

The Place of Mormon Handcart Companies in America's Westward Migration Story

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DURING THE SUMMER AND FALL OF 1856, personnel at Fort Laramie witnessed a strange phenomenon: five separate companies of men, women, and children pulling and pushing simple two-wheeled carts westward. One year later, two more dusty handcart brigades passed by, another one in 1859, and a final two in 1860. In the history of overland trails migration to the American West, handcarts are an anomaly. Of about 350,000 trail emigrants to Oregon and California and 70,000 to Utah, nearly all traveled in wagon companies. In total, only about 3,000 pioneers went west in ten handcart companies during a five-year period, 1856–1860.¹

Among the first five brigades in 1856 were the ill-fated Willie and Martin companies, whose terrible sufferings in blizzards in present-day Wyoming have bestowed on handcart pioneers more public awareness than their small numbers justify and have made handcarts *the* symbol of all Mormon Trail travel even though handcart emigrants constituted less than 5 percent

1. The standard, albeit dated, handcart study is LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856–1860* (Glendale, CA, 1960). An excellent article-length overview is Lyndia McDowell Carter, "The Mormon Handcart Companies," *Overland Journal* 13 (1995), 2–18. Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (Lincoln, NE, 1964), devotes chaps. 8 and 9 to the handcart saga.

of all Mormon emigrants. The image of someone walking near a covered wagon is not nearly as suggestive as someone pushing a loaded handcart of the endurance, self-sacrifice, and bravery possessed by people who made the long trek west.

To be properly viewed, the Mormon handcart saga needs not only the close-up lens typically used in studies to date but also the wide-angle lens that places it in the contexts of overland trail travel in general and of 23 years of Mormon trail traffic. The discussion that follows provides an overview of all ten handcart companies positioned within those larger contexts.

WAGON TRAVEL to Oregon began in 1841 and to California in 1844. The Oregon and California trails started from Independence and Westport (now Kansas City), Missouri, and initially passed by Fort Laramie and Fort Bridger in Wyoming Territory, and then swung northerly to Fort Hall in Idaho. That common route, designated the Oregon and California Trail, split near Fort Hall, the right fork heading to Oregon and the left into Nevada and California. After what is termed the "Great Migration" to Oregon in 1843, wagon travel to Oregon became an annual event. One year later, in 1844, the Stephens-Murphy party became the first company of wagons to roll to California. Wagon travel to California in significant numbers began in 1846, the year 49 of the 89 members of the ill-fated Donner party perished in Sierra snows. After John Sutter's workmen discovered gold in 1848, argonauts swarmed to California during the next four years. The two peak years for emigrants going to California and Oregon were 1850 and 1852. After 1852, the flow decreased year by year until completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 made overland trail travel all but obsolete.²

2. Two excellent studies of the western trails are John D. Unruh Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860* (Urbana and Chicago, 1979); and George R. Stewart, *The California Trail: An Epic with Many Heroes* (Lincoln, NE, 1962). Also useful are David Lavender, *Westward Vision: The Story of the Oregon Trail* (New York, 1963), and John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, CT, 1979). During the Gold Rush and in subsequent years, many on the California Trail took a Salt Lake cutoff near Fort Bridger, which rejoined the main trail midway across Nevada.

Mormon emigration to the Great Salt Lake Valley began in 1847. Over the next 22 years approximately 70,000 Mormons headed west in at least 329 wagon companies, using about 10,000 wagons total, and in ten handcart brigades. Mormon numbers crossing the Plains averaged nearly 3,000 per year.³ Unlike most other trail travelers, those Mormon emigrants “did not go west for a new identity, missionary work, adventure, furs, land, health, or gold, but were driven beyond the frontier for their religious beliefs.” They were followed by “thousands of European converts, at first mainly English, later with a heavy Scandinavian infusion.” Handcart pioneers amounted to less than 5 percent of all Mormon emigration and less than 1 percent of America’s overland emigration to the West.⁴

The trail experience for Mormon emigrants was much like what their contemporaries bound for Oregon and California experienced. “Their daily routine, their food, wagons, animals, sicknesses, dangers, difficulties, domestic affairs, trail constitutions, discipline, the blurring of sexual distinctions relative to work, and so forth, were typical.”⁵ However, Mormon emigrants differed from most westering Americans in several important ways. They migrated because of religious beliefs that required them to move to develop a religious haven. Generally they were much poorer than the average westward migrants. By and large Mormons traveled as families and in church-organized companies led by captains appointed by church authorities. Mormon emigration “was organized and directed by conscious policy.”⁶ Compared to other Plains travelers, the Mormons, according to Wallace Stegner, “were the most sys-

3. For a list of annual totals, see Stanley B. Kimball, *Historic Resource Study: Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail* (Washington, DC, 1991), 134–35. Kimball cites now dated statistics from Andrew Jenson showing that 68,028 people went west on the Mormon Trail. But my study of 1853 Mormon wagon trains shows more than 3,000 Mormon emigrants, compared to Jenson’s 2,603. And for 1861 Jenson listed only 1,959, whereas my study of that year’s emigration shows 2,000 more than that. Hence, the larger 70,000 figure used above. Further studies of individual years probably will increase that total.

4. Kimball, *Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail*, 9; Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*, 197.

5. Kimball, *Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail*, 2–3.

6. William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion: The Mormon Migration from Scandinavia* (1957; reprint, Minneapolis, 2000), vii.

tematic, organized, disciplined, and successful pioneers in our history." He also noted that "Oregon emigrants and argonauts bound for the gold fields lost all their social cohesion en route," but for Mormons, "far from loosening their social organization, the trail perfected it." Positioning the Mormon migration within western history, he found that, "in the composition of its wagon trains, the motives that drove them, the organization and discipline of the companies, it differed profoundly from the Oregon and California migrations. These were not groups of young and reckless adventurers, nor were they isolated families or groups of families. They were literally villages on the march, villages of a sobriety, solidarity, and discipline unheard of anywhere else on the western trails."⁷

By 1856, when the first Mormon handcart companies pulled in to Utah Territory, the Oregon-California Trail, including the Salt Lake Cutoff, had been "more heavily traveled, more firmly beaten down, and more improved by planned work – was ceasing to be a trail and becoming what we may better term a road."⁸ Therefore, after handcart pullers followed existing state roads across Iowa, they trekked the next 1,000 miles along well-used roads to the Great Salt Lake Valley.

