbed to the bone and in deep shock, many unable to move. Some just unfolded their wet tents on the snow-covered ground and crawled underneath, too cold and weak to attempt to raise them. Others searched desperately for dry firewood with which to save themselves. Death stared them all in the face.

Like the Willie Company, they staggered along for a short distance, then went into a more permanent camp at Red Buttes, where they stayed for nine terrible days as the storm raged and the last of their food ran out.¹¹² This is where the advance express of the rescue party, again with no supplies to give, found them in their misery, essentially waiting to die. Fifty-six were already dead when the advance party arrived on October 28, and many more dropped in the days that followed.¹¹³



Last crossing of the North Platte. Both the Willie and Martin Company emigrants last forded the Platte somewhere in the vicinity of Fort Caspar, in present-day Casper, Wyoming—the Martin Company on October 19, 1856, under blizzard conditions. This photograph is from the fort grounds on the downstream side, looking north.

John Jaques described conditions at the fording of the Platte:

On the 20th [19th] of October the company crossed the Platte for the last time, at Red Buttes, about five miles above the bridge. . . . That was a bitter cold day. Winter came on all at once, and that was the first day of it. The river was wide, the current strong, the water exceedingly cold and up to the wagon beds in the deepest parts, and the bed of the river was covered with cobble stones. Some of the men carried some of the women over on their backs or in their arms, but others of the women tied up their skirts and waded through, like heroines as they were, and as they had done through many other rivers and creeks. The company was barely over when snow, hail, and sleet began to fall, accompanied by a piercing north wind, and camp was made on this side of the river.¹¹⁴

Jaques's description indicates windchill conditions of from fifty to seventy degrees below zero, but in this case it was far worse, since most members of the company were also wet to the skin. Later in her life, Patience Loader Rozsa gave a harrowing



Martin Company campsite at Red Buttes. The Martin Company, after fording the Platte five miles further downstream, camped in this vicinity from October 20 to 29, 1856. At least thirty-seven Martin Company Saints died here. The photograph looks westward toward Red Buttes from across the river. The campsite was probably just to the left of the photographer's position.

account of her personal experience in the water and immediately afterward¹¹⁵ and described the misery that prevailed in camp at Red Buttes:

“We were all glad to move from this place. It seemed that if God our Father had not sent help to us that we must all have perished and died in a short time, for at that time we had only very little provisions left and at the request of Captain Martin we had come on four ounces of flour a day for each one to make the flour last as long as we could. I don’t know how long we could have lived and pulled our handcarts on this small quantity of food. Our provisions would not have lasted as long as they did had all our company lived, but many of them died causing our provisions to hold out longer.”¹¹⁶

However, both handcart companies, and the two wagon companies as well, had more suffering to endure. Now virtually starving and experiencing severe winter conditions, on October 23, the Willie Company, finally resupplied to some extent, moved out onto the trail and up through the Rocky Ridges in the teeth of a fierce northwest gale that furiously buffeted them all that day and through the night in windchill conditions that very probably reached seventy degrees below zero. Once again, John Chislett painted the experience with heartbreaking clarity. It is a story of suffering, apathy, death, heroism, courage, tenacity, endurance, will, duty, and faith that has hardly any equal.¹¹⁷

An accounting of deaths to this point reveals an uncannily grim parallel between the two beleaguered handcart companies. William Woodward (Willie Company) and John Jaques (Martin Company) accounted for almost identical numbers. Deaths beyond Florence up to October 19 were nearly identical: twenty for the Willie Company and nineteen for the Martin Company; and deaths from the onset of the October 19 storm to October 28 were apparently thirty-one for the Willie Company and thirty-seven for the Martin Company.¹¹⁸ After October 28, deaths in the Willie Company dropped off significantly; the company by then was well past South Pass and comparably well provided for by many resupply and rescue teams and personnel. The Martin Company, however, still had another week of bitter winter conditions to endure before it too could enjoy some respite.

Back at Red Buttes, men of Grant’s advance express were obliged to forcefully urge the Martin Company, and the Hodgett



Trail through the Rocky Ridges. This high, open terrain caused considerable difficulty for all emigrants owing to the steep gradients and rocky conditions of the trail surface. The Willie Company suffered greatly here during a fierce resurgence of the storm on October 23, 1856.



Willie Company campsite at Rock Creek. This excellent campsite is the first place after crossing the Rocky Ridges that could have offered at least partial protection from the storm. Fifteen members of the Willie Company, most of whom died as the result of their ordeal at the Rocky Ridges, were buried here, thirteen of them in a single grave.

and Hunt Companies as well, to move on immediately or die. Out from their camp of death and despair, they slogged steeply upward to a camp on the Rocky Avenue and, during the following day, on to another camp at Willow Springs, thence the next day on and over Prospect Hill.¹¹⁹

The campsite at Red Buttes, in the vicinity of Bessemer Bend, is beautiful and tranquil—one of those ideal camping places like Deer Creek. But the fifty-mile cross-country section between this place and the Sweetwater River is ugly—a matter commented upon often, from William Clayton in 1847 onward.¹²⁰ It is open, treeless, bleak, windblown, dangerously boggy, smelly, largely devoid of grass and of pure water except for a few puny little spring-fed brooks, and seemingly without relief, since close-by undulations of the depressing topography hide a more hopeful distant horizon. A word often used to describe it is “desolate.” It is probably the most desolate stretch of the entire Mormon Trail east of South Pass. But worst of all, the trail also courses steeply up and down.

It was with great relief that the emigrants reached, first, some good water at Willow Springs and, just a short pull further, the crest of Prospect Hill, where a great vista opened up—and gratefully downward—toward the beautiful country to the southwest.¹²¹

The Martin Company Saints departed Red Buttes under improved weather conditions, but the comparative warmth of the air was largely nullified by the steepness and mud-and-slush condition of the trail. The mud of this part of Wyoming is nasty, clinging stuff. It builds up, thick and heavy, on wheels and shoes, making onward movement, especially uphill, extremely difficult and discouraging.¹²² Daniel W. Jones of Grant’s advance express described that miserable ascent by those still-starving, frozen, sick, and demoralized people:

We continued on, overtaking the hand-cart company ascending a long muddy hill. A condition of distress here met my eyes that I never saw before or since. The train was strung out for three or four miles. There were old men pulling and tugging their carts, sometimes loaded with a sick wife or children—women pulling along sick husbands—little children six to eight years old struggling through the mud and snow. As night came on the mud would freeze on their clothes and feet. There were two of us and hundreds needing help. What could we do? We gathered on to some of the most helpless with our riatas tied to the carts, and helped as many as we could into camp on Avenue hill.¹²³



The Rocky Avenue. The Martin Company reached this site on October 29, 1856, after an agonizing ascent through mud and snow from their camp at Red Buttes.



Prospect Hill. This is the highest location along the trail between the Black Hills and Sweetwater Station. This photograph looks north and back down the trail toward the Rocky Avenue. Both the Willie and Martin Companies reached this point after an exhausting ascent from the North Platte, which runs just beyond the horizon at the right.

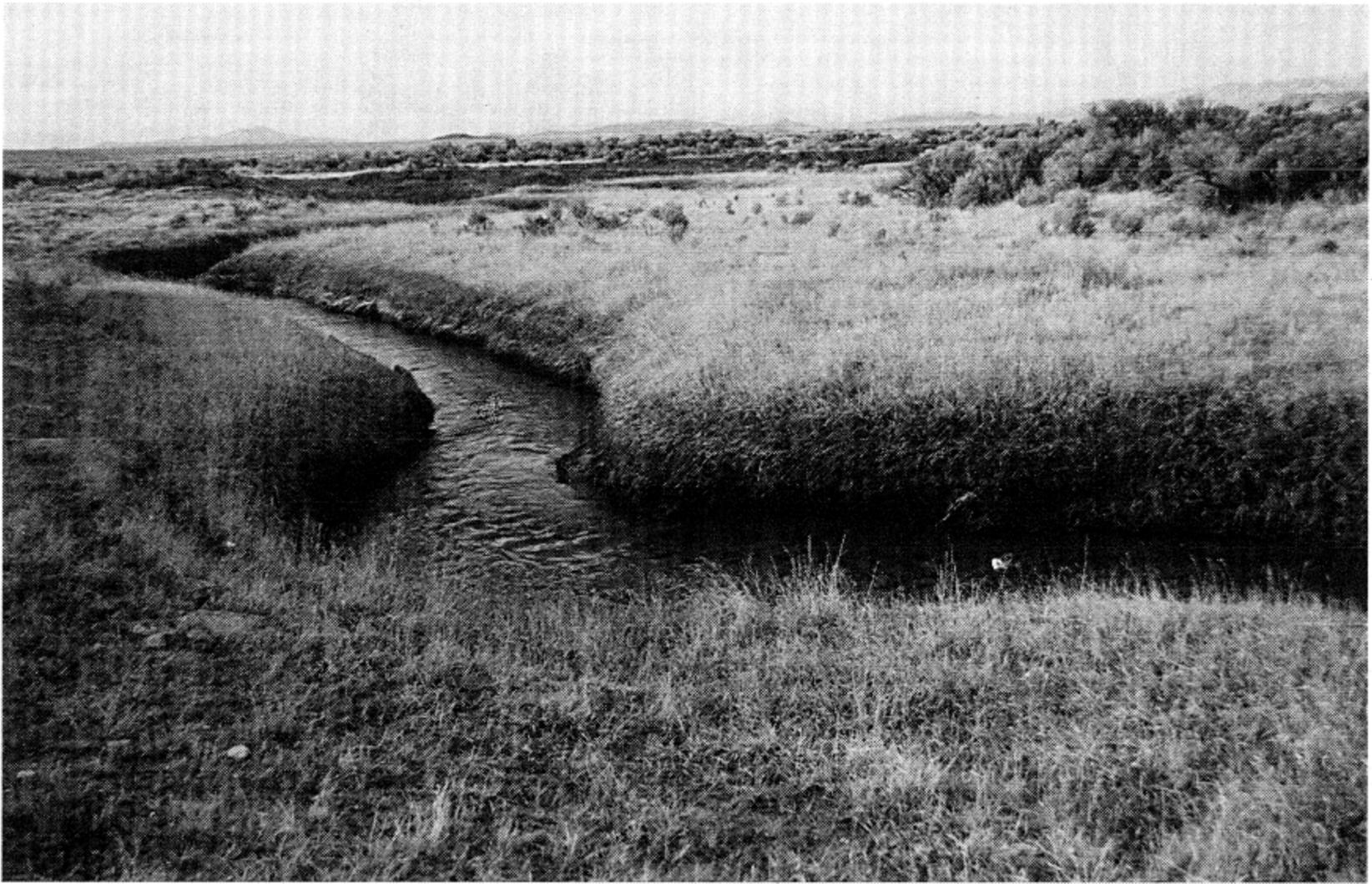
To further indicate the degree of difficulty, suffering, and breakdown at this point, Patience Loader Rozsa described a frightening incident:

“There was poor William Whittaker. He was in the tent with several others. He and his brother, John, occupied one part of a tent. In the other part another family was sleeping. There was a young woman sleeping and she was awakened by poor Brother Whittaker eating her fingers. He was dying with hunger and cold. He also ate the flesh of his own fingers that night. He died and was buried at Willow Springs before we left camp that morning.”¹²⁴

The full portent of this account, had rescue not come in time, is dismaying.

