

CHAPTER 4

GATHERING STORMS
In the

BLACK HILLS



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HE FOURTH OF OCTOBER, THE WILLIE COMPANY WAS FOUR DAYS WEST OF FORT LARAMIE, HALFWAY TO THE UPPER CROSSING WHERE THEY WOULD LEAVE THE PLATTE RIVER AND STRIKE OVERLAND TO THE SWEETWATER. HEAVY FROST ON THE GROUND SIGNALLED TO THE FEW WHO KNEW THE MOUNTAIN TRAILS THAT THEIR SITUATION WAS GRIM.

By the second week of October, the gravity of the situation appeared in their journals. Hunger, fatigue, and bone-chilling temperatures at night wore all the travelers down. Savage recorded, October 8: "Our old people are nearly all failing fast."

A blessing eased their suffering when, on October 10, Captain Willie picked up thirty-seven buffalo robes at the trading post at Richard's Bridge near Fort Casper; they had been purchased by Elder Richards and left behind for the emigrants and the cold undoubtedly ahead. Supplies, Richards indicated in a letter left for the company, would be ferried from the Valley to South Pass.

As the roads grew rockier, steeper, and in some places muddy or packed and rutted, the carts began to break down rapidly. So did the people. "Our old and infirm people began to droop," John Chislett wrote, "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." He added, "Each death weakened our forces." George Cunningham stated that "many felt like the ancient Israelites who looked back and moaned after their leeks and onions of Egypt."

Both a blessing and a trial, the companies always followed the river to be near water, but in doing so, they also had to cross each turn the river took. John Chislett recorded what effect such crossings had on the pioneers. "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



ASH HOLLOW CROSSING,

NEBRASKA BY FRANK MAGLEBY

Those pulling handcarts navigated many rivers and streams as they journeyed west each day. The trail closely follows major rivers along the way.

Swiss emigrant Hans Ulrich Briner, a butcher by profession and great-grandfather of artist Frank Magleby, traveled in the Hunt Wagon Train which followed behind the Martin Handcart Company. Accompanying him were his wife Maria, five-year-old daughter Maria, and mother Susannah. His mother, age sixty-six, was one of the many who died on the trail.

guard all night, [and] wade the streams repeatedly by day to get the women and children across. . . . In our frequent crossing of the Sweetwater, we had really a 'hard road to travel.' . . . When we waded it time after time at each ford . . . [it] lost to us its beauty, and the chill which sent through our systems left a void . . . a sadness, and, in some cases, doubts as [to] the justice of an overruling Providence."

CYRUS WHEELOCK



On October 14, at Black's Fork just past Fort Bridger, Captain Grant dispatched an express company led by Cyrus Wheelock to find the handcart companies—perhaps just west of South Pass. The calculations had not factored in the slow pace of all the companies. The Willie Company had just passed Independence Rock, 101 miles east, and the Martin Company were still wandering the Black Hills.





SNOWBOUND AT RED BUTTES

BY STEPHEN MARK BARTHOLOMEW

Great-great-grandmother of artist Stephen Mark Bartholomew, Charlotte Elizabeth Mellor, age fifteen, and her sixteen-year-old sister Louisa gathered firewood for the family every night. During the day, from Iowa to Devil's Gate, the two teenagers pulled one of two of the Mellor family handcarts loaded with supplies as well as one or both three-year-old twin sisters Emma and Clara. The youngest of the family, a second set of twin girls, Eliza and Elizabeth, died at Liverpool as the Martin Company boarded ship.



DYCHES

RESCUE RIDERS BY EMILY DYCHES

Rescue riders were the first sign of hope to the handcart companies. Joseph A. Young (left) and three others, Abel Carr, Cyrus Wheelock, and Stephen Taylor, met the Willie Party first. They then rode with great urgency under orders from Captain Grant to locate the other emigrants in the Martin, Hunt, and Hodgett Companies. Despite the intense suffering that greeted them, Young recalled the emigrants crying, "Let us go to the Valley; let us go to Zion!"⁴ as the rescuers questioned whether the bedraggled companies should stay at Devil's Gate for the winter or press on to Salt Lake City. Concerning this uplifting scene of rescue, artist Emily Dyches described: "My belief is that the greatest art seeks after the glory of God above all else."