MORMON is a nickname that outsiders had given to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who, by 1856, called themselves "Latter-day Saints" (later abbreviated as LDS). During the nineteenth century, LDS converts were expected to uproot and move to church gathering places, first in Ohio, then in Missouri, Illinois, and Iowa, and finally in Utah. "Wherefore the decree hath gone forth from the Father," a Mormon scripture reads, "that they shall be gathered in unto one place upon the face of this land."⁹ Gathering centers were created to be places of refuge from persecution. For converts, "emigration was practically synonymous with conversion." Saints in England were

7. Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*, 1, 9.

8. Stewart, *The California Trail*, 296.

9. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Doctrine and Covenants*, 29: 7-8. The *Doctrine and Covenants* is a collection of revelations recorded by Mormonism's founding prophet, Joseph Smith Jr., and his successors.

told in 1855 that God had commanded them “to gather up out of Babylon, just as emphatically as He did His ancient people, through Moses, to go up out of Egypt.”¹⁰

When violent citizens forced Mormons to leave Nauvoo, Illinois, and vicinity in 1846, more than 15,000 vacated their homes, basically uncompensated for their losses. That year, upwards of 12,000 Mormons moved across Iowa and then encamped for the winter at the Missouri River. The next spring, Brigham Young led a vanguard group west to find a new home for the refugees, following the north side of the Platte River along a faint route taken by fur traders in previous decades. Near Fort Laramie that track joined the Oregon and California Trail and followed it across present-day Wyoming to Fort Bridger. There, where the main trail bent north, the Mormons plodded southwesterly toward the Great Salt Lake Valley along a rough track the Donner party had blazed the year before. Leaders designated that arid expanse along the Wasatch Mountains as the new gathering center, their new “Zion.”¹¹

In addition to “gathering,” church members took seriously a commandment given them in 1831 to “look to the poor and needy, and administer to their relief that they shall not suffer.”¹² When the Latter-day Saints were forced out of Missouri in 1839 and again from Illinois in 1846, members in special meetings covenanted with uplifted hands to assist anyone lacking the means to move.¹³ Soon after the first Mormons settled by the

10. Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 137; *Millennial Star* [a newspaper then being published by the Latter-day Saints in England] 18 (3/1/1855), 138.

11. Most histories dealing with the Mormon Trail focus only on the historic 1847 Brigham Young company of pioneers who were the first to reach Utah. A standard overview history of the trail is Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*. For facts and summaries about trail history, routes, and sites, see Kimball, *Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail*. A brief guidebook to trail sites and scenes is William E. Hill, *The Mormon Trail: Yesterday and Today* (Logan, UT, 1996).

12. Doctrine and Covenants, 38:35.

13. On January 29, 1839, a gathering of LDS church members “resolved that we this day enter into a covenant to stand by and assist each other to the utmost of our abilities in removing from this state, and that we will never desert the poor who are worthy.” Brigham H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church*, 7 vols. (1902–1930; reprint, Salt Lake City, 1974), 3:250–54. Then, on October 6, 1845, a similar pledge was made that “every man will give all to help to take the poor” when the Saints left Nauvoo the next spring. *Ibid.*, 7:464–65.

Great Salt Lake, their leaders created a revolving loan fund, the Perpetual Emigrating Fund (PEF), to aid those needing help to make the journey. Many benefited, such that by late 1852 “all the exiles from Nauvoo who wished to come had been removed to Zion,” and “the obligations of the Nauvoo pledge had been faithfully discharged.”¹⁴

By 1852, some 30,000 Saints living in the British Isles were clamoring to emigrate, so leaders shifted the PEF aid from helping Nauvoo exiles to assisting Europeans.¹⁵ Scandinavian converts joined the flow on a large scale starting in 1853. European converts, as Stegner observed, were “gripped by the double promise of economic betterment and eternal life.”¹⁶ PEF money helped emigrants, too, by funding agents who chartered sailing ships and riverboats for the emigrants, obtained wagons and teams, and organized church-supervised wagon trains. In priority order, the fund assisted (1) those for whom Utah relatives had made donations; (2) converts with skills needed in pioneer-era Utah Territory; and (3) converts of ten years or more. Aid recipients signed agreements to repay costs the PEF had covered for them. Peak PEF assistance came during the early 1850s when the fund subsidized one out of every three Mormon emigrants.¹⁷ Often underwriting the PEF and covering its losses, the church remained the driving force behind the promotion, management, and financing of the emigration, devoting enormous financial and human resources to make the emigration happen.¹⁸

14. Gustive O. Larson, *Prelude to the Kingdom: Mormon Desert Conquest, a Chapter in American Cooperative Experience* (1947; reprint, Westport, CT, 1978), 113.

15. Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Lincoln, NE, 1958), 97.

16. Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*, 12.

17. See Larson, *Prelude to the Kingdom*. Between 1850 and 1859 the fund financed 4,769 emigrants at a cost of \$300,000. By the time of its demise in 1887, the fund had helped more than 100,000 people emigrate at a total cost of about \$12.5 million. See Kimball, *Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail*, 10.

18. Economic historian Leonard J. Arrington found that “the Fund realized very little from repayments. . . . The best evidence that there was little rigor in pressing for repayment is the constant mounting of these obligations [unpaid PEF debts], which totaled over \$100,000 in 1856, reached \$700,000 by 1872 and exceeded \$1,000,000 in 1877.” Years later the PEF was dissolved. See Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 101–2.

