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Sculptor Torlief S. Knaphus's *The Handcart Pioneer*, at Western Historic Trails Center in Council Bluffs, depicts Mormons' arduous migration on foot from Iowa to Salt Lake City. Western Historic Trails Center explores the story of westward migration trails, including the Mormon Trail.

# The Mormon Handcart Migration

by William G. Hartley



One hundred and fifty years ago, the Mormon handcart migration began. Between 1856 and 1860, Mormons organized ten handcart brigades, involving 3,000 Latter-day Saints (LDS) travelers, mostly from Europe. Although three of the brigades left the last two years from Florence, Nebraska Territory, just west of the Missouri River, seven of the ten crossed Iowa.

Although handcarts have become the primary visual symbol of the entire Mormon migration westward to Utah, less than 5 percent traveled in handcart brigades. The far larger westward migration began in 1846, when members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) were compelled to leave their main settlements in and around Nauvoo, Illinois, and find homes in the West. Crossing the Mississippi and southern Iowa beginning in 1847, they headed to Utah. From then until the transcontinental railroad opened in 1869, Mormons from the United States and Europe flowed to outfitting places yearly to join LDS wagon trains heading west. But outfitting was costly—the 1856 costs translate to \$10,000–\$12,000 in today's dollars. Such expense, especially after paying for travel from Europe to Iowa, meant that hundreds each year could not afford the trek west. To help those lacking money, the LDS Church created a revolving loan fund, the Perpetual Emigrating Fund, and agents arranged group rates on sailing ships and riverboats for the emigrants. By 1855 the fund was drained, so some other form of assistance was needed. In 1856 church leaders devised the system of handcart companies, whereby emigrants who could not afford the expense of covered wagons and four oxen could pull small, inexpensive handcarts the 1,300-mile distance.

Because most migrants (Mormon and non-Mormon) who traveled west in oxen-pulled wagon trains actually walked instead of rode, the vehicles they chose related more to hauling baggage than to moving people. Although nine LDS-sponsored wagon trains outfitted at Iowa City in 1856, 1857, and 1858 and headed to Utah, the advantages of handcarts were obvious in this era of wagons. Low cost was one advantage. The trip from England to Utah (including passage by ship, riverboats, and train to Iowa) cost less than 10 percent of what it cost for a wagon, oxen, equipage, and supplies. Faster daily travel was another advantage—handcart companies could move more rapidly than oxen, leave earlier in the day, and travel longer. The handcart pullers did not need to find campsites offering grass and water for oxen. They were spared the intense labor involved with oxen—

hitching, unhitching, double yoking to go uphill, getting them across rivers, taking them to pasture at midday and evening, watering them, guarding them at night, and rounding them up each morning. They did not have to worry about oxen injuries or illness, or about finding campsites with ample grass and water for the oxen. Disadvantages of the handcarts were that people had to power the carts themselves; the small carts could carry only bare essentials; and the travelers had no protection during the day from sun, wind, and rain like that provided by covered wagons (they did have big group tents to sleep in at night).

The outfitting campground site for the 1856 and 1857 handcart companies was on Clear Creek in present-day Coralville, on Iowa City's northwestern shoulder. Mormons from the East Coast who joined the handcart companies traveled by train to Iowa City, the western terminus of the railroad. They camped on the outfitting grounds and waited for the carts to be ready, filling time by sewing together tents and covers for the carts. Designs for fabricating the carts came from church headquarters in Utah. The first companies employed four different handcart designs, experimenting to see what worked best. Agents purchased prefabricated carts in St. Louis and Chicago, which were shipped to Iowa City. They hired Iowa City craftsmen to build others. Workers at the outfitting camp as well as wheelwrights in Iowa City and St. Louis constructed the two-wheeled handcarts, usually of hickory or oak. In the first year, 100 carts were built at St. Louis, 100 in Iowa City, and about 70 at the campground. In response to Brigham Young's direct orders, green wood was used in some hubs, which contributed to later breakdowns.

The covered family carts each had a small wagon box three or four feet long with the side and end boards about eight inches high, while the larger, open carts had no covers or sideboards. Carts were designed with an extended rectangular handle in front by which two people could pull the cart. One journal entry described the carts this way: "The carts which are delivered to us are well constructed and light. They have very strong wooden wheels, four feet high. The rim is made of two . . . fellies around which is fastened an iron tire. They have wooden axles upon which are attached two shafts eight feet long and five matching cross pieces. The carts are four feet wide and weigh 60 pounds."

According to a common myth, the handcart loads weighed 600 pounds. The truth is that each cart was built to carry about 100 pounds of food, clothing, and equipment, and the actual load was usually 100 to 150



pounds. Each traveler was limited to 17 pounds of baggage. Four or five persons were assigned to each cart, with 20 assigned to each large, round tent that the LDS agents provided. One wagon and team accompanied each 20 carts, hauling the heavy tents, food, and equipment, and carrying incapacitated travelers when necessary. Mule-team wagons kept up with the handcarts; wagons pulled by oxen had to travel longer days to keep up.