Real relief finally came on October 31 at Greasewood Creek, the last camp before Independence Rock and the Sweetwater. Although the general vicinity of the campsite is rather bleak, this attractive little creek of pure water snakes tightly back and forth in its banks. But the Martin Company emigrants mostly remembered only the blessed relief provided there by Grant's main party with six freight wagons full to the bows with food, blankets, and clothing. Now, their severe starving abated, in relative warmth, and with the realization that they had been saved from sure death, they could look forward again with some hope. But trouble still lay ahead—once again owing to the weather.

The campsites at Independence Rock and Devil's Gate are beautifully situated. The willow-lined Sweetwater River winds majestically around and through rather handsome low but sheer granite mountain formations of an even chocolate-milk hue.¹²⁵ Here and there are picturesque campsites that, in addition to providing the requisite features of water, grass, and firewood, are nestled among recesses in the rock, largely protected from the wind. Martin's Cove is a grand example. When one climbs away from the river and into the cove, at a certain point a door seems to shut, suddenly closing off the wind, and there is seeming silence, at least momentarily, until one notices the sound of the wind rustling through the tops of the aspen and pine trees and brushing along the rock walls overhead. The grass is thick and soft, and tiny brooks course to the right and left behind the low hill that shuts off the eastern entrance to the cove. It is also beautiful, and, especially because of its history, shrinelike.

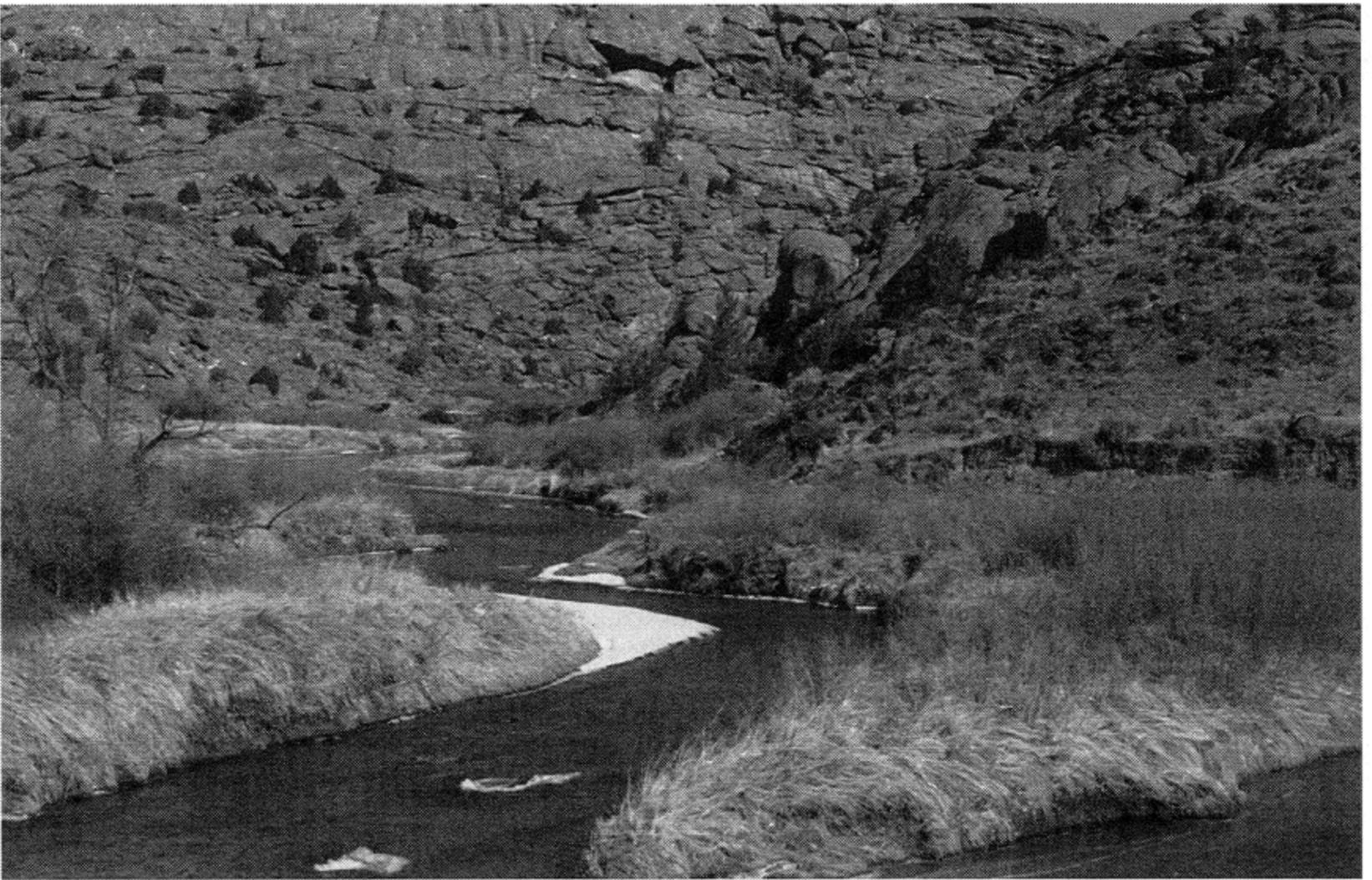


Martin Company campsite at Greasewood Creek. Here members of the Martin Company, after their descent from Prospect Hill on October 31, 1856, received the first supplies brought to them by the Grant rescue party.

But no beauty and relative comfort of any campsite could compensate for the bitter cold—and crowding—that occurred on November 1 and 2 at the camps at nearby Independence Rock and Devil's Gate. The temperature suddenly plummeted to below zero, the wind blew as usual, and over a thousand people of the Martin, Hodgett, Hunt, and Grant parties jammed into and around the several small buildings of the Devil's Gate stockade that existed there in 1856.¹²⁶ That Grant must have felt overwhelmed by the dilemma he faced is indicated by his pathetic appeal to Brigham Young for more help, which was written and dispatched by express on November 2. It reads in part:

The snow began to fall very fast, and continued until late at night. . . .

. . . You can imagine between five and six hundred men, women and children, worn down by drawing hand carts through snow and mud; fainting by the way side; falling, chilled by the cold; children crying, their limbs stiffened by the cold, their feet bleeding and some of them bare to snow and frost. The sight is almost too much for the stoutest of us; but we go on doing all we can, not doubting nor despairing.



Camp at Devil's Gate. The Martin, Hodgett, and Hunt emigrant companies joined the Grant rescue party here on November 2 and 3, 1856. This photograph looks north along the Sweetwater River from the campsite towards the river's upstream entrance to Devil's Gate.



Martin's Cove. The Martin Company, forced to move from nearby Devil's Gate Stockade because of the severely crowded conditions there, arrived here on November 4, 1856, after a terrible crossing of the Sweetwater River during a blizzard. The cove, nestled amongst rock escarpments, is protected not only by rock walls front, left, and rear, but also by a large, dune-line, brush-covered dirt hill to the immediate right.

Our company is too small to help much; it is only a drop to a bucket, as it were, in comparison to what is needed. I think not over one third of br. Martin's company is able to walk. This you may think is extravagant, but it is nevertheless true. Some of them have good courage and are in good spirits; but a great many are like little children and do not help themselves much more, nor realize what is before them.¹²⁷

“Nor realize,” indeed. Although the Devil's Gate campsite was partially protected by both the terrain and the stockade buildings, it was woefully inadequate for so many, and the Martin Company, on November 4 under blizzard conditions, had to move on, and, in the move, perhaps the most stirring story of the company unfolded. Fortunately, Martin's Cove, which was well known to the rescue party, was only two miles further south along the trail; but it was also on the other side of the river. If the Martin Company could only get across the nearly frozen river and up into the cove, relative comfort, protection from the wind, and plenty of firewood could be theirs.

It was an awful trip, however. The windchill created by the frigid temperature and the high winds must have created conditions equivalent to at least sixty-five degrees below zero. Even though short in distance, the relatively steep climb into the cove was difficult in and of itself, but fording the Sweetwater, which ran fast, deep, and relatively wide through that vicinity, was a near impossible task for these people who had already suffered so much and who were weak, sick, and demoralized. John Jaques's account of the crossing of the Sweetwater largely matches Chislett's account of crossing the Rocky Ridges for its pathos.¹²⁸

It was here also that the rescue party played its most heroic role. Grant's men had been saviors several times over by then, but most memorable was their courage, willingness, and fresh strength in helping those devastated people—more than five hundred of them—ford that stream under the awful conditions that existed. Carrying men, women, and children on their backs, these good men crossed the freezing water, with the piercing winter wind blowing in their faces and against their wet bodies, back and forth, again and again. The rescuers could not, however, have brought all the emigrants over by themselves; there were far too few of them



Crossing of the Sweetwater River. On November 4, 1856, the Martin Company, assisted by members of the Grant rescue party, forded this river under extreme conditions of below-zero cold and driving wind in order to get to Martin's Cove, which offered the only protection from the storm. The cove is a half mile behind the photographer's position here. The photograph looks easterly, with Devil's Gate two miles away and slightly to the left.

and far too many emigrants. Many, if not most, emigrants had to get across by themselves, which of course they did, as John Jaques eloquently attested. It is a story of iron courage and will that should never be forgotten.¹²⁹

Yet the camp at Martin's Cove can be considered the turning point of the disaster. The bitter cold continued and more members of the Martin Company died in the cove from the combined effects of all they had experienced, but then the enormity of the suffering and loss began to abate: On November 10, the Martin Company, followed by the Hodgett and Hunt wagon companies, now reasonably well fed and somewhat warmer, abandoned the handcarts and continued westward in comparably good weather, most of them in wagons pulled by strong teams. On that same day, the survivors of the Willie Company enjoyed their first full day safe,

well fed, and warm in Great Salt Lake City. Here the chronological narrative ends, although more bad weather, difficulty, heartbreak, and death remained ahead for the Martin, Hodgett, and Hunt Company Saints, who finally arrived in the valley between November 30 and December 15.