DURING 1855, Utah Territory (it gained territorial status in 1850) suffered from a severe drought and grasshopper invasion. Resulting scarcities meant that PEF loans did not get repaid, new donations dried up, and the church's financial resources dwindled. Leaders issued passionate appeals for PEF donations, arguing that "the cry from our poor brethren in foreign countries for deliverance is great, the hand of the oppressor is heavy upon them, and they have no other prospect on earth through which they can hope for assistance."¹⁹

Most trail travelers favored two- or three-yoke ox teams rather than horses or mules. Oxen were bigger and stronger and could pull more weight. They could graze better on available grasses and plants along the way, sparing emigrants from hauling feed that horses and mules required. And, being castrated bulls, oxen were docile and easier to manage than horses and mules. Some emigrants used their own farm wagons and oxen, but most had to buy new outfits or hitch rides with someone else. Many Mormons wanting to emigrate could not afford the traditional wagon-and-team outfit because they cost too much. Trail scholar John Mack Faragher found that during the overland trail period in general it cost a party of four approximately \$90 for a wagon, \$100 for two yoke of oxen, and approximately \$300 for food and supplies, or \$490 total. In 1860 a Mormon elder made the same estimate of about \$490 for a fully supplied outfit. (The equivalent in 2006 dollars is \$10,000–\$12,000.)²⁰ Such huge out-of-pocket expenses meant that thousands who could not afford wagon outfits could not go west. They needed assistance.

19. "Thirteenth General Epistle of the Presidency," 10/29/1855, in James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1833–1964*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, 1965), 2:181–82.

20. Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 192–93; Robert G. Athearn, ed., *The Look of the West, 1860: Across the Plains to California by Sir Richard Burton* (Lincoln, NE, 1963), 171. In 1853, when Mormon wagon trains outfitted in Keokuk, Iowa, a wagon cost \$70 and 2 yoke of oxen \$150, or \$220 total before adding the cost of food and supplies. William G. Hartley, "LDS Emigration in 1853: The Keokuk Encampment and Outfitting Ten Wagon Trains for Utah," *Mormon Historical Studies* 4 (2003), 49. For dollar comparisons from past years into today's dollars, consult Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, "Purchasing Power of Money in the United States from 1774 to 2006," Measuring Worth. Com, August 2007, at <http://measuringworth.com/calculators/pppowerus/>.

For the emigration year of 1856, the church's First Presidency, rather than suspend church-directed emigration because of PEF shortages, announced a new, lower-cost travel system whereby emigrants would pull simple handcarts across the Plains. "Let them come on foot, with hand-carts or wheelbarrows," the instructions to Europeans read; "let them gird up their loins and walk through, and nothing shall hinder or stay them." Walking west was nothing new. Contrary to television and movie depictions, almost everyone in ox-drawn wagon companies walked; few rode in the wagons. Leaders reminded British Mormons that people heading for California gold fields had crossed the Plains with but a pack on their back or had used simple carts. "Can you not do the same? Yes. . . . start from the Missouri River, with cows, hand-carts, wheel-barrows, with little flour, and no unnecessaries, and come to this place quicker, and with less fatigue than by following the heavy trains with their cumbersome herds, which they are often obliged to drive miles to feed." Rather than being delayed at outfitting posts to locate and train "wild ungovernable cattle," the instructions noted, handcart emigrants could simply load up and move on. A church leader in England, Elder Franklin D. Richards, enumerated several advantages handcart travel offered: less major labor to yoke, drive, and care day and night for oxen; fewer animals to tempt Indians; no night duty guarding cattle; and reaching Utah Territory faster, which also would save food costs.²¹

Under the handcart plan, costs to travel the entire distance from England to Utah Territory were projected at 9 pounds (between \$800 and \$1,000 in today's dollars).²² Handcarts them-

21. "Thirteenth General Epistle," 10/29/1855, in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 2:186; "Sixth General Epistle," 9/22/1851, *ibid.*, 2:87; Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 156–60. Oxen plodded along at about 2 miles per hour; people could walk faster than that. A driver walked beside the lead oxen while others walked away from the wagons to avoid dust, visit with others, explore, gather firewood or buffalo chips, pick wild fruit, and hunt. To ride in the wagon meant bumping and jolting, heat under the canvas top, constant trail dust, and terrible boredom. Walkers reduced the weight load of the wagons, sparing the oxen extra work. See Kimball, *Historic Resource Study*, 15–16.

22. For British pounds conversions, use Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, "Computing 'Real Value' Over Time with a Conversion Between U.K. Pounds and U.S. Dollars, 1830–2005," *MeasuringWorth.com*, August 2006, at <http://measuringworth.com/calculators/exchange/>.

selves cost church agents \$10 to \$20 each compared to \$220 for a wagon and two yoke of oxen. The handcarts resembled those used by porters and street vendors in American cities. They were simple vehicles weighing 50–75 pounds, with two wheels, a cart bed, and two handles protruding ahead and connected at the end by a crosspiece. On average, five people were assigned to one cart; each person was limited to 17 pounds of clothing, bedding, and belongings, which meant 85 pounds per cart. Therefore, loaded carts generally weighed less than 200 pounds. To propel the cart, one or two people stood within the handle framework and pushed on the front crossbar. One wagon accompanied each twenty carts, carrying food and tents and other equipment. Twenty people were assigned to one tent. Men with trail experience were chosen to captain each company and oversee subcaptains in charge of 50 people and 10 handcarts.²³

Built into the plan were several safety nets. Handcart companies from Iowa City would be resupplied and get their carts repaired at Florence, Nebraska. Companies could obtain some supplies and services at Fort Laramie and then at Fort Bridger (which by then was part of Utah Territory and belonged to the Mormons). Also, resupply wagons from the Salt Lake vicinity met Mormon Trail companies usually somewhere between South Pass and Fort Bridger. Finally, a key part of the handcart plan was for Mormon way stations to be established at four places along the Mormon Trail. “We propose Settling Colonies at every Suitable location along the route of travel where grain can be raised,” President Young announced in April 1856, “that in their migrations thither the Saints can travel from Settlement to Settlement and find friends and provisions.”²⁴ Unfortunately for 1856 travelers, Mormon agents at Florence were unable to recruit needed human and material resources to start an initial station at Genoa, Nebraska.

