

The Handcart Expeditions

During the summer of 1856 there arrived at Iowa City, then the western terminus of the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad, several thousand Mormon converts from England, Scotland, and other European countries. Many of these people were wards of the Perpetual Emigration Fund Company which had been organized to assist converts who could not pay for their outfits and transportation, the immigrants signing contracts to work for the church until the full amount was refunded.

At this time the wave of immigration bound for Utah had become so great that the officers of the church decided it was impossible to provide wagons and oxen to transport all the needy immigrants from Iowa City to Salt Lake City, although the total cost of bringing one of these poor converts from Europe to Utah was only about sixty dollars. To meet this situation, Brigham Young and his advisers had, as early as the fall of 1855, evolved the plan of sending these hundreds of proselytes across the continent on foot. "The Lord, through his prophet, says of the poor, 'Let them come on foot, with hand-carts or wheelbarrows; let them gird up their loins, and walk through, and nothing shall hinder them.'"

To show how feasible the plan was, the head of the church wrote to F. D. Richards in charge of the converts in Liverpool: "Fifteen miles a day will bring them through in 70 days, and, after they get accus-

tomed to it, they will travel 20, 25, or even 30 with all ease, and no danger of giving out, but will continue to get stronger and stronger; the little ones and sick, if there are any, can be carried on the carts, but there will be none sick in a little time after they get started."

Lured by this rosy picture of a trip of which their limited experience gave them no real comprehension, some thirteen hundred converts arrived at Iowa City during the summer of 1856 pledged to undertake the journey on foot. Here the tired and bewildered immigrants found that their outfits were not ready: even the handcarts were yet to be made. While waiting for their equipment, the newcomers were camped on the prairie some two miles from Iowa City, often without tents or any shelter from the elements.

Finally, however, after two or three weeks delay one detachment after another got under way for the first stage of the overland journey — the trip from Iowa City to the Missouri River — following at first the old road to Fort Des Moines.

The first company left Iowa City on June 9, 1856, with two hundred and twenty-six people; the second, with about the same number, started two days later; and a third and smaller company, composed largely of Welsh converts, began their march on June 23rd. Since these three companies were small and started fairly early in the summer, they arrived safely at Salt Lake City before the cold weather began. The

first detachment, which reached its destination on the twenty-sixth of September, was met by a delegation of church officers, a large number of citizens, an escort of cavalry, and the bands of the Nauvoo legion. The "divine plan" of transporting converts was considered a great success.

The two later companies were not so fortunate. The fourth detachment, commanded by James G. Willie, was detained at Iowa City for three weeks while the carts were being made for them and did not leave until the middle of July, while the fifth and last company for this year, with Edward Martin as its leader, began its long march on July 28th.

Their personal equipment was necessarily limited: seventeen pounds of baggage was allowed each person and this must include some food and the bedding and clothing for the long march. To carry this baggage there was provided for every five persons a cart — two wooden wheels, with thin iron tires, connected by a wooden axle upon which rested the body or box in which the baggage was to be carried. Attached to one end were projecting shafts about five feet long with a cross piece at the end by means of which the rickety vehicle was pulled along.

In addition to the carts a wagon drawn by three yoke of oxen was provided for each hundred persons and on this were the extra provisions and the five tents allotted to this group. A few of the very old or crippled members of the company were carried in these wagons but, for the most part, the company was on foot — men, women, and children. More-

over, the handcarts, weighing when loaded about one hundred pounds, had to be pulled over the rough roads or unbroken prairie.

To most people of to-day — even to the young and strong, unencumbered by supplies — the prospect of walking from Iowa City to Council Bluffs in July or August would be viewed with dismay, but these people were of all ages and conditions of physical strength, and there were more women than men. Many carts were pulled by women, although the men in the party were required to assist others if they were not needed by their own families.

A description of the fourth division during the march through Iowa, written by one of those who participated in the exodus, gives a vivid picture of the company as it trailed across Iowa :

As we travelled along, we presented a singular, and some times an affecting appearance. The young and strong went along gaily with their carts, but the old people and little children were to be seen straggling a long distance in the rear. Sometimes, when the little folks had walked as far as they could, their fathers would take them on their carts, and thus increase the load that was already becoming too heavy as the day advanced. . . . The most affecting scene, however, was to see a mother carrying her child at the breast, mile after mile, until nearly exhausted. The heat was intense, and the dust suffocating, which rendered our daily journeys toilsome in the extreme.