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FOR SOMETHING BIGGER BY JEFFREY HEIN

Caroline Reeder, age seventeen, died near Three Crossings of the Sweetwater River on October 15, 1856. Nearing camp at the end of the day, she had collected sagebrush in her apron to make a fire (there was no wood to be found). "She sat down to rest, leaning on her bundle, exhausted. They found her chilled and dying and carried her into camp," wrote her young brother Robert Reeder. Like so many, she was placed in an unmarked grave. Her father David had died a week earlier and was simply wrapped in a sheet and placed in a shallow hole. The weather grew increasingly more severe and the food supply increasingly diminished. Wrote young Robert Reeder of the family's circumstances, "We must go on our way in silent mourning and in a weakened condition."

Young Robert Reeder, Willie Company, from Linstead, Suffolk, England, lost his sister on October 14. He wrote with soberness:

“Nights were getting colder and some would sit down by the roadside and die. My younger sister, Caroline, seventeen years old, after traveling all day and seeing the camp being made for the night, took off her apron to . . .

[gather] some sagebrush in. . . . She

sat down to rest, leaning on her bundle, exhausted. They found her chilled and dying and carried her into camp. She died without regaining consciousness.” She, like others, was buried in an unmarked grave, and the camp rolled on again.

The rescuers reached Green River on October 15. “Our hearts began to ache when we reached Green River and yet no word of them,” rescuer Daniel Jones lamented.

Meanwhile, the Willie Company cut rations for men to 10 ounces and the women to 9 ounces. Children were reduced to 6 and others to 3 ounces each. “The people are weak and failing very fast,” Levi Savage noted in his journal. “It requires great exertion to make any progress.”

Farther back and just as desperate, the Martin Company “shortened [their] rations that they might hold out, and that the company be not reduced to starvation,” Elizabeth Jackson recorded. “First the pound of flour was reduced to three-fourths of a pound, then to a half of a pound, and afterward to still less per day. However, we pushed ahead.” Jaques wrote, October 9:

ROBERT REEDER



“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. You felt as if you could almost eat a rusty nail or gnaw a file.” They cut rations until the daily fare was less than half a pound for adults. The flour was used to make a paste or gruel, which got thinner and thinner as the flour ran out. Patience Loader, Martin Company, later recalled, “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.”

On October 17 they began discarding items to lighten the loads on the handcarts “owing to the growing weakness of emigrants and teams,” Jaques wrote. “Baggage including bedding and cooking utensils was reduced to ten pounds per head, children under eight

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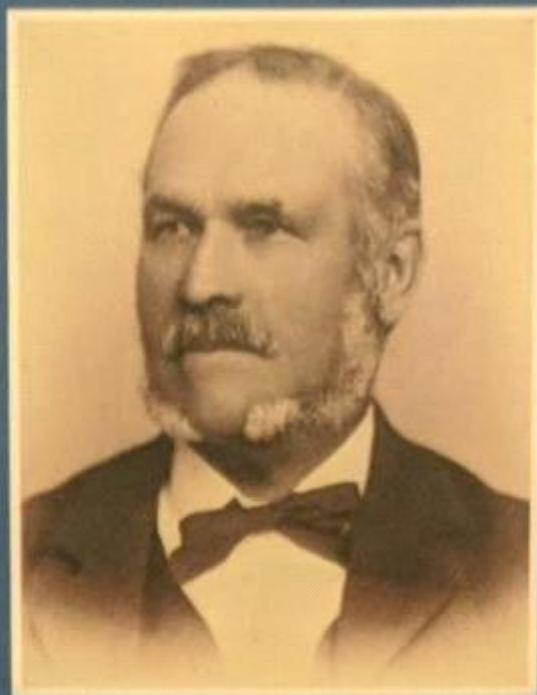
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HALLOWED GROUND BY RON RICHMOND

The freezing weather with its icy blasts, the empty kettles, the sickness—each took their toll. The poorly clad women and children suffered much. One member of the Willie Company recorded: “October 16, 1856. Thursday, Sweetwater. This morning we had three deaths and one birth. We have traveled eleven miles today.”^s

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John Jaques said of the misfortunes of the Martin Company in the 1856 emigration: “[We] traveled one of the hardest journeys across the plains by handcart. [We] nearly worked to death, starved to death, and froze to death.”

Jaques was an ardent supporter of the handcart plan. In a letter to his father-in-law, James Loader, a convert who had earlier emigrated to New York but scoffed at the handcart idea, John said, “The Lord promised through His servant Brigham that the handcart companies shall be blessed with health and strength and will be met partway with teams and provisions from the Valley.” Jaques expected that “those who go by handcarts, and continue faithful and obedient, will be blessed more than they ever dreamed of. When they get to Zion they will be welcomed and will feel that they have got to just the right place. They will be better Saints [in] every way than when they started.”

