

Martin's Cove

Natrona county, Wyoming United States of America

The first handcart company left Iowa City, Iowa on June 9, 1856 for the Salt Lake Valley. That year, four additional handcart companies would traverse the difficult trail on foot. The fourth company, led by James G. Willie, left on July 15, 1856 and the last company, led by Edward Martin, left on July 28, 1856.¹

Although the two companies that left before reached Salt Lake City without incident, Willie and Martin companies left later in the season and suffered tremendous hardships. Jens Neilson, a member of the Willie Handcart Company explained that "No person can describe it, nor could it be comprehended or understood by any human living in this life, but those who were called to pass through it."²

Leaving so late in the season put the companies at a considerable disadvantage. On October 1 the Willie company arrived at Fort Laramie, but supplies they had hoped for to be left by Franklin D. Richards were not there. They had also suffered a serious loss of a number of oxen which they were unable to replenish there.³ Hunger, fatigue, and worsening weather conditions each contributed to the grave situation the Saints found themselves in. Upon reaching Salt Lake City on October 4, President Richards alerted Brigham Young to the companies' situation. A rescue party was organized and left three days later to give relief and aid. However, they would not reach the Willie company for three weeks.

To make matters worse, while at Deer Creek, members of the Martin company made an unfortunate mistake. To lighten the loads which they were forced to pull, the allowed weight for each handcart was reduced and blankets and other clothing was burned or discarded. Then on Sunday, October 19, a severe winter storm passed through the region bringing the situation of the handcart companies to the breaking point. The Martin company had just crossed the Platte River, and hypothermia took many victims. When the advance



Martin's Cove with the Sweetwater River in the foreground
Photo courtesy of Derek J. Tangren

party had reached them, 56 had already perished and many more would lose their lives.⁴

After passing through Devil's Gate, the Martin company was forced to cross the Sweetwater River where four young men who were members of the rescue party carried people across the ice cold river. Afterwards they settled into Martin's Cove to find shelter from the wind. However, several individuals died from exposure in the cove as well. The rest of the rescue party reached them and they finally came into the Salt Lake Valley between November 30 and December 15. In total, 177 individuals lost their lives from the Willie and Martin handcart companies.⁵ Though they passed through tremendous difficulty, those that survived were ever true and faithful to the gospel. One man described that he "came through with the absolute knowledge that God lives for we became acquainted with him in our extremities."⁶

SOURCES

¹ Andrew Jenson, *Encyclopedic History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Publishing Co., 1941), 314.



² Susan Arrington Madsen, *I Walked to Zion: True Stories of Young Pioneers on the Mormon Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1994), 37.

³ Howard A. Christy, "Weather, Disaster, and Responsibility: An Essay on the Willie and Martin Handcart Story," (*BYU Studies* 1997–98) 37:1:6.

⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

⁵ *Ibid*, 51.

⁶ Our Heritage, *A Brief History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995), 78.

VARIOUS ACCOUNTS AT MARTIN'S COVE

*Patience Loader*¹

"The handcart company was in part re-organized, and most of the carts were left there [Devil's Gate], tow of the best being retained for each hundred. These were loaded with cooking utensils, such as frying pans, bake kettles, sauce-pans, and camp kettles, so that they loads in these few carts were of a weighty nature. The remainder of the baggage of the company was put on the wagons. Under this arrangement the company started from Devil's Gate westward and when about three miles away crossed the Sweetwater to the north side and camped at a place known since as Martin's Ravine. It was not exactly a ravine, a but a recess or opening in the mountains, which here run along near the river.

The passage of the Sweetwater at this point was a severe operation to many of the company. It was the worst river crossing of the expedition and the last. The water was not less than two feet deep, perhaps a little more in the deepest parts, but it was intensely cold. The ice was three or four inches thick, and the bottom

of the river muddy or sandy. I forget exactly how wide the stream was there, but I think thirty or forty yards. It seemed a good deal wider than that to those who pulled their handcarts through it. Before the crossing was completed, the shades of evening were closing around, and, as everybody knows, that is the coldest hour of the twenty-four, or at least it seemed to be so, in a frosty time, and it seemed so then for cold enough it was. The teams and wagons and handcarts and some of the men forded the river.

Four members of the relief party waded the river, helping the handcarts through and carrying the women and children and some of the weaker men over. They were D. P. Kimball, George W. Grant, Stephen W. Taylor, and C. A. Huntington....