Handcart travel had distinct limitations: handcarts transported less food than wagons and hardly any clothing and bedding; propelling the carts was hard physical work, espe-

23. Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 53–54.

24. Brigham Young to John Taylor, 4/10/1856, Brigham Young Papers, Letterbook 2, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City.

cially when going up or down hill or when pulling on sandy or muddy roads; support wagons could transport only a few of those who became ill or weak; many carts required repairs or broke down; during daytime the travelers had no protection from sun, and day and night they lacked protection from bad weather. As a result, some judged the handcart experience more harshly than others. Hannah Lapish, for example, who, with her husband, pulled two young children to Utah in the ninth handcart company, considered handcarts to be a "most pathetic mode of traveling."²⁵

PRESIDENT BRIGHAM YOUNG placed Elder Franklin D. Richards in charge of implementing the handcart system. In Liverpool, Richards chartered sailing ships and signed up handcart emigrants, including those from Scandinavia. Assigned agents made arrangements at American ports to receive the emigrants and move them by railroad to Iowa City, the farthest west terminal. Richards appointed Daniel Spencer as the general superintendent of the outfittings. Agents obtained and prepared outfitting grounds on the northwest edge of Iowa City. Other agents ordered prefabricated handcarts and wagons in St. Louis and Chicago and carts to be built by Iowa City craftsmen. When emigrants arrived, they camped and filled time by assembling carts and sewing tents and cart covers. Experienced wheelwright Chauncey Webb supervised handcart construction in camp. Other men went far into Missouri to procure cattle and horses.²⁶

There was a significant amount of traffic on America's overland trails in 1856. That year some 1,000 people went to Oregon and 8,000 to California.²⁷ About 3,700 Mormons traveled to Utah Territory, half in wagon trains and the rest in handcart companies; 1,891 emigrants pulled out of Iowa City in six handcart groups (regrouped into five in Florence), using 430 handcarts

25. "Hannah Settle Lapish," in Andrew Jenson, comp., *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (1901-1936; reprint, Salt Lake City, 1971), 2:526.

26. Andrew Jenson, "Crossing the Plains in 1856," *The Contributor* 14 (December 1892), 65. *The Contributor* was an LDS Church general interest periodical.

27. Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 120.



George Simons sketched a train of Mormons crossing the Plains with handcarts in 1856. Courtesy Council Bluffs Public Library, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

and 27 wagons.²⁸ On June 9 and 11 the first two companies, led by captains Edmund Ellsworth and Daniel McArthur, left Iowa City with 479 people, 100 carts, 5 wagons, and 25 tents. They carried enough provisions to reach Florence. Two days and 35 miles out, the Ellsworth company seemed to one observer “cheerful and universally happy.” When both companies pulled into Florence on July 17, a Mormon observer noted, “One would not think that they had come from Iowa City, a long and rough journey of two hundred and seventy-seven miles, except by their dust-stained garments and sun-burned faces. . . . Methinks I see their merry countenances and buoyant step, and the strains of the hand-cart song seem ringing in my ears.” That company had among its members the Birmingham band, young performers who “played really very well.” After repairs and taking on 60 days’ rations for the trip to Utah Territory, the two companies pulled out on July 20 and 24.²⁹

On the Plains, some eastbound travelers found the Ellsworth company to be “very cheerful and happy.” When these first handcart pioneers approached Salt Lake City, they received a royal welcome. Captain Ellsworth, on foot, led the caravan. Captain McArthur’s company pulled up behind the Ellsworth bri-

28. Kimball, *Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail*, 134.

29. Jenson, “Crossing the Plains in 1856,” 66–67.

gade. A long procession entered the city: lancers, followed by women on horseback, the church presidency in carriages, the two handcart companies, and then citizens in carriages and on horseback. Throngs of waiting men, women, and children on foot, on horses, and in wagons lined the streets to greet the parade. At a city square the handcart pullers stopped, received a formal greeting, and pitched their tents, ending their 1,300-mile journey. Though fatigued, they had completed the journey with less mortality than was the average for ox-trains. Often they had traveled 25 to 30 miles per day. They had demonstrated the practicality of men and women crossing the Plains pulling their own baggage in handcarts, a first in the history of organized overland travel.³⁰

Meanwhile, back at Iowa City, Daniel Spencer had organized a third company of about 300 emigrants, primarily from Wales, with Edward Bunker as captain. Bunker, like captains Ellsworth and McArthur, was returning to Utah Territory after three years of missionary service in England. This was to be his fourth trip over the Mormon Trail. His company rolled out on June 23 and reached Florence on July 19. After 11 days of rest, repairs, and provisioning, they set out and arrived in Salt Lake City two months later, on October 2.³¹

The Ellsworth, McArthur, and Bunker companies covered the 1,031 miles from Florence to Salt Lake City in an average of 65 days, which was 12 days faster than three wagon trains that year that covered the same distance in an average of 77 days.³² Hence, the handcart system shaved a week to ten days off the travel time. Had they not been slowed down by their ox-drawn support wagons, they could have traveled even faster.

Due to late ship departures from Liverpool, two more 1856 handcart companies started very late, leaving Iowa City in mid- and late July. Led by captains James Willie and Edward Martin, each comprised about 500 people. They were tailed by the John A. Hunt and William B. Hodgetts wagon trains. The four companies did not leave Florence until the last half of August. In present-

30. *Ibid.*, 67–68.

31. Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 81–90.

32. A study of 13 Mormon wagon trains in 1861 shows that they averaged 73 days for the trip; see chart in William G. Hartley, "The Great Florence Fitout of 1861," *Brigham Young University Studies* 24 (1984), 367.

day Wyoming they encountered October and November blizzards and sub-freezing temperatures and suffered disastrous losses. About 180 died while exposed to those conditions before rescue teams from Utah reached the survivors and through heroic efforts hauled them, many frostbitten and ill, to Salt Lake City.³³ Such loss of life made this the worst tragedy in overland trails history.