The *Millennial Star* paid tribute to Jaques in the June 14, 1856 edition after he had sailed. “By his labors with the pen, he has done much to instruct and bless the Saints, and preach the gospel in these lands, and has left us rich in faith, and with the spirit of Zion burning in our bosom. And we pray that it may continue to increase abundantly upon him and his family, and that they may live to enjoy all the blessings of the gospel, with the people of God.”

Born at Bosworth, Leicestershire, England, on January 7, 1827, John was a son of Wesleyan Methodist parents. His home life encouraged him to earnestly seek religion and truth. He was apprenticed to a carpenter at age fourteen where a journeyman in the shop introduced him to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He was baptized in 1845 at age eighteen.

His father’s response to his conversion was consternation. He wrote: “I wished you . . . to attend the Wesleyan Chapel. I . . .



JOHN



hope you will give up the idea of belonging to such a party. . . . It is fiction.”

John’s reply, written 14 March 1847, when he was but twenty years of age, included these words: “Dear Father, I would pray that I may be led and guided into all truth that I may understand the things of the kingdom of God and carry my ideas to you. . . . Since I [joined the Church] my eyes have been opened and I have been able to understand the truth. I can bear testimony to the truth . . . of the doctrines . . . in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” At age twenty-three he wrote a poem that was printed in a mission tract under the direction of Franklin

AQUES

D. Richards; it expounded doctrinal foundations of the LDS Church. The words eventually were set to music, becoming a classic Mormon hymn:

*Then say, what is truth? 'Tis the last and the first,
For the limits of time it steps o'er.*

*Though the heavens depart and the earth's fountains burst,
Truth, the sum of existence, will weather the worst,
Eternal, unchanged, evermore.*

He served as assistant editor of the Church’s newspaper in England, the *Millennial Star*, and as a missionary prior to coming to America. His family nursed great bitterness at his zeal for the new religion. Only his brother James came to see him off before he left Liverpool on the ship *Horizon*.

From 1889 until his death in 1900, Jaques served as Assistant Church Historian. Ten of those years he worked with Church Historian Franklin D. Richards, who, as noted, set in motion the handcart “experiment” in which Jaques traveled to the Great Basin. Jaques died June 1, 1900, at age seventy-three.

LAST CROSSING OF THE NORTH PLATTE, FORT CASPER

BY FRANK MAGLEBY *A much-loved story is told by an older emigrant who defended with fervor what some called the "handcart experiment." He said of his own experience and others' that they had become acquainted with God in their struggles. He described pulling his handcart through rivers and sand, so weak and weary from illness and lack of food that he could hardly keep going. Then he recounted that one day he'd looked ahead to a hill on which to set his sites—hoping he could make it to that point, and then, he said, the angels of God came to his side and pushed for him.*



years, five pounds. Good blankets and other bedding and clothing were burned as they could not be carried further, though they were needed more badly than ever, for there was yet 400 miles of winter to go through." Such hasty action suggested they had reached the breaking point.

Children chewed on bark, leaves, twigs, and even the tattered leather from the boots—boots from those who had died. Strips of burlap or canvas replaced worn-out shoes. Temperatures dropped dramatically. Their ragged clothing, wet from river crossings, never dried from one day to the next. Josiah Rogerson who walked guard duty at night and pulled a handcart by day, wrote, "This seemed to drag the life . . . completely out of us all."

