

SWEETWATER RESCUE

The WILLIE and MARTIN

HANDCART

Heidi
Swinton

STORY

Lee
Groberg



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**JAMES KIRKWOOD CARRIES HIS BROTHER,
JOSEPH, OVER ROCKY RIDGE** BY DEL PARSON

The Willie Company included at least eighty-four children between the ages of three to twelve. For the most part, they walked day after day, even in the snow. When their strength wore out, many were carried by older siblings through the streams and rivers, up hills and into camp late at night. While these youngsters worried initially about the rumors of snakes and Indians, they soon came face-to-face with enemies much more ominous—starvation and death.

REVERENCE AT ROCK CREEK BY JULIE ROGERS

The companies did not stop for rain, wind, or childbirth.

Trudging along in the processions were hundreds of children.

The older children were charged with watching out for the

younger. Like many other children, Jenetta McBride recalled that her shoes were worn out and that she left bloody footprints in the snow. She also records that, in camp one evening, the wind blew over their tent and soon snow blanketed the canvas. In the morning men asked how many were dead. She was certain her brother was frozen under the collapsed and snow-covered tent. Jerking the tent from the ground, the men found her brother Heber very much alive, though his hair had frozen to the tent; a patch of skin would be exposed on his head the remainder of the journey.



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Preface



AFTER OUR FOOD HAD GIVEN OUT, WE WENT TO OUR TENT TO DIE," ELIZABETH SERMON, MARTIN COMPANY, WROTE OUT ON THE TRAIL. HER HUSBAND HAD BEEN FAILING FOR DAYS. "HE PUT HIS ARM AROUND ME," SHE CONTINUED, "AND SAID, 'I AM DONE' AND BREATHED HIS LAST. 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."¹

From 1856 to 1860, ten handcart companies traveled to what they considered Zion. Eight crossed the plains successfully. Two—the Willie and Martin Companies—met with a wintry disaster, as did the Hunt and Hodgett Wagon Trains trailing behind them. The rescuers from the valley faced the same horrific snows. Rescuer Harvey Cluff reported, "When an animal was killed to take to the emigrants, there was no need to salt the beef—it froze during quartering and stayed frozen." The Church Journal History, drawn from the Hunt Company records, reported an interesting phenomenon in the Hunt records for November 3, 1856: "From this date on, the camp journal was written with lead pencil which . . . can scarcely be read. It would appear that the ink used by the scribe had frozen, and the journal from [then] on only contained a few entries."²

Frozen ink and frozen limbs, frozen corpses left by the trail. These evidences of sacrifice and suffering speak for themselves. As many as 200 of these emigrants from Great Britain and Europe were buried in shallow graves, but more than 1,000 of them lived—and told their story.

In chronicling these stories of faith and endurance, this book joins with the television documentary *Sweetwater Rescue: The Willie and Martin Handcart Story* produced by Lee Groberg. I appreciate the years and the projects I have shared with Lee, and in particular the opportunity to write this book and the script for the companion film.

Thank you to the many talented and willing in our "handcart company." Mark Goodman—cinematographer, film editor, and friend—has been, as always, remarkable. Thank you to the many artists whose images on these pages, painted specifically for this book and the accompanying art show, have captured the experience of the handcart emigrants. And a thank-you again to Lee, who carried the responsibility of working with the artists—coordinating and helping them envision the trail, the people, and the experience.

Thank you to the community at Covenant who gave this book life. The ever-able production-meister Margaret Weber, designer Jessica Warner, editor Angela Eschler and acquisitions editor Phil Reshke have made the process of taking my manuscript from desktop to tabletop a pleasure of its own.

Thank you to my dear husband who, like so many in the Willie and Martin Companies, has pulled our handcart across the Great Plains and the snows of life. To our sons and their wives, and to my mother; all of us have helped each other cross many rivers. We, too, buried one child along the way.

And thank you to the blessed emigrants who pressed on and held on. As rescuer Reddick Allred said at the end of the trail: "Thus ended one of the hardest and most successful missions I have ever performed."

INTRODUCTION

THE DOCKS AT

LIVERPOOL

SPRING 1856



I

N THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, TENS OF THOUSANDS OF BRITISH, WELSH, AND SCANDINAVIANS CROWDED THE DOCKS AT LIVERPOOL, ENGLAND, TO TAKE A ONE-WAY OCEAN VOYAGE TO AMERICA. THESE EMIGRANTS DREAMED OF A NEW LIFE, A NEW BEGINNING.