An exact accounting of those who perished has as yet not been determined and may never be determined. Although identification of those who perished in the Willie, Hodgett, and Hunt Companies may be nearly complete, an accounting of the deaths in the Martin Company is probably still well short of the mark.

Apparently, no daily journal was kept after October 18, the day before the winter storm struck. An estimate of the dead was reported to the advance express of the Grant rescue party as totaling fifty-six up to October 28, but no other counts were given other than a few deaths along the trail well beyond Martin's Cove. A significant number of Saints must have died in the cove, however. The Martin Company arrived at the cove greatly debilitated from the ordeals of the crossing of the Platte two weeks previously, the struggle over Prospect Hill, the cold at Devil's Gate, and, importantly, the terrible crossing of the Sweetwater the day they entered the cove.

● Individual accounts indicate many deaths at Martin's Cove, and some researchers feel that deaths there may have equaled or even exceeded those at Red Buttes. But few of those deaths have been confirmed by name or date. At the time of this publication, the confirmed totals for the disaster are as follows: 103 for the Martin Company, 74 for the Willie Company, 20 for the Hunt Company, and 9 for the Hodgett Company.¹³⁰

Concluding Thoughts on Faith and Works

Reflection on the foregoing narrative, which focuses so sharply on the disaster, raises the question of faith. The enormity of the disaster is beyond doubting. The staggeringly dangerous crossing of the Platte, the starvation and emotional devastation at Sweetwater Station, the freezing at the Rocky Ridges and at Devil's Gate, and the tortuous crossing of the Sweetwater—these and more experiences were so terrible that one wonders, not so much that as many

as two hundred died, but that more than a thousand lived. Only great individual faith on the parts of these people can explain why. The Willie and Martin Company handcart experience is arguably the greatest story of the triumph of individual faith in the history of the Mormon people. Indeed, coupled with the courage, tenacity, endurance, and will to live that always accompany great faith, the story is one of the great witnesses to faith in American history that can inspire and strengthen us all.

Yet the disaster was also a terrible mistake that raises another question—How could good men of great individual faith have risked the lives of so many others so imprudently? This essay purposely opens with evidence regarding the mistake of allowing so many people to go out on the plains so late in the season. It cannot be glossed over any more than any other great mistake in history. There are reasons why this tragedy occurred, and those reasons may include a kind of overconfidence that God would guide the emigrants safely through all the perils ahead, whether precipitated by nature or by man. If any story can prove the folly of such overconfidence, it is this one. The storms cruelly struck those people down at the worst possible times. Only the immediate departure of the initial element of the rescue effort from Great Salt Lake City on a calm Indian summer day saved them. A few days' delay could have resulted in the death of all of them.

Brigham Young seems entirely correct in his remarks of November 2, when he rebuked Franklin D. Richards for not stopping the last handcart companies in Nebraska.¹³¹ He also seems to have been prophetically correct when he, paraphrasing the scriptural passage that opens this essay, stated that the Lord would have been responsible “after everything the Saints could do” to bring the emigrants in if the rescue failed. On November 16, Brigham Young explained:

If br. Willie's company had not been assisted by the people in these valleys, and he and his company had lived to the best light they had in their possession, had done everything they could have done to cross the plains and done just as they did, asking no questions and having no doubting; or in other words, if, after their President or Presidents told them to go on the plains, they had gone in full faith, had pursued their journey according to their ability, and

done all they could, and we could not have rendered them any assistance, it would have been just as easy for the Lord to send herds of fat buffaloes to lay down within twenty yards of their camp, as it was to send flocks of quails or to rain down manna from heaven to Israel of old.

My faith is, when we have done all we can then the Lord is under obligation and will not disappoint the faithful; he will perform the rest. If no other assistance could have been had by the companies this season, I think they would have had hundreds and hundreds of fat buffaloes crowding around their camp, so that they could not help but kill them. But, under the circumstances, it was our duty to assist them, and we were none too early in the operation.

It was not a rash statement for me to make at our last Conference, when I told you that I would dismiss the conference, if the people would not turn out, and that I, with my brethren, would go to the assistance of the companies. We knew that our brethren and sisters were on the plains and in need of assistance, and we had the power and ability to help them, therefore it became our duty to do so.

The Lord was not brought under obligation in the matter, so he had put the means in our possession to render them the assistance they needed. But if there had been no other way the Lord would have helped them, if he had had to send his angels to drive up buffaloes day after day, and week after week. I have full confidence that the Lord would have done his part; my only lack of confidence is that those who profess to be Saints will not do right and perform their duty.¹³²

Fat buffalo were in fact near the emigrants' camps, as Ephraim Hanks proved on November 11. Hanks came upon and easily shot two fat buffaloes on the trail along the Sweetwater very near where the Willie Company ran entirely out of food on October 18.¹³³ Did the Holy Ghost prompt the prophet of this? Had God truly positioned those fat buffaloes in preparation for the possibility that the rescue would start too late or otherwise fail in its mission? It is not impossible; and it is further possible that some number of the emigrants would have found enough food along the trail to survive had the entire rescue turned back at South Pass, but one must wonder at what additional cost.

That Brigham Young links faith with "when we have done all we can" should not surprise anyone. Besides being a great spiritual

leader, Brigham Young was a pragmatic man, a splendidly practical man, and, as much as anything else, this aspect of his character greatly contributed to the initial survival and ultimate success of all the Utah Saints. On November 30, the day the Martin Company arrived in Great Salt Lake City—but while the Hodgett and Hunt Companies and many of the rescuers were still in danger out on the plains—President Young stated that

the great majority of the brethren here, so far as we have called on them to assist this year's immigration, have freely and nobly manifested their faith by their works. . . .

. . . Works have been most noble when they were needed; we put works to our faith, and in this case we realize that our faith alone would have been perfectly dead and useless, would have been of no avail, in saving our brethren that were in the snow, but by putting works with faith we have been already blest in rescuing many and bringing them to where we can now do them more good.¹³⁴

The faith of team captain Levi Savage prompted him to warn the company before departing Florence that

the lateness of the Season was my only objection, of leaving this point for the mountains at this time. I Spoke warmly upon the Subject, but Spoke truth. . . . Willie then Spoke again in reply to what I had Said, evidently dissatisfied, and Said that the God that he Served was a God that was able to Save to the utermost, that was the God that He Served; and he wanted no Jobes co[m]forters with him . . . I then Said that what I had Said, was truth . . . I had Spoken nothing but the truth, and he and others knew it.¹³⁵

Savage's objection was voted down by the majority of the company, and by several returning missionaries as well, including George D. Grant and William H. Kimball, who were among those appointed to arrange for outfitting the handcart companies at Iowa City and beyond. Although he had felt humiliated by Willie's public reprimand, and later by Richards, Savage remained as a team captain and continued with the company. He proved to be of great service throughout and was one of the heroes of the trek.¹³⁶

The faith of George D. Grant and William H. Kimball took them right back out on the trail in the vanguard of the resupply and rescue effort. For the next six weeks they gave everything they had to bring succor to those in need. They too were heroes.

The faith of James Willie, who may have been overconfident about the degree to which God would intervene, strengthened him to heroically do his duty to the utmost along the trail at great personal risk and suffering. Willie's dutifulness was willingly and liberally conceded by John Chislett, whose courage and duty were equal to anyone's, even though his own faith seems to have wavered sometime after the ordeal was over.¹³⁷

Moreover, "after all we can do" calls for more than great individual faith on the part of leaders. Any leader must be dedicated to the lives and welfare of those the leader has been called to serve. Among other things, such dedication requires great care, concern, caution, restraint, and moral courage. Great care requires great foresight, planning, and preparation—planning that in turn requires being open to contingencies when unforeseen circumstances impose themselves sufficiently to make the risks too high. And this degree of concern sometimes requires the moral courage to make unpopular decisions. Some of those appointed to carry out the handcart plan, as fine and faithful as they all were, seem to have fallen short on this occasion in some of these elements of leadership, and, what is more, may have labored under an erroneous belief that God would "overrule" the elements sufficiently to assure success irrespective of the degree of risk. That is, in the face of sure knowledge of the many dangers, such faith may have led to decisions that simply risked too much.¹³⁸

On September 13, according to John Chislett, Richards promised the Willie Company Saints that "though it might storm on our right and on our left, the Lord would keep open our way before us and "we should get to Zion in safety,""¹³⁹ an apparent personal conviction that he repeated to the Church membership in Great Salt Lake City on October 5, the day after the Swiftsure Train dashed into Great Salt Lake City and exactly two weeks before the storms slammed into the emigrants head on.

The Saints that are now upon the plains, about one thousand with hand-carts, feel that it is late in the season, and they expect to get cold fingers and toes. But they have this faith and confidence towards God that he will overrule the storms that may come in the season thereof and turn them away, that their path may be freed from suffering more than they can bear.