DESPITE THE DISASTER, that December the church's presidency issued a general epistle stating that the handcart plan "has been fairly tested and proved entirely successful" for companies that did not start too late in the season. The letter outlined specific improvements that should be made to the carts in 1857, and cautioned that emigrants should provide themselves with "an extra supply of good shoes." Aged and infirm emigrants were to go in a wagon company, not with a handcart. "It is desirable to make a few locations along the line of travel," the letter continued, "and our agents at Florence and St. Louis have been instructed in relation thereto."³⁴

In a February 1857 sermon, President Young said, regarding the handcart pioneers, "They have come a great deal cheaper and better than other companies. I believe that if a company was to try it once with ox-teams and once with hand-carts, every one of them would decide in favour of the hand-carts, unless they could ride more and be more comfortable than people generally are with ox-teams."³⁵

Early that year, Utah Mormon Hiram Kimball obtained the federal government's overland mail contract, which required that relay stations be built all along the trail. By April, Brigham Young had taken over Kimball's mail contract and started east-bound mail service. He assigned Mormons to build several towns of one square mile each at stations at LeBonte and Deer

33. Rebecca Cornwall and Leonard J. Arrington, *Rescue of the 1856 Handcart Companies* (Provo, UT, 1982).

34. "Fourteenth General Epistle," 12/10/1856, in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 2:200-201.

35. Brigham Young discourse, 2/1/1857, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, 1857), 4:203. The *Journal of Discourses* contains stenographic reports of sermons given between 1851 and 1856 by LDS church leaders and others.

Creek in present-day Wyoming. On April 23 he noted that between 30 and 50 wagons loaded with a food supply of flour had started east to establish the new trail settlements. By May, Andrew Cunningham, a Mormon agent in Florence, was starting a settlement in mid-Nebraska. By the end of May, Young noted, 60 men, "well supplied," had left Utah to start the LaBonte settlement in Wyoming's Black Hills. Showing continued confidence in the handcart system, despite the tragedies in late 1856, Young in April had sent some 70 missionaries eastbound from Utah Territory not with covered wagons but pulling handcarts.³⁶

Compared to Mormon emigration numbers in 1856, those the next year dropped by two-thirds, from 3,700 to about 1,300, because Mormon funds for emigration from England were depleted. Of those 1,300 emigrants, nearly 500 traveled in two handcart companies and 800 in six wagon trains. Both handcart companies and two of the wagon trains departed from Iowa City.³⁷ Unlike the 1856 handcart pioneers, these had to buy their own outfits.

On May 22–23, Captain Israel Evans's handcart company of 149 individuals, 28 carts, and 1 wagon left Iowa City and reached Florence on June 13. Susan Milverton, age 18 in 1857, later recalled that on good days they covered 15–25 miles and that "most often the evenings around the campfire were pleasant, and we were happy." Rains detained them at Florence. Cart loads were reduced to 15 pounds per person. They left on June 19 and reached the Salt Lake Valley on September 11–12.³⁸

On June 12, 1857, the year's second handcart company left Iowa City. It reached Florence on July 3. There, Christian Christiansen became captain over the 330 people, 68 handcarts,

36. Brigham Young to Horace Eldredge, 4/[1]/1857; Young to Feramorz Little, 4/1/1857; Young to Orson Pratt, 4/23/1857; Young to Horace Eldredge, 5/29/1857, all in Brigham Young Papers, Letterbook 3.

37. For handcart company statistics, see table below and Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, chart on p. 193. The Family and Church History Department of the LDS Church maintains a constantly updated Web site at www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/pioneercompanylist-information/0,16281,4117-1-2144%20,00.html that lists all LDS wagon trains by year, names of passengers, and diary and autobiographical accounts for each company.

38. Susan Rover Milverton Witbeck, *Autobiographical Sketch*, 5–7, LDS Church Archives.

and 3 wagons. They pulled into Salt Lake City on September 13.³⁹ That year, because U.S. President James Buchanan had ordered federal troops to march to Utah Territory to suppress a suspected Mormon rebellion, Mormon emigrants on the trail, while keeping their Mormon identities quiet, “on several occasions traveled and camped in close proximity to the government freight train” provisioning the troops.⁴⁰

During the next year, 1858, the church halted its European emigration because of “the difficulties which are now threatening the Saints,” meaning possible warfare between Mormons and the U.S. Army. To defend Utah communities, church missionaries were called home.⁴¹ For 1859 the church lifted its edict against emigration, and the annual flow resumed. That year European Saints were told,

... no one will receive any help whatever from the P. E. Fund. The deliverance of the Saints depends entirely upon themselves, and we hope that those who have the means will go, and that those who can assist their brethren will stretch forth a helping hand. There will be an opportunity for all to go with hand-carts this season, as usual, who cannot raise the amount necessary to procure a team. Those who have the means, and prefer it, can go with wagons.⁴²

Because so few had funds, “through emigration” from Liverpool to Utah Territory in 1859 was confined to one shipload of Saints. Florence replaced Iowa City that year as the outfitting place because emigrants by then could travel by rail across Missouri to St. Joseph and then take a short riverboat ride up to Florence. The *Council Bluffs Press* reported in late May that about 1,300 Mormon emigrants were at Florence, and that about 250 would cross the Plains with handcarts.⁴³ That season the Pikes Peak gold rush produced heavy trail traffic from the Omaha area.⁴⁴

39. Allen C. Christensen, *Before Zion: An Account of the 7th Handcart Company* (Springville, UT, 2004).

40. Jenson, “Emigration from Europe in 1857,” *Contributor* 14 (May 1893), 346.

41. Editorial, *Millennial Star* 19 (10/17/1857), 668.

42. Editorial, *Millennial Star* 21 (1/1/1859), 436.

43. Council Bluffs, Iowa, had been the Mormon city of Kaneshville until 1852, when most Mormons living there left for Utah Territory.