After we were over the Sweetwater we had to travel some distance to a good camping place. We had a very nice camping place. Here we remained for 9 days as we had to wait until more provisions came to us. Supplies had to be left at Devil's Gate for the brethren that had to stay all winter...We were on four ounces of flour a day nearly all the time we were in camp on the Sweetwater, but the morning we had orders to leave there, we were told to leave our handcarts. We were very glad to leave the cart, but we had to walk for several days before we could all ride in the wagons...."

*Elizabeth Sermon*²

"My husband's health began to fail and his heart almost broken to see me falling in shafts. Myself and children hungry, almost naked, foot-sore and himself nearly done for. Many trials came after this. My oldest boy had the mountain fever, we had to haul him in the cart, there was not room in the wagon. One day we started him out before the carts in the morning to walk with the aged and sick, but we had not gone far on our journey before we found him lying by the roadside, unable to go any farther. I picked him up and put him on my back and drew my cart as



well, but could not manage far, so put him in the cart, which made three children and my luggage. My husband failing more each day, the Captain put a young man to help me for a short time. My other son Henry walked at 7 years old, 1300 miles with the exception of a few miles. . . .

“I will here state there was no time crossing the rivers to stop and take off clothing, but had to wade through and draw our carts at the same time with our clothes dripping wet, had to dry in the sun and dust as merrily on our way we go until we reach the valley, oh, like a herd of stock or something worse.

“My husband’s sufferings have always pained me and I can never forget them. Poor Rob’s (age 5) feet began to freeze. I cannot remember the place’s; it was after wading a very deep river (Platte?) the freezing commenced. We had no wood but sagebrush. I went out and cut the sage to keep the fire all night. Covered them up with their feet to the fire and cut some more and kept the fire as well as I could. My clothes froze stiff. Well, we got through that night. Your father would not walk now. He would get into wagon after wagon, only to be turned out. The cattle were giving out and everyone had their friends, but the friend death, would soon end his sufferings. John (age 9) and Rob had to ride, Henry (age 7) walked, your father would take my arm and walk a little distance, fall on his knees with weakness. We moved from Devil’s Gate. I believe it was brother David Kimball who carried us over a river and a great many more besides us. My poor husband blessed him for so doing.

“After our food had given out as I said before, we went into our tents to die. I always thought I could get through to Salt Lake City and I tried to encourage my husband, but he was starving. He had always lived good at home. There was a shout in the camp. Brother Joseph A. Young had come on packed mules with Brother Little. Brought flour, meat and onions. I got 1 pound of flour and some meat and 2 onions. I chopped the fat off the meat real fine and

made some dumplings. We made a good meal and blessed Brother Little and Joseph from the bottom of our hearts. . . . We had 70 miles to get to the wagons that had been sent from Salt Lake City with food and clothing and some clothing had come for us.

“Your father after having some food and clothes, seemed to revive. He called you to him and told you to be good children and to do all you could for me, and then he said to me, ‘God bless you, Eli,’ that being the name he called me. ‘You have saved my life this time.’ I said, ‘We must hold out now and get to the wagons,’ but we had to go back to the 1/4 lb. of flour and he sank under it. I think he would not have died if he had got food, but he was spared the trial ahead. We went to bed about 3:00. He put his arm around me and said, ‘I am done,’ and breathed his last.

“I called Brother John Oley. We sewed him up in a quilt with his clothes on, except his boots, which I put on my feet and wore them into Salt Lake City. A coat I put on John to keep him warm, which afterward went to Ft. Bridger. Some friend tried to get it for me but he did not succeed. Father was buried in the morning with 2 more in the grave. I stood like a statue, bewildered, not a tear: the cold chills, even now as I write, creep over my body, for I feel I can still see the wolves waiting for their bodies as they would come down to camp before we left.