They have confidence to believe that this will be an open fall.¹⁴⁰

The emigrants had every reason to respond with such confidence—inexperienced, anxious, and so strongly assured by their authorities as they were—but those authorities did not.¹⁴¹

By the time John Chislett gave his powerful account, he had lost much of his faith, at least enough of it to have been cut off from the Church in 1864, apparently for his unwillingness to pay tithing. Nevertheless, he always maintained his gratitude for the rescuers, the prophet who sent them out so expeditiously, and the people of Utah who generously provided so much of the succor.¹⁴² Although most historians, and Church authorities as well, have quoted liberally from his tragic but eloquent account, few if any have quoted his conclusion, presumably because of his apparent bitterness after the fact. But it deserves to be quoted:

“After arriving in the Valley, I found that President Young, on learning, from the brethren who passed us on the road, of the lateness of our leaving the frontier, set to work at once to send us relief. It was the October Conference when they arrived with the news. Brigham at once suspended all conference business, and declared that nothing further should be done until every available team was started out to meet us. He set the example by sending several of his best mule teams laden with provisions. Heber Kimball did the same, and hundreds of others followed their noble example. People who had come from distant parts of the Territory to attend conference volunteered to go out to meet us, and went at once. The people who had no teams gave freely of provisions, bedding, etc.—all doing their best to help us. . . .

“Immediately that the condition of the suffering emigrants was known in Salt Lake City, the most fervent prayers for their deliverance were offered up. There, and throughout the Territory, the same was done as soon as the news reached the people. Prayers in the Tabernacle, in the school-house, in the family circle, and in the private prayer circles of the priesthood were constantly offered up to the Almighty, begging Him to avert the storm from us. Such intercessions were invariably made on behalf of Martin’s company, at all the meetings which I attended after my arrival. But these prayers availed nothing more than did the prophecies of Richards and the elders. It was the stout hearts and strong hands of the noble fellows who came to our relief, the good teams, the flour, beef, potatoes, the warm clothing and bedding, *and not prayers nor prophecies*, that saved us from death. It is a fact patent to all the old settlers in Utah, that the fall storms of 1856 were earlier and more severe than were ever known before or since. Instead of their prophecies being fulfilled and their prayers answered, it would

almost seem that the elements were unusually severe that season, as a rebuke to their presumption.”¹⁴³

But let John Jaques, that good and faithful Saint who with his beloved family suffered so much with the Martin handcart company, have the last word. Long after the tragedy and still strong in the faith, he refused to find fault with anyone, especially Franklin D. Richards, who after the ordeal had so generously taken Jaques and his grieving family into his home and lovingly nurtured them back to health:

To all, the journey, with its great and incessant toils, its wearing hardships, and wasting privations, was a hard and bitter experience, wholly unanticipated. But to many, and especially to women and children who had been delicately brought up and tenderly cared for, and who had never known want nor had been subject to hardships previously, as well as to the weakly and elderly of both sexes, it was cruel to a degree far beyond the power of language to express, and the more so for the reason that the worst parts of the experience were entirely unnecessary, because avoidable by timely measures and more sagacious management. . . .

The question may be asked, whom do I blame for the misadventures herein related. I blame nobody. I am not anxious to blame anybody. I am not writing for that purpose of blaming anybody, but to fill up a blank page of history with matters of much interest. I may say that notwithstanding the serious misfortunes of this company, 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.¹⁴⁴

Let the matter rest there. But at the same time, let all be reminded, and take whatever lessons from this towering story that might be of personal benefit—and of benefit to those whom we all may, from time to time, be called to serve.

Howard A. Christy recently retired as senior editor of Scholarly Publications at Brigham Young University. The basic topography of the map is provided courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management. Image manipulation and trail overlay are by Bruce Christy, and descriptive annotations are by Bruce Patrick, senior designer, Brigham Young University Publications. Photographs courtesy of the author.

NOTES

¹The term “disaster” has been applied to the experience of the Willie and Martin handcart companies by many historians. For example, see B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century One*, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Corporation of the President, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1965), 4:82. John Jaques, a member of the Martin handcart company who was later a General Authority and assistant Church historian under Franklin D. Richards, forthrightly stated that the “expedition” was “a grand mistake” that was ultimately “fraught with disaster and death.” Jaques’s account was published under the title “Some Reminiscences” on the front page of the *Salt Lake Daily Herald* beginning on Sunday, December 1, 1878, and running serially each Sunday until January 19, 1879. A transcript of the series is available on microfilm at the Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

²The best eyewitness accounts are the official or semiofficial journals of the Willie and Martin handcart companies; the Grant rescue party journal; the brief account of the Swiftsure Train of returning missionaries led by Franklin D. Richards; the Levi Savage journal; and the more extensive narrative accounts of several eyewitnesses to the disaster published after the fact. The narratives that I have relied on most are the comparatively more complete, detailed, and insightful accounts of John Chislett, a team captain in the Willie Company; John Jaques, at least initially a team captain in the Martin Company and an excellent writer; and Daniel W. Jones, a member of the Grant rescue party. Although written several years after the fact, their length and thoroughness, clarity, agreement with other eyewitness accounts, dignity, and seeming honesty make them especially valuable. All of the aforementioned journals are located in the LDS Church Archives.

³Brigham Young often looked for lessons to be learned from difficulty. See, for example, Brigham Young to Orson Pratt, October 30, 1856, in *Millennial Star* 19 (February 14, 1857): 99: “Let this be a lesson to us in future, not to start companies across the Plains so late. It is a great mistake.”

⁴See, for example, John D. Unruh Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 73-74; and “Sixth General Epistle of the Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, from Great Salt Lake Valley, to the Saints Scattered throughout the Earth,” September 22, 1851, in James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 2:87.

⁵For a fine brief account of all the handcart companies, see LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856-1860* (1960; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

⁶The scheme was more than once labeled an “experiment.” See, for example, Erastus Snow to John Taylor, September 15, 1856, in *Millennial Star* 18 (November 1, 1856): 701.

⁷Sources concerning the people involved in planning and provisioning for the emigrant companies are somewhat sparse. Two references, however, give apparently reliable information on staffing. The April 12, 1856, issue of *The Mormon*, published in New York City by the Eastern States Mission, states:

APPOINTMENTS.—George D. Grant and William H. Kimball are appointed to purchase cattle for the coming emigration. Alexander Robbins is appointed to purchase provisions and general supplies for emigration, and carry them to Florence, the outfitting place for the plains.

Daniel Spencer is appointed general superintendent of emigration in the West, with liberty to call for such aid as he may need, in Iowa City and other places.

James H. Hart, of St. Louis, Mo., is appointed agent to receive orders and moneys for the purchase of cattle, wagons, provisions, &c., for the emigration. . . .

James McGaw, John Van Cott, William Walker, Joseph France, and all the elders going West, on the way to Utah, are requested to report themselves to Daniel Spencer, at Iowa city, and assist him, if needed. . . .

[Signed] JOHN TAYLOR. ("News from Elders," *Deseret News*, June 11, 1856, 109)

In a letter to Heber C. Kimball dated June 11, 1856, William Woodward reported that "Bro. Spencer is president of the emigration to Deseret from Europe. . . . James Ferguson assists him. . . . C. G. Webb superintends the making of handcarts, E. Bunker the making of ox-yokes." Andrew Jenson, *Journal History of the Church*, June 11, 1856, 1, LDS Church Archives.

These individuals left Europe early to carry out the indicated duties in the United States. George D. Grant and William H. Kimball departed England on the steamer *Atlantic* on February 6, 1856. "Editorial," *Millennial Star* 18 (February 23, 1856): 125. Daniel Spencer and John Van Cott departed on the steamer *Canada* sometime before April 5, 1856. "Editorial," *Millennial Star* 18 (April 5, 1856): 216. Franklin D. Richards, who supervised the handcart plan in Europe, departed Liverpool on July 26, accompanied by Charles H. Wheelock, Joseph A. Young, William C. Dunbar, and James Linforth. "Editorial," *Millennial Star* 18 (August 9, 1856): 504.

⁸James B. Allen, "The Latter-day Saints' Emigrants' Guide: How & Why It Came to Be," in William Clayton, *The Latter-day Saints' Emigrants' Guide: Being a Table of Distances Showing All the Springs, Creeks, Rivers, Hills, Mountains, Camping Places, and All Other Notable Places, from Council Bluffs to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake*, ed. Stanley B. Kimball (Tucson, Ariz.: Patrice Press, 1983), 1-9.

⁹See Brigham Young, "Remarks," *Deseret News*, November 12, 1856, 283; compare Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855-86), 4:66-70, November 2, 1856.

¹⁰"General Epistle from the Council of the Twelve Apostles to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Abroad, Dispersed throughout the Earth," December 23, 1847, in Clark, *Messages*, 1:329.

¹¹"Brigham Young to Elders Orson Hyde, George A. Smith, and Ezra T. Benson, and the Saints Scattered Abroad, in Pottawatamie County, and Neighborhood," October 9, 1848, in Clark, *Messages*, 1:342.

¹²“Sixth General Epistle,” September 22, 1851, 2:88–89.

¹³“Seventh General Epistle of the Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, from Great Salt Lake Valley, to the Saints Scattered throughout the Earth,” April 18, 1852, in Clark, *Messages*, 2:94.

¹⁴“Eighth General Epistle of the Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, from Great Salt Lake Valley, to the Saints Scattered throughout the Earth,” October 13, 1852, in Clark, *Messages*, 2:104.

¹⁵The Ellsworth Company required sixty-nine total days for the trip; both the McArthur and Bunker Companies required sixty-five days. Departure and arrival information is given in several sources, especially Jenson, *Journal History*; and Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts*.

¹⁶See Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts*, 46, 91–98. According to Franklin D. Richards, the Willie Company consisted of “404 persons, 6 wagons, 87 handcarts, 6 yoke of oxen, 32 cows, and 5 mules”; the Martin Company consisted of “some 576 persons, 146 hand-carts, 7 wagons, 6 mules and horses, and 50 cows and beef cattle; also one wagon mostly loaded with church goods”; the Hunt Company consisted of “240 persons, 50 wagons, 297 oxen and cows, 7 horses and mules, and some 4 church wagons” and that the “majority of this company have light loads and good teams, and are generally well provisioned”; and the Hodgett Company consisted of “150 persons, 33 wagons, 84 yoke of oxen, 19 cows and some 250 head of heifers and other loose cattle.” Franklin D. Richards and Daniel Spencer to Brigham Young, in *Deseret News*, October 22, 1856, 258. See also Jenson, *Journal History*, October 4, 1856, 1–2. Such statistics are reported in several other trail journals, cited in later notes. These counts give a total of 1,370 persons late out on the plains. The Willie Company, which numbered 500 persons upon departure from Iowa City, dropped to 404 upon departure from Florence.