44. In February 1859 an Omaha newspaper carried a front-page article about a handcart company being recruited to go to the Pikes Peak gold rush country:

On June 9, 1859, Captain George Rowley's handcart company left Florence with 235 people pulling 60 handcarts that had iron axles, which were much more durable than the wooden ones used previously. For each cart there were four or six persons. Carts carried 20 pounds of baggage per person and half the provisions needed for the trip. Eight ox-drawn wagons followed with the other half of the provisions "and to give the tired and sick an opportunity to ride." Among the company were "a number of beautiful singers" who entertained visitors around the campfire singing popular "airs" and "several amusing hand-cart songs." Food ran out by the time they reached the Green River, 170 miles shy of Great Salt Lake Valley. "We didn't have nearly enough to eat," Sarah Beesley later recalled, "and oh, the suffering!" Until then her husband had played his violin around the campfire at night, while others sang or listened. But "we all got so hungry that we couldn't have good times any more." The Beesleys tried sleeping in the tents "but it was dreadful" because "everyone was in everyone else's way." Soon thereafter, five 4-mule teams with provisions met and assisted them. "They saved our lives," Beesley said. As the emigrants approached Salt Lake City, two or three bands of musicians and "thousands" of citizens met and escorted them along streets lined with spectators. Locals generously gave the newcomers a variety of provisions.⁴⁵

For 1860, the last handcart year, church leaders told European Saints that the demand in Utah Territory for labor of all kinds, for both males and females, was such that those who emigrated would find immediate employment at fair wages. But emigrant numbers were low. Three shiploads of Mormons

"A Hand Cart Train! No Excuse for Staying Away!" A company of nearly 100 men had been raised, it said, "for the purpose of starting to mines with HAND CARTS—a la Mormon." Promoters presented arguments in favor of the cart travel, including low cost, speed, not needing to care for mules and cattle, and usefulness of the carts in the mining camps. And, the notice bragged, anyone who pulled a handcart to the mines would "show himself a MAN," one "made of tried and true stuff." *Omaha Times*, 2/10/1859.

45. Jenson, "Emigration of 1859," *The Contributor* 14 (July 1893), 438, 439; Sarah Hancock Beesley, *Reminiscences*, posted with 1859 Rowley Company accounts on the Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel site at www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/pioneercompanylist-information/0,16281,4117-1-2144%20,00.html.

sailed early that year. Of about 1,400 who sailed, 640 expected to go through to Utah Territory, including 268 by handcarts. Two handcart companies were formed in Florence. Daniel Robison's company left June 6 with 233 people, 43 carts, 6 wagons, 38 oxen, and 10 tents. According to Captain Robison, "six teams were put to lead, the carts were in the rear. The people pushed the carts. The boxes and carts were painted beautifully, and had bows over the top. These bows were covered with heavy canvas." Unlike handles used in earlier years, his carts had a tongue with a crosspiece at the end of it, against which the people pushed. During the first two weeks they were drenched by rain showers, but had good weather thereafter. At Fort Laramie, with food running short, people pooled what money they had to buy more flour. Hannah Lapish traded jewelry for 700 pounds of flour, which she donated to the company commissary. At the Green River, relief wagons brought them 2,500 pounds of flour and 500 pounds of bacon. On August 22, just before he reached Fort Bridger, stagecoach traveler Richard Burton passed the Robison company: "The road was now populous with Mormon emigrants," he wrote. "Some had good teams, others hand-carts, which looked like a cross between a wheelbarrow and a tax-cart." The Robison Company reached Salt Lake City on August 27. Thousands welcomed them, a band entertained, and bishops brought the newcomers "a liberal supply of vegetables and other edibles."⁴⁶

When the tenth and final handcart company left Florence on July 6, 1860, "everything on the trail was changing." During its 80 days in transit, it "several times met or was passed by the overland stage carrying mail and passengers behind four fine and frequently changed horses, and periodically Pony Express riders rushed by their carts at a furious gallop." Such transportation, which seemed to Mary Ann Stucki Hafen "almost like the wind racing over the prairie," appeared "lovely and fast and comfortable from down in the roadside dust." Captain Oscar Stoddard led the 126 people, 22 handcarts, and 6 wagons.

46. Sir Richard Burton's account as edited in Athearn, *The Look of the West*, 218; Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 181-82; Jenson, "Emigration to Utah in 1860," *The Contributor* 14 (September 1893), 544, 545, 547; "Hannah Settle Lapish," in *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 2:526.

TABLE
MORMON HANDCART COMPANIES

| Departure | Captain | People | Carts | Wagons | Arrival | Deaths |
|---------------|--------------|--------|-------|--------|----------|---------|
| 6/9/1856 | Ellsworth | 274 | 52 | 5 | 9/26/56 | 13 |
| 6/11/1856 | McArthur | 221 | 48 | 4 | 9/26/56 | 7 |
| 6/23/1856 | Bunker | 320 | 62 | 5 | 10/2/56 | <7 |
| 7/15/1856 | Willie | 500 | 120 | 6 | 11/9/56 | 67 |
| 7/28/1856 | Martin | 576 | 146 | 7 | 11/30/56 | 135-150 |
| 5/22/1857 | Evans | 149 | 31 | 1 | 9/11/57 | ? |
| 6/12/1857 | Christiansen | 330 | 68 | 3 | 9/13/57 | 6? |
| 6/9/1859 | Rowley | 235 | 60 | 6 | 9/4/59 | 5? |
| 6/6/1860 | Robison | 233 | 43 | 6 | 8/27/60 | 1 |
| 7/6/1860 | Stoddard | 124 | 21 | 7 | 9/24/60 | 0 |
| Totals | | 2,962 | 651 | 50 | | ca. 250 |

SOURCE: Based on a chart in Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 193. Some accounts by individual handcart pioneers found since the Hafens' study give slightly different company passenger tallies, but historians have not yet developed a standardized set of adjusted totals.