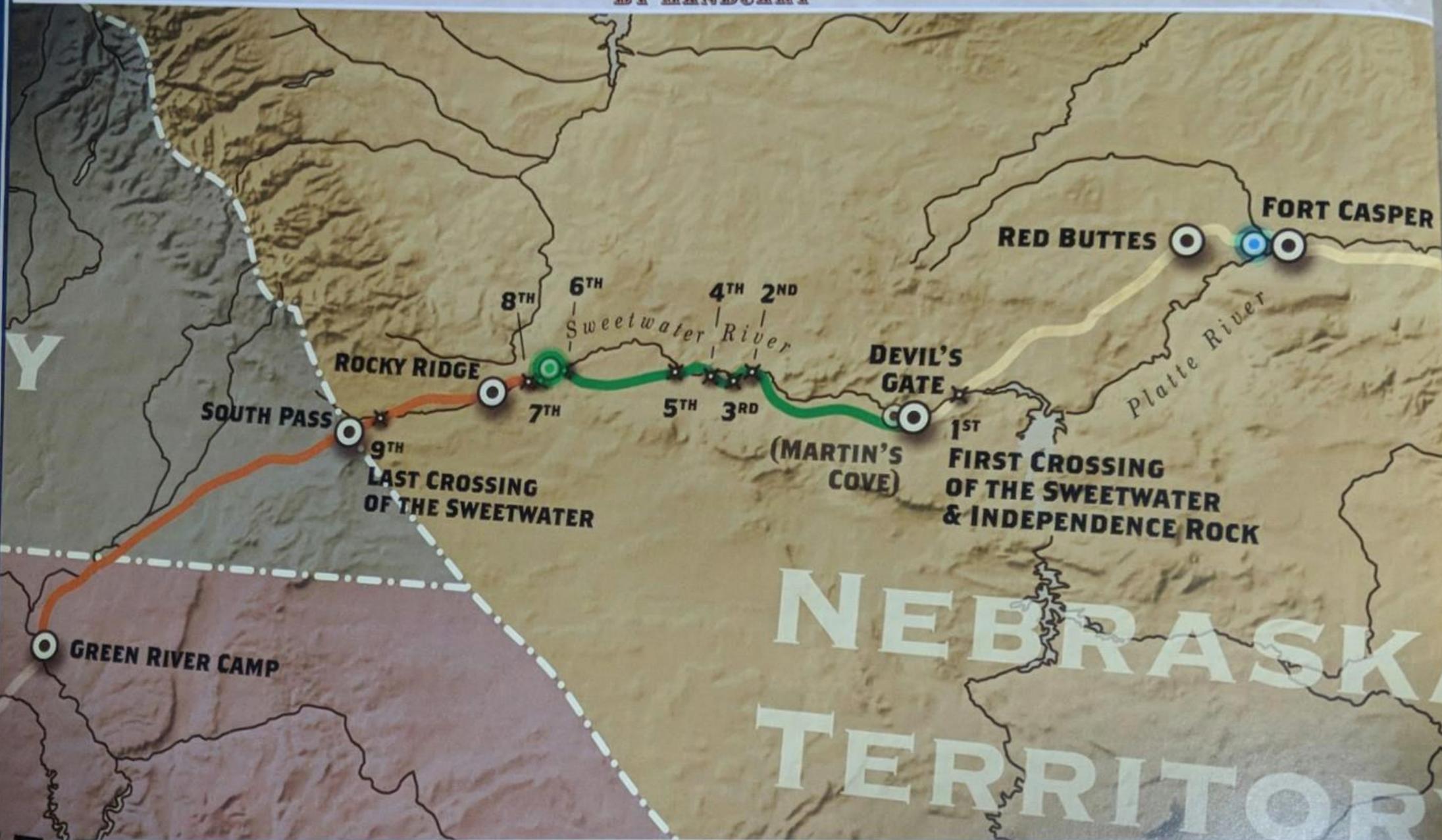
In the mornings, they would crawl from their tents, their faces gaunt, their frames quivering. They were in no condition to push on. "We were cold all the time," Sarah James, Willie Company, stated. She was traveling with her parents, sisters Emma and Maryann, brothers Reuben and Robert, and a younger child. "Father told us one night that the flour was gone. . . . Father was white and drawn. I knew that mother was worried about him, for he was getting weaker all the time and seemed to feel that there was no use in all the struggle." Captain Willie announced one morning that

all the animals in the company would be killed for fresh meat. "We were so hungry that we didn't stop to think what it would do for our wagons. How good the soup tasted made from the bones of those cows, although there wasn't any fat on them. The hides we used to roast after taking all the hair off of them. I even decided to cook the tatters of my shoes and make soup of them. It brought a smile to my father's sad face when I made the suggestion, but mother was a bit impatient with me and told me that I'd have to eat the muddy things myself."

The relief party proceeded eastward as rapidly as possible, reaching South Pass, the backbone of the continent, on October 17. Captain Grant stationed Reddick Allred, eleven men, and four supply wagons to restock the relief companies when they returned with the emigrants. Captain Grant also dispatched four express riders to find the two companies and assure them help was on its way. The express riders—on horseback with only a light wagon—could make more than thirty miles a day.

OCTOBER 1856

JOURNEY BY HANDCART



RESCUERS Oct. 21—wagons meet Willie Co.; six wagons continue east in search of Martin Co., remaining wagons head west with Willie Co.

WILLIE CO. Oct. 23, 9AM—begin Ascent of Rocky Ridge; Oct. 24, 5AM—reach camp on west end of Rocky Ridge; Oct. 25—continue toward Valley

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**BRASKA
RITORY**

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