¹⁷See Maps, U.S. Department of Interior, Geological Survey, topographic quadrangle 7.5-minute series, scale 1:25,000, for Wyoming; and maps, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, topographic quadrangle 30 x 60-minute series (Surface Management Status), scale 1:100,000, for Wyoming. The name “Rocky Ridges” describes the cobblestone-like surface of the trail more than it does the surrounding terrain. Although remote and largely empty of significant human habitation, concrete posts have been installed along the trail in recent times between Sweetwater Station and Rock Creek. Plastic stakes mark the trail between Red Buttes and Greasewood Creek.

¹⁸William Clayton, *The Latter-day Saints’ Emigrants’ Guide*, facsimile, in Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 3:547–73. See also Clayton, *Emigrants’ Guide*.

¹⁹See, for example, William Clayton, *William Clayton’s Journal: A Daily Record of the Journey of the Original Company of “Mormon” Pioneers from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1921), 229–30. Clayton’s journal is an excellent companion when studying the 1856 trail journals dealing with the handcart experience. The trail varies somewhat in the immediate vicinity of present-day Casper, Wyoming, but is the same elsewhere. Most of the trail is easily accessible by four-wheel-drive vehicle between Red Buttes and Devil’s Gate. The highway south and west of Devil’s Gate either traces exactly or crosses the trail in several places as far as Sweetwater Station. Restricted ranch roads, sections of Bureau of Land Management roads,

and sections of trail follow the route exactly between Sweetwater Station and South Pass.

²⁰These campsites are easily accessible by hard-surface highway, unsurfaced roads, or trail. Several are identified by posts or historical monuments or displays.

²¹Regarding the well-marked Rock Creek campsite, see “James G. Willie Emigrating Company,” Journal, typescript, LDS Church Archives. In the appendix to that journal, William Woodward, who acted as “clerk of the camp from October 1st till our arrival in G. S. L. City,” stated that the camp occupied by the Willie Company on October 23–24 was “near Willow Creek on the banks of the Sweetwater.” If so, this would place the Willie Company camp not at Rock Creek, but at the same location as the Grant rescue party camp of October 19–20, which location, when accounting for the downstream detour to the Sweetwater, was about four miles further. Personal reconnaissance of both the Rock Creek campsite and the site where Willow Creek enters the Sweetwater, however, strongly indicates that the Willie Company camped at the excellent site at Rock Creek.

²²Hiking over this part of the trail in winter, in addition to the trail being slippery and sticky, is lonely to the point being a little scary. Beyond the Rocky Ridges to the west, the trail is easily lost in the snow and wet meadows typical of the high country above timberline. The concrete posts, which can be easily spotted now, are extremely valuable for staying on course, although they can be confusing also, especially in the vicinity of McLean Meadows, where *two* trails—the older Oregon/Mormon Trail and the Pony Express Trail, established a few years later—and segments of recent range roads intersect or cross each other. Compass and map are advisable for those interested in traversing this fascinating back-country on foot.

²³Pioneer trail accounts repeatedly mention the wind. During my visits to Wyoming in February and March 1997, the wind blew hard every day, all day. The flag stood straight out from the pole at the rest station at South Pass. When asked about the wind at Muddy Gap, just south of Devil’s Gate, the gas-station attendant gave me the station’s business card, which has a windchill chart on the back. I had difficulty maintaining my balance when walking in the strong east wind from Sun Ranch to Martin’s Cove and back. (It would have been a very strong east wind that blew down many, if not all, the tents of the Martin Company one night while they were in the cove.) The folks at Sun Ranch stated that the windchill reached seventy degrees below zero or more several times during the winter of 1996–97. At the campground at Fort Caspar, after being kept awake all night listening to the wind, I asked the campground attendant if the wind always blew around there. He wryly motioned his head toward a sign on the wall, which lists the five most often asked questions around there. Question 1 reads: “Does the wind always blow around here?”

²⁴Many sources give windchill information. See notes 61 and 62 below for references.

²⁵Savage wrote that Atwood, although he apparently did not speak openly, confided to Savage that “with all his experience, he had never been placed in a position where things appear so dark to him, as it does to undertake to take this Company through at this late Season of the year.” Levi Savage, Journal, August 12, 1856, holograph, LDS Church Archives. This is a splendid journal, many of its entries being detailed, richly written, honest, and self-deprecating. Written in the

bold hand of one of the Willie Company's captains of hundred, it stands with the longer narratives of Chislett and Jaques as one of the most valuable eyewitness accounts of the Willie and Martin handcart disaster. It has the added value of having been written on the spot.

²⁶Savage, Journal, August 13, 1856. The prophetic accuracy of this statement, written on a warm day in August, is striking. See Savage, Journal, October 22-24, 1856.

²⁷Savage, Journal, August 13, 1856.

²⁸Savage, Journal, August 15, 1856. This would have made the decision unanimous on the part of the emigrants' "authorities."

²⁹Benjamin Platt, "Autobiography of Benjamin Platt," microfilm of typescript, LDS Church Archives, 3.

³⁰Josiah Rogerson, "Martin's Handcart Company, 1856," *Salt Lake Herald*, October 27, 1907, 11.

³¹Franklin D. Richards, "Discourse," *Deseret News*, October 12, 1856, 252; compare Franklin D. Richards, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:115, October 5, 1856.

³²Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 1, 1878.

³³Heber C. Kimball, "Remarks," *Deseret News*, November 12, 1856, 282-83; compare Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:64-65, November 2, 1856.

³⁴See Young, "Remarks," November 12, 1856, 283; compare Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:66-70, November 2, 1856. In his October 30, 1856, letter to Orson Pratt, who had replaced Richards as president of the European Mission, Young stated that "the immigration is too late; this is an evil that must be remedied in future." Young to Pratt, October 30, 1856, 97.

³⁵I am indebted to Stella Jaques Bell, for her book-length biographical account of John Jaques, which incorporates his diaries, letters, and other writings, the extensive account of his sister-in-law Patience Loader Rozsa, who was also a member of the Martin Company, and the series of reminiscences published by Jaques in the *Salt Lake Daily Herald*. Stella Jaques Bell, *Life History and Writings of John Jaques* (Rexburg: Ricks College Press, 1978). Bell states in her dedication that Jaques's diaries and letters, which were owned and kept by the family, were lost in the Teton Dam Disaster of 1976. The information regarding the *Asia* is found at pages 100 and 123. See also "Departures," *Millennial Star* 18 (August 9, 1856): 504. Further regarding the Richards party's trip to Florence, see J. Linforth to Asa Calkins and the brethren in the *Millennial Star* Office, September 1, 1856, in *Millennial Star* 18 (October 25, 1856): 683-84.

³⁶Cyrus H. Wheelock to J. A. Little, September 2, 1856, in *Millennial Star* 18 (October 25, 1856): 681-82.

³⁷Richards and Spencer to Young. The term "Swiftsure Train" was used several times by contemporary observers. Erastus Snow reported that this very well-equipped train "consisted of four carriages and three light wagons, hauled by four mules each." Erastus Snow to President John Taylor, September 15, 1856, in *Millennial Star* 18 (November 1, 1856): 701. John Chislett described it as "a grand outfit of carriages and light wagons" with "each vehicle drawn by four horses or mules, and all the appointments seemed to be first rate." "Mr. Chislett's Narrative," pt. 1 of ch. 37, in T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints: A Full and Complete History of the Mormons, from the First Vision of Joseph Smith to*

the Last Courtship of Brigham Young (New York: D. Appleton, 1873), 319 (hereafter cited as Chislett Narrative). It may be that Richards hurried on to Great Salt Lake City as quickly as possible to report that many more emigrants were still on the trail. No records show, however, that Richards himself said anything more than that he hurried in hopes of getting to the city in time to attend the October Conference of the Church. See, for example, Savage, Journal, September 13, 1856.

³⁸On the parts of the returning missionaries, confidence in the handcart “experiment” seems to have been high. Richards, in a letter to J. A. Little, stated:

But for the lateness of the rear companies, everything seems equally propitious for a safe and profitable wind-up at the far end. From the beginning we have done all in our power to hasten matters pertaining to emigration, therefore we confidently look for the blessing of God to crown our humble efforts with success, and for the safe arrival of our brethren the poor Saints in Utah, though they may experience some cold. (Franklin D. Richards to J. A. Little, September 3, 1856, in *Millennial Star* 18 [October 25, 1856]: 682)

Cyrus H. Wheelock wrote:

The presence of brothers Franklin, Spencer, and my humble self among them seemed like the magic of heaven. Their spirits and bodies seemed almost instantly refreshed, and when we passed up and down the lines we were met with those hearty greetings that none but Saints know how to give and appreciate. All were in good spirits, and generally in good health, and full of confidence that they should reach the mountains in season to escape severe storms. . . . I have never seen more union among the Saints anywhere than is manifested in the hand-cart companies. And hundreds bear record of the truth of the words of President Young, wherein he promised them increasing strength by the way. (Wheelock to Little, September 2, 1856)

Erastus Snow, who saw the returning missionaries off at Florence and then returned east, wrote that “so far as yet known, the experiment with hand-carts is likely to succeed quite as well as the most ardent advocate of the measure could have anticipated.” Snow to Taylor, September 15, 1856.

³⁹Young, “Remarks,” November 12, 1856, 283; compare Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:67, November 2, 1856.

⁴⁰See “Fourteenth General Epistle of the Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to the Saints in the Valleys of the Mountains, and Those Scattered Abroad throughout the Earth,” December 10, 1856, in Clark, *Messages*, 2:200. The epistle states in part:

In the first place, our emigration MUST start earlier in the season, and the necessary arrangements MUST be made and completed by the time they arrive on the western frontier, and no company must be permitted to leave the Missouri river later than the first day of July.