NOTE: All seven of the 1856 and 1857 companies departed from Iowa City; the three subsequent companies departed from Florence, Nebraska.

"Considerable sickness" prevailed. Some oxen pulling support wagons died, which made the last part of the journey difficult. After the Stoddard company reached Salt Lake City on September 24, the era of "the marathon walk of the handcart companies" ended, and a cheaper, more efficient system was created the next year.⁴⁷

In total, between 1856 and 1860 nearly 3,000 individuals departed for the West in ten companies, using about 651 handcarts, assisted by 50 supply wagons (see table). (During those same years, another 5,200 Mormons went west in wagon trains.) Scores dropped out along the way, but no exact number has been calculated. Eight of the ten handcart companies made the journey successfully, without major mishap. To have emigrants pull handcarts to Utah Territory was a workable, albeit unorthodox and physically taxing, system that provided low-cost transportation for healthy people unable to afford high-priced wagons and teams.

47. Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*, 289; Jenson, "Emigration to Utah in 1860," 548; Mary Ann Hafen, *Recollections of a Handcart Pioneer of 1860: A Woman's Life on the Mormon Frontier* (Lincoln, NE, 1983), 24-25.

BY 1860, PEF FUNDS were so depleted that even the handcart system cost more than church resources could sustain. But surpluses at Camp Floyd, the federal army's big post in Utah, and from army suppliers had made Utah oxen-rich. Thus President Young instituted a new, efficient system for transporting emigrants that did not require cash.⁴⁸ Wagons and teams would go "down" from Utah to Florence and bring emigrants "back." Previous experimental round trips had shown that oxen sent from Utah could make the 2,000-mile, six-month journey in good condition. So, in February 1861, President Young asked each Mormon congregation in the territory to equip and loan at least one outfit for "down-and-back" trips. In return for the loaned oxen, wagons, supplies, and manpower, donors received credit in church account books for tithes they owed that year or in the future.⁴⁹ While promoting the new plan, Young stated that "he had made a covenant while in Nauvoo never to slacken his efforts until all were gathered, which he intended to carry out."⁵⁰

Seventy-five congregations—nearly every one in Utah Territory—participated. On April 23, 1861, the donations yielded four wagon companies that left Salt Lake City, led by experienced wagon captains, containing 203 wagons, 217 teamsters, 1,699 oxen, about 18 guards, and 136,000 pounds of Utah flour. During the trek "down" they deposited flour at four stations along the trail for use during the return trip.⁵¹ Meanwhile, nearly 4,000 Mormons from Scandinavia, England, and the United States reached an outfitting camp in Florence in May,

48. Hartley, "The Great Florence Fit-out of 1861," 341-71; idem, "Down-and-Back Wagon Trains: Travelers on the Mormon Trail in 1861," *Overland Journal* 11 (1993), 23-34.

49. Saints were expected to tithe 10 percent of their annual income or increase produced by their own labor and one day of labor for every ten days that did not generate income. Granting tithing credits to donors for teams and materials was a bookkeeping transaction that involved no cash. Emigrants assisted by the donated outfits were expected to pay the church for them after they reached Utah, in essence repaying the church for losses caused by the tithing credits granted to donors of the down-and-back outfits and materials.

50. Minutes, Presiding Bishop's Meeting with Bishops, 1/31/1861, LDS Church Archives.

51. Brigham Young to George Q. Cannon, 5/9/1861, Brigham Young Letterbook, 1861, LDS Church Archives.

June, and July. For three months Mormon agents operated the bustling Florence depot, which included a provisions store, warehouse, campsites, corrals, and a weighing machine. Saints able to buy wagons and teams formed eight Mormon wagon trains that outfitted there. Those unable to afford outfits reported for travel in one of the down-and-back wagon companies. Agents assigned six to twelve people to each Utah wagon. Fares (paid then or later in Utah) were \$41 for adults (about \$944 in 2006 dollars) and half that for children under age eight. Each passenger could take 50 pounds of baggage for free and pay 20 cents per pound after that.⁵²

The four Utah down-and-back trains in 1861 moved about 1,700 passengers, or 44 percent of the year's total of 3,900. For Mormon emigrants that year, the wagon trek west was routine and rather uneventful—no major hardships or tragedies or loss of life. Perhaps with the earlier handcart pioneers in mind, 1861 emigrant James H. Lindford pointed out that even with wagons “all of the able bodied emigrants walked from Florence to Utah.” The 1861 companies rolled into the Salt Lake Valley in August and September. There, the trains disbanded, and the borrowed wagons and teams were returned to their owners. “The sending down of wagons from Utah to Florence,” Brigham Young exulted, “is a grand scheme.”⁵³

The round-trip system worked so well that after 1861 it became the Mormons' primary method for moving not only needy Saints but anyone wanting to gather to Zion.⁵⁴ From 1861 through 1868, at least 20,000 Mormons trekked west in down-and-back wagon trains. No such wagon trains operated in 1865 due to transportation disruptions caused by the Civil War or in 1867 because of troubles with Utah Indians, but during the other years at least 2,000 Utah teams, or an average of about 330

52. Hartley, “The Great Florence Fit-out of 1861”; William Jeffries Journal, summary entry before entry for 9/23/1861, LDS Church Archives; Officer and Williamson, “Purchasing Power of Money,” 2007.

53. *An Autobiography of James Henry Lindford, Sr.* (n.p., 1947), 24–25; Journal History, 7/17/1861, LDS Church Archives. (Journal History is a day-by-day collection of LDS history items extracted by church historians from diaries, newspapers, minute books, and other primary source materials.)

54. Brigham Young report to LDS Church leaders in England, copied into Journal History, 12/31/1861, supplement titled “Church Emigration of 1861,” 7.

wagons per year, hauled the emigrants.⁵⁵ After 1865, as the Union Pacific tracks pushed westward from Omaha, Mormon wagon trains from Utah Territory met emigrants wherever the current rail terminus was—North Platte, Nebraska, in 1867 or Laramie or Benton, Wyoming, in 1868.