Nearly 2,000 of them, believers in an American religion commonly called Mormonism, boarded vessels from February to May of 1856. They were bound for what they considered the promised land. They left behind their homelands, their jobs, and even their families to gather with those who shared their spiritual convictions. They contrasted sharply with adventurers on the high seas and those seeking farmland or fortunes. Theirs was a pilgrimage to claim what they considered the promise to God's covenant people.

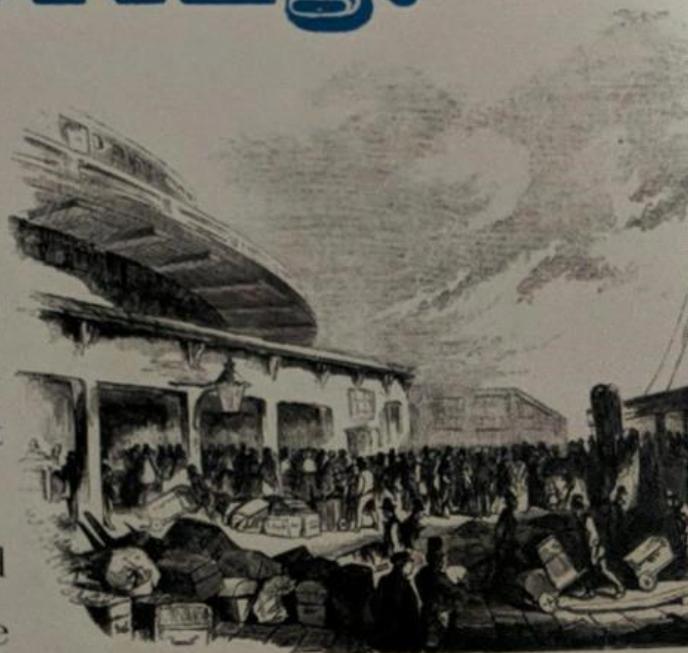
With the fire of Israel's God burning in their

hearts, these Latter-day Saints, as they called themselves, dreamed of gathering to Zion. "My parents, relatives, and friends did all in their power to keep me from coming to America," Susanna Stone Lloyd later recalled. "But I had the spirit of gathering and the Lord opened my way . . . with the handcart company." A single woman, age twenty-six, she sailed in May on the ship *Thornton* and was assigned to the Willie Handcart Company in Iowa.

James G. Bleak, also age twenty-six, and his young family would board the ship *Horizon* on May 23, 1856. The next day, Saturday May 24, he

I had the spirit
of gathering.

SUSANNA STONE LLOYD





PRAIRIE ANGELS BY LEON PARSON

The emigrants brought with them hearts filled with hope for the future and faith in the divine intervention of the Creator. As weather conditions grew blustery, stormy, and then destructive—it was the strength of soul, the courage and willingness to submit to the will of God that made angels out of ordinary folk in the darkest of days.



Gay S. Heflinger © 2011

wrote, "I feel to thank God for His goodness to me thus far, my earnest prayer is that He may inspire my heart to continually do His will, that His favor may continue to abide with me." Later, Bleak and his family would be assigned to the Martin Handcart Company.

For the most part, the Latter-day Saint emigrants were poor. Some came from the factory towns; some were tradesmen and farmers. In their journey across the Great Plains and the Rockies, they would pull wooden handcarts loaded with only what they needed to survive. Their story, largely untold, is a gripping saga of the strength and triumph of the human soul.

PATH OF COURAGE BY GLEN S. HOPKINSON

*An earlier traveler described the increasing difficulty of the trail in these words, "There were hills piled on hills, mountains in every direction."^b (When the handcart emigrants reached this stretch of the trail, they already were worn out.) "Nearly all suffered more or less at night from cold," John Chislett wrote as the Willie Company advanced into Wyoming (then Nebraska Territory).**

"Instead of getting up in the morning strong, refreshed, vigorous, and prepared for the hardships of another day of toil, the poor Saints were seen crawling out from their tents looking haggard, benumbed, and showing an utter lack of that vitality so necessary to our success."^c