They must be provided with stronger hand-carts, and endeavour so to arrange as to have the burden upon each cart vary as little as possible during the journey. [Rather] than starting with such heavy loads and lightening them up so soon, it would be better to start with lighter loads and gradually increase them, as the brethren become more accustomed to the labour. This might be accomplished by sending out a few teams with provisions a few days in advance of the companies, to be taken on the handcarts as they come up, when the teams could return. (*italics in original*)

The General Epistle to the Saints dated December 23, 1847, suggested being ready to depart from Winter Quarters on May 1. Clark, *Messages*, 1:329. The Sixth General Epistle, dated September 22, 1851, instructed that emigrants should be ready to depart Winter Quarters in April. Clark, *Messages*, 2:89. Prior to the Martin and Willie Companies arriving in the Great Salt Lake Valley, President Young instructed Orson Pratt “not to permit any company to leave the Missouri river later than the first of August, and it is far more preferable that they leave early in June or May.” Young to Pratt, October 30, 1856, 97. See also Brigham Young to Orson Pratt, July 19, 1856, in *Millennial Star* 18 (October 11, 1856): 651, and for an apparent response, see the editorial under the title “Emigration” in the *Millennial Star* 18 (November 8, 1856): 712-13.

These sources imply that the suggested safe departure date from Winter Quarters varied from as early as April to as late as August 1. There is apparently no record of a safe departure date after May being mentioned before the spring of 1856, however. Jedediah M. Grant, of the First Presidency, summed up the matter of the safe departure date from Winter Quarters in his remarks of November 12, 1856:

The grand difficulty with a portion of our immigration this year has been starting in the forepart of September instead of the first part of May. . . . Unless I have different feelings to what I now have, I should never wish to see a train leave the Missouri river after the middle of June, or after the first day of July at the latest. (Jedediah M. Grant, “Discourse,” *Deseret News*, November 12, 1856, 284)

⁴¹Young, “Remarks,” November 12, 1856, 283; compare Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:68, November 2, 1856.

⁴²Although all companies apparently worked from a base of one pound per person per day, women and children were apparently, in varying amounts, allotted less.

⁴³The five handcart companies after 1856 took far longer; one company took sixty-nine days, the same amount of time taken by the Ellsworth Company in 1856, but the other four averaged eighty-five days. See Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts*, 193 and throughout.

⁴⁴This and all further estimates of food shortage have been roughly calculated from company rosters and allotments of different amounts of flour depending on gender and age. In the absence of exact data, these estimates can only be approximate; they have, however, been made conservatively. In most instances, the shortages were probably worse than the estimates in this essay. An example

of the lack of exactness that leaves a question is William Woodward's statement that "From Iowa City to Florence, we had 10 ounces of flour per day, *a little or no groceries*. When we left Missouri River we had *not quite enough* provisions for sixty days at 1 lb. per head each, per day." William Woodward to Wilford Woodruff, February 17, 1857, in Jenson, *Journal History*, February 17, 1857, 17; italics added.

⁴⁵Brigham Young to Franklin D. Richards, September 30, 1855, in *Millennial Star* 17 (December 22, 1856): 814.

⁴⁶"Taking 15 miles as the average rate per day at which a company with hand-carts would travel, the journey would be performed in 70 days. . . . If the companies average twenty miles per day on the last half of the journey, it will reduce the time to sixty days, or two-thirds of that occupied by heavily loaded ox trains. We believe that experience will prove sixty days to be about the medium time that it will require to cross the plains." "Emigration," *Millennial Star* 17 (December 22, 1856): 810.

⁴⁷A lack of knowledge or concern regarding numbers is indicated by the *Millennial Star* in its May 3, 1856, feature "News from the United States." In March 1856, George D. Grant and W. H. Kimball "contracted for 100 hand-carts of excellent quality, at about two guineas each." "News from the United States," *Millennial Star* 18 (May 3, 1856): 281. The Ellsworth, McArthur, and Bunker Companies departed Iowa City with 164 handcarts. The 266 handcarts needed by the Willie and Martin Companies had to be crafted, of unseasoned wood, by the Willie and Martin emigrants themselves. This created a delay of at least three weeks, which delay ultimately proved devastating. This reference, of course, could have been one of several other such notices that did *not* get published. Nevertheless, the emigration required at least 430 well-made handcarts, and extant evidence indicates that those in charge of the emigration in Iowa City fell far short of that number in time to prevent dangerous delays. See Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts*, 193.

⁴⁸Young to Pratt, July 19, 1856, 651.

⁴⁹A year previously, Heber C. Kimball had written Richards that "about 40,000 lbs. of flour started out last week to meet our present emigration who are now on the road." Heber C. Kimball to Franklin D. Richards, August 31, 1855, in *Millennial Star* 17 (November 17, 1855): 730.

⁵⁰Daniel Spencer to Brigham Young, June 19, 1856, in *Deseret News*, August 6, 1856, 173.

⁵¹Daniel D. McArthur to Wilford Woodruff, January 5, 1857, in Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts*, 215; see also "Official Journal of the First Handcart Company," August 30-31, 1856, in Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts*, 209. Although evidence on the resupply train that provided flour to the Ellsworth and McArthur Companies (and probably the Bunker Company) at Deer Creek is sketchy, it is apparent that the train was privately owned by John Smith. Franklin D. Richards reported that "near Independence Rock, we nooned near Patriarch John Smith and two other brethren, who had come out with flour for the companies. Br. Smith returned with us." Richards and Spencer to Young.

⁵²"We had no idea there were any more companies upon the Plains, until our brethren arrived [on October 4, 1856], presuming that they would consider their late arrival in America, and not start them across the Plains until another year, but so it is, and now too late to remedy." Young to Pratt, October 30, 1856, 99.

⁵³William Woodward to Heber C. Kimball, June 11, 1856, in Jenson, *Journal History*, 2-3.

⁵⁴Savage, *Journal*, July 24, 1856. Again, planners may have anticipated that the emigrants would augment their supplies by purchasing food from Iowa farmers and merchants along the trail. Apparently, such purchases were minimal—perhaps owing to a lack of funds.

⁵⁵Chislett Narrative, 316. See also Woodward to Woodruff, 17.

⁵⁶The combined total of emigrants in the two trains was about 950. See note 16 above.

⁵⁷For good information on mileages, consult Clayton, *Emigrant's Guide*, ed. Kimball. William H. Kimball to Franklin D. Richards, April 7, 1856, in *Millennial Star* 18 (May 24, 1856): 333, reported that “the route from Iowa City to this place [Florence, or Winter Quarters] is 277 miles.”

⁵⁸On July 14, Levi Savage commented on the potential difficulty that the seventeen-pound limit would pose: “Agreeable to Council we Solde and hired carried all lugage over 17 lbs per person this makes us rather destitute for wearing apperil, and Beding.” Savage, *Journal*, July 14, 1856. See also Savage, *Journal*, October 19, 1856.

⁵⁹See, for example, George D. Grant to Brigham Young, November 2, 1856, in *Deseret News*, November 19, 1856, 293.

⁶⁰For comments by eyewitnesses, see Savage, *Journal*, August 13 and 22, 1856; “Willie Emigrating Company,” *Journal*, appendix.

⁶¹For useful information on this malady, see Daniel F. Danzl and Robert S. Pozos, “Accidental Hypothermia,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 331 (December 29, 1994): 1756-60; and Evan L. Lloyd, “Temperature and Performance I: Cold,” *British Medical Journal* 309 (August 20-27, 1994): 531-34. Hypothermia strikes silently and unobserved, is hard to shake off, and can kill quickly. I have had two personal experiences with mild hypothermia: on the summit of Mount Fujiyama, Japan, in June 1956, and during and immediately after the Seattle Marathon in 1980. These experiences proved to me how quickly and silently it takes effect and how hard it is to throw off. In both cases, even after being warmed by vigorous physical activity under sunny conditions after coming quickly down from the summit of Mount Fujiyama or by hot showers and warm blankets after the Seattle Marathon, I experienced uncontrollable shaking for about seven hours. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and *Seattle Times* reported that more than 250 runners were hospitalized with hypothermia following the 1980 Seattle Marathon, which was run on a cold, wet day where the wind blew the rain horizontally—probably somewhat like the conditions (though in Seattle it was much warmer) that prevailed along the Mormon Trail at the crossing of the Platte and along the Sixteen Mile Drive on October 19, 1856.

⁶²Alan Fry, *Wilderness Survival Handbook*, rev. ed. (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), 249-51; italics in original. See also Harvey Manning, *Backpacking: One Step at a Time*, 4th ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 76-79.

There is misery on the trail, and pain, and death. . . .

. . . The vast majority of weather-caused fatalities—among veterans as well as novices—result from hypothermia, whereby the body loses more heat than it can generate. . . .

. . . Muscles become clumsy, thinking gets tangled. . . .

A common misconception is that hypothermia is a danger only at below-freezing temperatures. . . . *Wind chill* can cause hypothermia at temperatures far above freezing.

Moisture cools somewhat by wetting the skin but mainly by reducing the insulation value of clothing; the thermal conductivity of water is 240 times greater than that of still air. Hypothermia is not confined to high ridges but can occur in low forests from *water chill*. The combination of wind and rain is particularly lethal. (Manning, *Backpacking*, 76-79; italics in original)

⁶³See Chislett Narrative, 317. Just how many pounds were placed on the handcarts is hard to determine and probably varied to a considerable extent. Chislett, a captain of a hundred, commented on the typical load:

“To each hundred there were five round tents, with twenty persons to a tent; twenty hand-carts or one to every five persons; and one Chicago wagon . . . to haul provisions and tents. Each person was limited to *seventeen pounds of clothing and bedding*, making eighty-five pounds of luggage to each cart. To this were added such cooking utensils as the little mess of five required. But their *cuisine* being scanty, not many articles were needed, and I presume the average would not exceed fifteen to twenty pounds, making in all a little over a hundred pounds on each cart.” (Chislett Narrative, 314-15; italics in original)

Other evidence indicates that at Florence the tents were placed on handcarts in order to further reduce the weight of each supply wagon. See Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 8, 1878. This being so, at least one out of every four handcarts would have had the extra weight of one twenty-person tent, which would have weighed as much as fifty pounds.

⁶⁴See Chislett Narrative, 318; and “Willie Emigrating Company,” Journal, September 1856 and throughout. This is one of the most useful documents dealing with the 1856 handcart story. It is arguably the best-kept journal of any of the ten handcart companies.