“Well, I went again to the cart as all that could had to walk to get to the wagons. Poor Rob had to ride from this time and sometimes John, Henry and Marian (age 3) were with me. When I got into camp I would clear the snow away with a tin plate, gather my wood, get my bed clothes from the wagon. . . . I was too weak to haul much. . . get my allowance of flour and carry the children to the fire, make their beds on the ground, the tent was frozen and ground so hard we could not set it up. I think it was two weeks we were without tents. We went to bed without supper in order to get a little better breakfast. I found it



some help to toast the rawhide on the coals and chew it; it helped to keep the hunger away, for I was feeling it rather keenly now. I had to take a portion of poor Robert's feet off which pierced my very soul. I had to sever the leaders with a pair of scissors. Little did I think when I bought them in old England that they would be used for such a purpose. Everyday some portion was decaying until the poor boy's feet were all gone. Then John's began to freeze; then afterwards my own. We kept meeting teams from Salt Lake City now, which rendered all the assistance they could. I remember asking one of the drivers if he could give me a cob of corn to eat. He looked so pitiful and said, 'Oh, sister, I hate to refuse you but my horses haven't enough to eat now, and I do not know how we will get back to Salt Lake.' I said, 'I ought not to have asked you, but myself and children are so hungry.' He said, 'Keep up your faith sister.'

"A loaf of bread would have given me great faith and satisfied a hungry stomach as well, but the bread was not many miles off. We got it and it was the sweetest bread we ever ate. One instance occurred. Poor Brother Blair, a very tall thin man; he was starving and was eating a piece of griddle cake; another poor brother, not as hungry asked for a piece of it. He said, 'I cannot do it, I want it myself.' Poor fellow he died in the night and so one after another passed away. Fathers mothers, sisters, brothers and friends, many, many honest souls laid in mother earth. The brothers kept meeting us and some times we had a good cheery fire built for us when we got into camp. I was terribly put to for clothes to wrap my poor boy's legs in, his feet all gone. I got all I could from the camp, then I used my underclothing until I had but 2 skirts left upon my body, and as such I finished my journey for my wardrobe would not be replenished where I was.

"At last the old handcart was laid by without a regret; we got to the wagons, were taken in and some days we rode all day and got a little more food. A severe storm came up. I think it

was on the Sweetwater, but I was so troubled I forget all about the names of places. My eldest boy John's feet decaying, my boys both of them losing their limbs, their father dead, my own feet very painful, I thought, 'Why can't I die?' my first thought of death. Brother Patton took us in his wagon, blessed me for my integrity and blessed us with tea and bread and so with what food was so kindly sent out to us from the people in Salt Lake, our lives were spared."

SOURCE

¹ Stewart E. Glazer and Robert S. Clark, eds., *Journal of the Trail* (Salt Lake City, Utah: 1996), 97-101, 103-107.

² *Ibid*, 76-80.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Address:

Off State Route 220 just west of Devil's Gate

Hours of Operation:

Summer

8:00 AM to 7:00 PM

Winter

9:00 AM to 4:00 PM

Admission:

Free

Notes:

Call 1-307-328-2953 for additional information or to schedule large groups.



FURTHER READING RESOURCES

- “Remembering the Rescue,” *Ensign*, Aug. 1997, 38.
- Susan Easton Black, *Members of the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies of 1856: A Sesquicentennial Remembrance*, (Provo, UT: Susan Easton Black, 1980).
- Kate B. Carter, Comp., “The Handcart Pioneers,” *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 1956, Vol. 5, 229-96.
- Stewart E. Glazier and Robert S. Clark, *Journal of the Trail*, (Salt Lake City, 2005).
- Walter R. Haefele, “The Rescue of the Handcart Pioneers,” *American West*, December 1989, Vol. 26.
- Leroy R. Hafen, “Handcarts to Utah, 1856-1860,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, October 1956, Vol. 24, 309-17.
- Leroy R. Hafen, “Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856-1860,” *The Far West and the Rockies Historical Series*, Vol. 14, (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark, 1960).
- William G. Hartley, “Mormons and Early Iowa History (1838-1858): Eight Distinct Connections,” *Annals of Iowa*, Summer 2000, Vol. 59.
- Lynne Watkins Jorgensen, “The Martin Handcart Disaster: The London Participants,” *Journal of Mormon History*, Fall 1995, Vol. 21, 171-200.
- Robin B. Lambert, “Walking on Hallowed Ground,” *Friend*, May 1998, 9.
- Gustive O. Larson, “The Handcarts of ‘56,” *Improvement Era*, July & August 1956, Vol. 69.
- Carol Cornwall Madsen, *Journey to Zion: Voices from the Mormon Trail*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997).
- Paul H. Peterson, “They Came by Handcart,” *Ensign*, August 1997, Vol. 27, 30-37.
- Riverton Wyoming Stake, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Comp., *Remember: The Willie and Martin Handcart Companies and Their Rescuers--Past and Present*, (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1997).