In the history of overland trail travel to the West, only the Mormons sponsored round-trip wagon trains from destination to departure point and back. That decade of “down-and-back” wagon trains marked a new era of trail travel. “By any system of computation, it was a steady and heavy flow of traffic, both in passengers and freight,” Stegner said. The transporting was

conducted entirely by professionals. No longer did captains have to instruct women, boys, or Welshmen in the mysteries of geeing and hawing oxen. No longer did they have to race against weather and failing supplies and growing exhaustion through the Black Hills and up the Sweetwater. . . . There were no more days lost hunting quicksand fords, no more axle-breaking drops and climbs out of steep-banked creeks, no more loss of wagons to wind or current fording the North Platte; there were ferries and bridges on the major streams, and the approaches to the fords had been improved through twenty years.⁵⁶

These round-trip wagon trains served as the grand finale for Mormon emigration across the Plains until completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 ended large-scale migration along the overland trails.

THE HANDCART VENTURE, although of rather slight significance numerically, merits inclusion in history books even without the terrible story surrounding the Willie and Martin companies, because it was a strange exception to the normal transportation modes and because human interest attaches to people hand-pulling their own baggage across the Plains. Colored by the Willie and Martin companies’ tragedies, however, the image of handcart pioneers looms large. Overland trails mu-

55. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 208. See LDS Church Historical Department list of LDS wagon companies by year, 1847 to 1868, as reproduced in Kimball, *Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail*, 136–50.

56. Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*, 291.

seums that tell about the Mormon Trail, for example, always include displays that highlight those tragedies.⁵⁷ One unfortunate result is a popular misperception that death and heartbreak plagued *all* Mormon Trail travel. In truth, for almost all Mormon Trail travelers, by wagon or handcart, the trek west was hard, yes, but not tragic or overly difficult. It was physically taxing, often boring, and full of discomfort, as extended camping experiences tend to be, but it was usually successful. Most Mormons who “gathered to Zion” did so gladly, and they demonstrated courage and commitment to their faith. They shared the optimism of the stanza “but with joy wend your way” expressed in “Come, Come Ye Saints,” the Mormon anthem written on the trail in 1846, and the happiness of the “Handcart Song” written in Iowa City in 1856: “some must push and some must pull as we go marching o’er the hill, as merrily on the way we go until we reach the valley-o.”

For some emigrants, however, the handcart trek was an ordeal they wanted to forget. Handcart veteran Sarah Hancock Beesley, when interviewed in old age, responded that while others might be enthusiastic about their handcart experiences, she was not. “Don’t ask me anything about it,” she warned. “My children have often tried to get me to write my handcart story but I will not.” For her, married a few months before the trek, it was a “dreadful time.” She complained that her company did not have nearly enough food, sleep was hard, the sun burned hot, wind covered her with sand and dirt, pulling the cart was hard labor, especially when its wheels sometimes sank to the hubs in sand, fording rivers was strenuous, and when someone died, the company never stopped for a proper burial. “Yes, I crossed the plains with a handcart once but I am thankful I have never had to again. I couldn’t do it.”⁵⁸

LDS historian Andrew Jenson, writing 33 years after the handcart era ended and having studied it well, noted the lasting impact he expected the handcart venture to have:

57. See displays, for example, at the Western Historic Trails Center in Council Bluffs, Iowa; the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument in Kearney, Nebraska; and the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center in Casper, Wyoming.

58. Sarah Hancock Beesley, *Reminiscence*, 28, 32–34.

Its peculiar and distinct characteristics will ever belong to that part of the reminiscences of the Latter-day Saints which deals with heroic men and women, who . . . fought and suffered to establish Zion in the Rocky Mountains. Tales of endurance, self-sacrifice and bravery pertaining to these times, will be rehearsed in the ears of our children and grand-children, and all future generations will yet pay homage to the memory of those noble sons and daughters of Zion, who accomplished what they did for the sake of religion.⁵⁹

Jenson predicted correctly: subsequent generations have indeed paid homage to the handcart pioneers. In the early 1900s an organization called Daughters of Utah Handcart Pioneers commissioned a statue that depicts a family pulling a handcart. Sculpted by Torleif Knaphus, it has been prominently displayed for years near the Mormon Tabernacle on Temple Square in Salt Lake City and has become well known and widely replicated (see cover).⁶⁰ Other handcart memorials include the Mormon Handcart Park in Coralville, Iowa, and a visitors center and park at Martin's Cove in mid-Wyoming, near where many in the ill-fated Martin Company sought shelter from a blizzard. The Martin's Cove center provides replicated wooden handcarts for visitors to pull along an actual stretch of the handcart pioneers' route. For many Mormon youth in the current generation, participating in a group handcart trek and campout for a few summer days has become part of their church experience, one that connects them physically and spiritually to what early converts to Mormonism endured to build up a Zion in the American West.⁶¹

59. Jenson, "Emigration to Utah in 1860," 548.

60. William G. Hartley, "Torleif Knaphus, Sculptor Saint," *The Ensign* (July 1980), 10–15. When the Daughters of Utah Handcart Pioneers commissioned Knaphus to memorialize the heroic handcart trek, he created a 3-foot-high bronze monument featuring a rickety cart with much worn wheels, a ragged quilt hanging from one side, a kettle underneath, a small girl sitting in the cart, a bearded man pulling the cart, and a woman walking beside him; a boy is pushing from behind. Unveiled in 1926, it was displayed in Salt Lake City's Temple Square Information Bureau. Then, for the Mormon Pioneer Sesquicentennial in 1947, LDS church leaders commissioned Knaphus to create a heroic-size copy. Cast in bronze in New York, it is displayed prominently near the Tabernacle in Temple Square in Salt Lake City.

61. John L. Hart, "Life-Changing Youth Handcart Treks," *Church News*, 7/29/2006, 6–7. (*Church News* is published weekly as a section of the *Deseret Morning News* in Salt Lake City.)