⁶⁵Chislett Narrative, 318.

⁶⁶The three-day delay had the effect of costing the company about nine hundred pounds of flour.

⁶⁷Chislett Narrative, 318.

⁶⁸See Jaques Journal, August 25, 1856, in Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 129. With the Martin Company’s departure from the Florence staging area on August 27, for the next thirty days all five 1856 handcart companies were traveling on the trail.

⁶⁹Chislett Narrative, 319. See also Savage, Journal, August 13 and September 13, 1856. Savage was openly humiliated by Willie on August 13, especially when Willie in effect labeled him as a sort of whining “Jobes Comforter.” On September 13, Willie, apparently still angry at Savage, misinterpreted (to Richards) Savage’s August 13 opposition to leaving Florence so late in the season, which

evoked Richards's further censure. The misinterpretation was not so much that Savage opposed the late departure, but that he had opposed the entire handcart "sistem" or "skeem," a matter that Savage vigorously denied in his journal both on August 13 and September 13. On September 13, Savage went on to state that "Brother Richards reprimanded me Sharply. Bro. Willey Said that the Spirit that I had manifested from Iowa City. This is Something unknown to me and Something he never before expressed. I had allways the best of feelings toward him, and Supposed he had to ward me until now." Savage, Journal, September 13, 1856.

Savage's journal, which has been preserved in his own hand, is hard to refute in retrospect. This incidence smacks of an age-old vexation—and challenge—for leaders: controlling one's ego and pride when one's judgment is honestly questioned by a subordinate. It is to Willie's great credit, however, that, whatever his pride, he did not replace Savage as a captain of one the company's hundreds when Savage offered to step down on August 14. See Savage, Journal, August 14, 1856. Willie was a great leader and proved it many times when the chips were down, and he knew a good man when he saw one. Willie, Savage, and Chislett were great men—heroes of the first order—throughout the course of the disaster.

⁷⁰Chislett Narrative, 319.

⁷¹"Willie Emigrating Company," Journal, September 12, 1856.

⁷²Chislett Narrative, 319; and see Savage, Journal, September 29, 1856.

⁷³Savage, Journal, October 10, 1856.

⁷⁴See Jaques Journal, September 8 and 10, 1856, in Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 134–36; and "Willie Emigrating Company," Journal, September 15–18, 21, 1856.

⁷⁵Savage, Journal, September 17, 1856.

⁷⁶Savage, Journal, September 23, 1856.

⁷⁷Savage, Journal, September 27, 1856.

⁷⁸See Chislett Narrative, 319; and Savage, Journal, September 29, 1856. "Brother Richards has no cattle provided for us here, & no other provisions made."

⁷⁹Savage, Journal, October 1, 1856; see also "Willie Emigrating Company," Journal, October 1, 1856.

⁸⁰Shortage of supplies at this late date is understandable; merchants along the trail can have been expected to have sold out their stocks as completely as possible by the end of the emigration season, which normally extended to the end of July.

⁸¹Woodward to Woodruff, 17. These amounts were condensed by Savage to be "an average of 12 oz flower per head." He went on to state that "we are not certain of Supplies before arriving at the Pacific Springs." Savage, Journal, October 4 and 6, 1856. See also Chislett Narrative, 319; and James G. Willie, "Synopsis of the 4th Hand Cart Company's Trip from Liverpool, England, to Great Salt Lake City in the Spring, Summer and Autumn of 1856," in Jenson, *Journal History*, November 9, 1856, 8–15.

⁸²"Willie Emigrating Company," Journal, October 15, 1856.

⁸³"Willie Emigrating Company," Journal, September 3, 13, 15, 21, 22, 26; October 1, 3, and 4, 1856.

⁸⁴Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 306–7. That is, by October 9, both companies had already suffered more deaths than any other handcart company experienced during their entire trek.

⁸⁵See, for example, Jaques' list of deaths for August 12, 13, 22, 27; September 30; October 19; and November 22; in Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 306-7. Jaques gives diarrhea as a cause for the deaths of his father-in-law and his daughter. Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 306-7 (September 27 and November 22, 1856). See also Chislett Narrative, 324 (quoted in pages 34-39 of this essay); and Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 8, 1878:

The flour ration fell to four ounces per day. . . . In addition to the flour ration, considerable beef was killed and served to the company, as had been the case most of the journey. But the cattle had now grown so poor that there was little flesh left on them, and that little was as lean as could be. The problem was how to cook it to advantage. Stewed meat and soups were found to be bad for diarrhoea and dysentery, provocative of and aggravating those diseases, of which there was considerable in the company, and to fry lean meat without an atom of fat in it or out of it was disgusting to every cook in camp.

⁸⁶See Jenson, Journal History, October 1, 1856 and throughout, for daily weather reports for Great Salt Lake City on most dates in October and November; especially see Henry E. Phelps, "Meteorological Observations for October, 1856," *Deseret News*, November 5, 1856, 280. Brief weather synopses are given in this concise table for each day in October. According to Phelps, noon temperatures ranged from seventy to seventy-eight degrees between October 1 and 6. Phelps, "Meteorological Observations."

⁸⁷"Harvey Cluff's Account of the Rescue," in Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts*, 232.

⁸⁸Savage, Journal, October 6, 1856.

⁸⁹Woodward to Woodruff, 16.

⁹⁰Savage, Journal, October 11, 1856.

⁹¹Savage, Journal, October 15, 1856.

⁹²Savage, Journal, October 16, 1856.

⁹³Savage, Journal, October 16, 1856.

⁹⁴Chislett Narrative, 320.

⁹⁵Chislett Narrative, 320. Chislett probably knew nothing about hypothermia, but he ably described its effects.

⁹⁶Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 8, 1878.

⁹⁷See Clayton, *Emigrants' Guide*. At first glance, this is not significant information; but it almost forced a fatal decision. The discovery that the lead handcart company was not yet west of South Pass, according to his own admission, started Grant thinking that the emigrants might have "wintered over" some significant distance east of South Pass. Had he acted on that hunch and turned around when the storm hit on October 19, all the emigrants might have perished in the absence of the succor and hope that Grant's rescue party ultimately rendered to both beleaguered handcart companies. Richards estimated that the Willie Company was averaging fifteen miles per day. In actuality it was averaging only twelve miles per day. To have covered the 582 miles from North Bluff Fork to Black's Fork in the thirty-one days since Richards parted company with the Willie Company, that company would have had to average almost nineteen miles per day.

A difference in average daily travel of three miles over a sixty-day period, the period estimated for each handcart company to make the trek from Florence to Great Salt Lake City, equates to twelve extra travel days. The Willie Company would need more than 3,500 extra pounds of flour to make up the difference; the Martin Company, about 5,000 pounds. That is, small deviations from inflexible estimates can yield major errors when so many people are involved; in this instance as many as 1,400 people, and 1,400 pounds of flour per day, were involved.

⁹⁸Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 8, 1878.

⁹⁹Chislett Narrative, 320–21.

¹⁰⁰Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, January 5, 1856.

¹⁰¹These indicators are: numbness, lack of vitality, lassitude, fretfulness, peevishness, lack of accountability, and gradual weakening of the mental faculties. Compare Danzl and Pozos, "Accidental Hypothermia," 1756–60, and Lloyd, "Temperature," 531–34, which list among other symptoms, impaired judgment, maladaptive behavior, depression, muscle rigidity, incoordination, and progressive clouding and loss of consciousness. See also Fry, *Wilderness Survival Handbook*, 251–52.

¹⁰²By then there were also three deaths in the Hunt wagon company. Jesse Haven, Journal, October 4 and 13, 1856, microfilm of holograph, LDS Church Archives. See "Willie Emigrating Company," Journal, throughout, and Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 305–7 and throughout. Owing to the incompleteness of extant evidence, the death count, up to October 19 and especially beyond, cannot be assessed with total accuracy.

¹⁰³"Journal of the First Rescue Party," October 18, 1856, in Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts*, 223; "Cluff's Account," in *Handcarts*, 232.

¹⁰⁴Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 15, 1978. Although tolls fluctuated, apparently the per-wagon toll was \$3 in May 1856; see George A. Smith to Editor of the Deseret News, April 28, 1856, in *Deseret News*, May 14, 1856, 76. For other details about the Platte (or Richard's) Bridge, see Robert A. Murray, "Trading Posts, Forts and Bridges of the Casper Area—Unraveling the Tangle on the Upper Platte," in *Bison Hunters to Black Gold: A Brief History of the Fort Caspar Area from Pre-historic Times to Oil Development* (Casper: Wyoming Historical Press, 1986), 6–9. Tolls for wagons are given but not for handcarts.

¹⁰⁵The storm covered a wide area, including the Wasatch Front; see "Snow," *Deseret News*, October 29, 1856; Jenson, Journal History, October 19–21, 1856; and Phelps, "Meteorological Observations."

¹⁰⁶See, for example, Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 405; and Gustive O. Larson, "The Mormon Gathering," in Richard D. Poll and others, *Utah's History* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 182.

¹⁰⁷At least fourteen members of the Willie Company died between October 1 and 19. Several if not most probably died from hypothermia. See "Willie Emigrating Company," Journal, October 1, 1856, and throughout.

¹⁰⁸See Juanita Brooks, ed., *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), 2:605; and Jenson, Journal History, November 11, 1856, 1. The resupply effort nearly came apart completely, with as many as half the teams turning back. For a discussion of this

nearly tragic blunder, see Rebecca Bartholomew and Leonard J. Arrington, *Rescue of the 1856 Handcart Companies*, rev. ed. (Provo, Utah: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1993), 31-37.

¹⁰⁹Jesse Haven of the Hodgett Company indicates that those still on the trail after December 1 had to leave many wagons and teams at Fort Bridger and race against the weather to get through the high passes of the Wasatch before those passes were buried under many feet of snow. See Haven, Journal, December 1-14, 1856.

¹¹⁰Chislett Narrative, 324; and note 85 of this essay.

¹¹¹Daniel W. Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1890), 64.