**O**n August 2, 1856, the *New York Evening Post* published a non-Mormon's description of the Iowa City camp when it was near its fullest, busiest time. "The camp, as viewed from the brow of a neighboring hill . . . presents a fine spectacle. Over one hundred tents, and perhaps as many covered wagons, with their spires and arches of dazzling white—contrast well with the green sward of prairie and the sparkling ripples of the river running close beside. . . . In all about three thousand have rendezvoused in this spot, of whom some eighteen hundred still remain. . . . The tents are arranged in rows, with wide streets between them—the wagons generally in rings, with the entrance at one side, and sleeping tents on the outside. . . . There are in all four hundred and forty-five oxen, twenty mules, and a few horses. . . . There is seen, as you enter camp, a smithery, a workshop and a store, all full of business and industry. . . . I have made acquaintance of their leaders, and have found them courteous, cultivated, and in business transactions, uncommonly 'sharp.' "

The first two handcart companies, captained by Edmund Ellsworth and Daniel McArthur (both returning from missionary service in Great Britain), left the Iowa City outfitting grounds on June 9 and 11, 1856, and traveled close together all the way to Utah. Together, they contained 497 people, 100 handcarts, 5 wagons, 24 oxen, 4 mules, and 25 tents. Their wagons hauled provisions to last them until they reached Florence, Nebraska Territory, 275 miles to the west, where they were reprovisioned. Both companies arrived in Florence on July 8, the Ellsworth Company 27 days after starting, the McArthur Company, 25 days.

On some days the handcart travelers in Iowa walked and pulled 20 miles or more. On July 1, Mormon diarist Archer Walters noted that the Ellsworth Company had "traveled about 15 miles. Walked very fast,—nearly 4 miles an hour." Twenty-four-year-old Twiss Bermingham, a Dublin University graduate traveling with his wife and three

children, wrote on July 3 that the McArthur Company started at 5 a.m. and traveled "a long and tedious journey of 25 miles" before camping at 7:15 p.m.

Iowa's summer humidity and heat took a toll. Bermingham recorded that "some of the Brethren fainted on the road and were carried into camp in the ox-team. I nearly fainted myself from exhaustion." They reached Florence City "generally very fatigued," in dust-stained clothes and with sunburned faces.

Returning missionary Edward Bunker led the third company, which contained mostly Welsh Saints—320 persons, 64 handcarts, and 5 wagons pulled by mule teams. They left Iowa City on June 28 and reached Florence July 19—a record-setting 22-day journey despite "heavy rain and wind storms which blew down our tents and washed away our handcarts." "People made fun of us as we walked, pulling our carts," Priscilla Evans noted, but she admitted that although "we were very tired at night, still we thought it was a glorious way to go to Zion."

John D. T. McAllister, one of the officials who disbursed equipment and supplies at the outfitting camp, wrote a "Handcart Song" that was sung by many handcart pioneers—and by Latter-day Saints ever since.

Ye Saints who dwell on Europe's shore  
Prepare yourselves with many more  
To leave behind your native land  
For sure God's judgments are at hand.  
Prepare to cross the stormy main  
Before you do the Valley gain,  
And with the faithful make a start  
To cross the plains with your handcart.

*Chorus:*

Some must push and some must pull  
As we go marching up the hill,  
And merrily on the way we go  
Until we reach the Valley, oh!

**O**f the five handcart companies that crossed Iowa in 1856 (six if counting Jesse Haven's division of the Martin Company), the Ellsworth, McArthur, and Bunker companies made the long, strenuous trek to Utah successfully. But the last two, the ill-fated James G. Willie and Edward Martin companies, left late because ships bearing the emigrants sailed late from England, and their large



numbers required extra time to prepare additional handcarts and supplies. After problems and slow-downs in Nebraska, they were trapped by severe blizzards in Wyoming, and some 200 out of 1,076 lost their lives.

The last to use Iowa City for outfitting were the Israel Evans and Christian Christiansen companies in 1857. J. F. F. Dorius in the Christiansen Company described the camp, where tents pitched in a circle-like fashion accommodated 18 people each. "Each family obtained a handcart from the railroad station," he said. Three days later they broke camp. "I felt glad in enjoying this free life outdoors," he wrote that day. But so many became sick by mid-June that the four mule-pulled wagons were filled to capacity. An elderly woman died in the outfitting camp on June 21 and was buried "in the Woods." (Such non-cemetery burials by Mormon wagon and handcart companies became the source of many Iowans' local traditions about Mormon graves being on lands they now own.)

The 111-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 6 from Iowa City to Des Moines closely parallels the old river-to-river road along which the 1856 and 1857 handcart brigades traveled. They passed where South Amana now is and rolled along one mile south of Marengo. (A young traveler in the first handcart company, Job Welling, Jr., not quite two years old, died on June 17, 1856, near present-day Grinnell and

was buried the next day.) The handcart route continued westward through Newton. Turning southward, the handcart brigades passed through Mitchellville and into Des Moines, where they crossed the Des Moines River. At Adel, the travelers forded the North Raccoon River and moved on to present-day Wiscotta and then west to the now vanished town of Dalmanutha (41 miles west of Des Moines). They walked for many miles beside Turkey Creek, closely following present-day State Route 83. At Lewis, the handcart route joined the 1846 Mormon Trail route and followed it into Council Bluffs. They moved north and crossed the Missouri River at Florence, Nebraska Territory. This ended their journey through Iowa. ♦

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

This article appeared in a slightly different form as part of a larger article, "Mormons and Early Iowa History (1838 to 1858): Eight Distinct Connections," in *Annals of Iowa*, 59:3 (Summer 2000). Research sources appear in the footnotes of the longer article.