¹¹²Accounts describing where the Martin Company forded the Platte are ambiguous and misleading. By piecing the accounts together, however, it becomes apparent that the company, upon passing the Platte (Richard's) Bridge, which was located just downstream of the big bend of the Platte, at present-day Evansville, Wyoming, continued along the east bank of the river to a crossing somewhere between four and six miles upstream from the bridge, then continued upstream on the west bank to their camp at Red Buttes, which was probably just across from present-day Bessemer Bend. The company could have forded the river at several places in this vicinity. Part of the confusion arises from the name Red Buttes being applied to several features, both historically and geographically, which are several miles apart.

¹¹³See Grant to Young, November 2, 1856. Joseph A. Young, who on November 2 had been dispatched by Grant to report the plight of the Martin Company to President Young, arrived in Great Salt Lake City on November 13, and spoke at the Tabernacle on November 16. "Capt. Martin informed us that about 56 of 600 had died upon the plains, up to that date [October 28]." Joseph A. Young, "Remarks," *Deseret News*, November 19, 1856, 292. If John Jaques's accounting is correct that nineteen members of the company died from August 27 to October 19, no more than thirty-seven individuals could have died between October 19 and October 28. See Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 306-7.

¹¹⁴Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 15, 1878.

¹¹⁵See Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 145-46.

¹¹⁶Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 150.

¹¹⁷Chislett Narrative, 326-29; and Savage, Journal, October 23-24, 1856. Levi Savage, in his rich account of the Rocky Ridges ordeal of October 23, fully corroborates Chislett. In addition to the descriptions of the difficulty encountered by everyone and of the courage of the many emigrants involved, these accounts also indicate the dedication to duty and heroism of Willie, Savage, and Chislett, who unstintingly served the company under blizzard conditions throughout the day and night of October 23-24.

¹¹⁸See "Willie Emigrating Company," Journal, October 1, 1856 and throughout; and Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 306-7. William Woodward recorded each of the thirty-seven deaths in the Willie Company individually by name, date, and location. For Martin Company deaths, see note 113 above.

¹¹⁹See Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, January 5, 1879, for the Martin Company's itinerary of camps between Red Buttes and Martin's Cove from October 29 to November 4, 1856.

¹²⁰See, for example, Clayton, *Journal*, 244–45; and see Stanley B. Kimball's recent description in Clayton, *Emigrants' Guide*, 67.

¹²¹Clayton, *Emigrants' Guide*, 67, and personal reconnaissance. See also Clayton, *Journal*, 244–45.

¹²²This information comes from my personal reconnaissance. In a February 1997 attempt to traverse this section, the mud piled up on my one-ton van so thickly and the road was so slippery that I had to turn back. In March 1997, I hiked up through the Rocky Ridges in very similar conditions of snow mixed with mud. In addition to slipping a lot, I had to deal with heavy mud buildup on my boots, the combination of which made the climb tedious and difficult.

¹²³Jones, *Forty Years*, 68. This is a remarkable assertion for a man who had witnessed so much danger and difficulty during his many years on the frontier.

¹²⁴Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 150. Willow Springs is beyond the Rocky Avenue and just short of the crest of Prospect Hill.

¹²⁵These are the Granite Mountains; see map on pages 14–15.

¹²⁶See "Journal of the First Rescue Party," November 2–7, 1856, 224; and Haven, *Journal*, November 7, 1856.

¹²⁷Grant to Young, November 2, 1856. Joseph A. Young rushed the dispatch westward on horseback on November 3. He arrived in Great Salt Lake City on November 13, having averaged thirty-three miles per day.

¹²⁸Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 15, 1878.

¹²⁹One of the most splendid stories about the tragedy is the sacrifice and heroism of so many rescuers. As a remarkable example, no fewer than seven sons or nephews of the three members of the First Presidency of the Church were represented. George D. Grant, President Jedediah M. Grant's nephew, who had so strongly urged that the Martin Company go on late from Florence, nevertheless on October 7, only three days after arriving in Salt Lake City with the Swiftsure Train, went right back as the leader of the advance resupply party. He took with him his teenage son George W. Grant. Three sons of Heber C. Kimball were involved. Like George D. Grant, William H. Kimball was also in Florence in August 1856 and urged the Martin Company to go out regardless of circumstances. And, like Grant, he went back only three days after arriving home with the Swiftsure Train. He was accompanied on the rescue by his two younger brothers David P. Kimball and Heber P. Kimball. And two of Brigham Young's sons were involved. Joseph A. Young had also just arrived with the Swiftsure Train and went right back with Grant's advance party. Lastly, Brigham Young Jr. assisted the rescue as one of those who kept the trail open through the high passes of the Wasatch. Two of the four young men named by John Jaques as the heroes who carried members of the Martin Company across the Sweetwater on November 4 were teenagers George W. Grant and David P. Kimball. Bartholomew and Arrington, *Rescue*, 21–29, 47–49, 54 n. 31, 58 n. 99.

¹³⁰James Willie reported a total of seventy-seven deaths for his company. The number of deaths for the Martin Company cannot be precisely determined. John Jaques, who acted as an unofficial scribe for the company, entered deaths into his diary as they occurred until October 18, 1856, when his diary ended—understandably the day before the storm struck and his attention turned to survival of his family and himself. Later he stated, "I do not know what the mortality

amounted to. My general impression has been that it was about one in six, but others who claim to know put it at about 100, or about one-eighth of the entire number that left Liverpool in the ship *Horizon* in the spring." Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 22, 1878. Other, not very reliable, estimates are much higher—as high as 150. Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts*, 193. B. H. Roberts apparently combed the records to get an accurate number for the *Comprehensive History*, but could only conclude:

The exact number of those who perished in this company is not of record in our official annals; and it is difficult to fix upon any approximate number with certainty. . . . All things considered the estimate of Chislett and Jaques,—putting their estimate at 145—is perhaps not far from the facts. And these added to Willie's seventy-seven deaths, brings the total of deaths to 222. (Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 4:101)

Stella Jaques Bell lists only two more deaths in her compilation from the combined writings of Jaques and Patience Loader Rozsa: William Whittaker at Willow Springs on October 30, and Flora Loader Jaques, John and Zilpah Jaques's daughter, who died at Green River, Wyoming, on November 22, just one week before the company arrived in Great Salt Lake City. Of this heartbreaking loss, Patience Loader Rozsa said, "My sister's . . . dear little two year old girl died near Fort Bridger. She wrapped her in a blanket and fetched her into Salt Lake City" where she "was buried in Franklin D. Richards' lot" (Bell, *Writings of John Jaques*, 170, 172; see also 307). Jaques mentioned one more death, that of George P. Waugh, who "died at our last camping ground." Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, January 19, 1879.

Intensive research of extant records is under way by members of the Riverton Wyoming Stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an essential part of their highly commendable "Second Rescue" effort—the carrying out of temple ordinances for all those who perished and for their families. The individuals who make up the 206 total listed in the text here, which have been confirmed by the Riverton Stake, are listed by name and by company at the Devil's Gate Visitors' Center.

¹³¹See Young, "Remarks," November 12, 1856, 283; compare Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:66-70, November 2, 1856.

¹³²Brigham Young, "Remarks," *Deseret News*, November 26, 1856, 298; compare Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:91, November 16, 1856.

¹³³Sydney Alvarus Hanks and Ephraim K. Hanks, *Scouting for the Mormons on the Great Frontier* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1948), 134-36; see also *Journal of the First Rescue Party*, October 24, 1856: "Saw a large herd of buffalo three miles distant." Daniel W. Jones also mentioned the advance express's horses straying from camp to follow "a band of buffaloes" in the same general vicinity in late October. Jones, *Forty Years*, 66. Although Hanks's account is somewhat sketchy and was given many years later, many members of the Martin Company gratefully acknowledged him for both providing buffalo meat and gently treating several emigrants suffering from severe frostbite. He is counted among the heroes of the handcart story.

¹³⁴Brigham Young, "Remarks," *Deseret News*, December 10, 1856, 320. President Young, in eloquent and colorful language so typical of his style, elaborated on this theme at considerable length.

¹³⁵Savage, Journal, August 13, 1856. According to John Chislett, Franklin D. Richards deemed Savage's warning to have been because of his "lack of faith in God." Chislett Narrative, 310.

¹³⁶John Chislett paid Savage just tribute: "Brother Savage was true to his word; no man worked harder than he to alleviate the suffering which he had foreseen, when he had to endure it. Oh, had the judgment of this one clear-headed man been heeded, what scenes of suffering, wretchedness, and death would have been prevented!" Chislett Narrative, 317. Chislett stated that when Savage was voted down 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. Amen.'" Chislett Narrative, 317. Savage, true to his apparent modesty, said nothing of this remarkable pledge in his personal journal.

¹³⁷See Chislett Narrative, 324, 325.

¹³⁸Richards's use of the word "overrule" may have come from his interpretation of a letter written to him by Brigham Young on July 30, 1855. President Young, after expressing concerns about funding for the migration of Saints from Europe, stated, "Still shove them across the water as fast as you can, and if they prove faithful they will soon make their way over the plains. The Lord is truly hedging up the way by distress of nations and various other ways, still His hand is over His work, and He will overrule all for the good of His people. Israel will be gathered, and Zion redeemed." Brigham Young to Franklin D. Richards, July 30, 1855, in "Foreign Correspondence," *Millennial Star* 18 (October 20, 1855): 666-67.

¹³⁹Chislett Narrative, 319.

¹⁴⁰Franklin D. Richards, "Discourse," *Deseret News*, October 12, 1856, 252; compare Franklin D. Richards, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:115, October 5, 1856. Daniel Spencer, who directed the handcart plan at Iowa City, stated from the same pulpit just before Richards:

The emigration is late, quite late, but it is useless for me to undertake to explain why it is so. They are late, but the faith of those that have been associated with them is that the God of heaven will control the elements, providing that you, my brethren and sisters, render them that assistance which he has given you ability to do. (Daniel Spencer, "Remarks," *Deseret News*, October 15, 1856, 252)

¹⁴¹Savage, Journal, August 13, 1856.

¹⁴²Chislett Narrative, 326, 331; letter from Chislett to Brigham Young, *Salt Lake Daily Tribune Extra*, April 15, 1873.

¹⁴³Chislett Narrative, 331-32; italics in original. Chislett's observation regarding beef and potatoes vis-à-vis prayers and prophecies was largely paralleled by Brigham Young. See Young, "Remarks," December 10, 1856.

¹⁴⁴Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, January 19, 1879.