The daily rations consisted of ten ounces of flour — then selling for three cents a pound — for each adult and half as much for each child. As luxuries

they were occasionally served a little rice, sugar, coffee, and bacon. "Any hearty man", said the analyst, "could eat his daily allowance for breakfast. In fact, some of our men did this, and then worked all day without dinner, and went to bed supperless or begged food at the farmhouses as we travelled along."

The people of Iowa gave food to the hungry wayfarers and urged them not to attempt the long trip overland, especially so late in the summer. The converts, however, were new to the difficulties of prairie travel; they were inspired by the hope of seeing the new Zion, and thoroughly under the influence of their leaders who constantly warned them against the Gentiles. Only a very few of the company withdrew.

Almost four weeks elapsed before the weary immigrants reached the Missouri River — the starting point of the great adventure. Here a council was held to discuss the advisability of attempting the journey so late in the year, but all the leaders except one — Levi Savage — urged that the train continue and the converts obediently voted to proceed. Savage, who had made the trip to and from Salt Lake, was rebuked for want of faith but promised to accompany the expedition and share the hardships.

A week of hurried preparations, and the detachment left Florence, Nebraska, on August 18, 1856, westward bound. If the trip through Iowa had been full of hardships that now before the immigrants

was appalling. In Iowa food was plentiful and charity frequently supplemented the regular rations. Any who were unable to continue the march might find a haven in some settlement where sympathy counteracted religious prejudice. But on the plains there was no opportunity to secure clothing or bedding as the nights grew chill, no settlers' shanties where food might be secured if their own supply gave out. There was food, it is true, in the herds of buffalo, but these European working men were totally unfitted to secure it. Indeed, with their equipment, it is doubtful whether experienced plainsmen could have lived off the country.

The carts were, consequently, more heavily laden than before, but even so, much in the way of bedding and warm clothing, the need of which was not evident in August, had to be discarded for lack of room. A ninety-eight pound sack of flour was added to each cart, nearly doubling the original burden. The flour ration, however, was increased to a pound a day, fresh meat was issued occasionally, and each hundred had three or four milch cows.

Refreshed by the rest at Florence, trusting implicitly in their leaders, and unaware of the perils in front of them the immigrants started out gaily, gathering each evening around the camp fires for worship, exhortation, and singing. One of the favorite songs was specially written for the handcart travellers and was sung to the tune *A Little More Cider*. The words were as follows:

Oh, our faith goes with the hand-carts,
 And they have our hearts' best love;
 'Tis a novel mode of travelling,
Devised by the Gods above.

CHORUS:

Hurrah for the Camp of Israel!
 Hurrah for the hand-cart scheme!
 Hurrah! hurrah! 'tis better far
 Than the wagon and ox-team.

And Brigham's their executive,
 He told us the design;
 And the Saints are proudly marching on,
 Along the hand-cart line.

Who cares to go with the wagons?
 Not we who are free and strong;
 Our faith and arms, with right good will,
 Shall pull our carts along.

It was not long, however, before trouble developed. The carts were hastily and poorly made and on the dry prairie the axles were soon badly worn from the constant grinding of the dry sand. No axle grease had been provided and some of the company were compelled to use their cherished allowance of bacon to grease the wheels. Others used their soap, of which they had very little, and attempts were made to protect the axles by wrapping them in leather or tin. As the weight of the flour

dwindled, however, the carts ran easier and with grim determination the company pressed forward.

To those who have made the trip over this route by rail, watching the corn and wheat fields of Nebraska slip smoothly past the windows of the Pullman car or idly counting the prairie dogs which bob up and stand at attention as the train flashes through the barren hills of Wyoming, the journey is one of a few hours and no hardship. Even the tourist in the dust-covered automobile can have no real appreciation of the task of these four hundred and twenty men, women, and children as they walked wearily along day after day pulling the creaking, complaining carts or carrying little children in their arms.

To add to their difficulties their cattle were stampeded by the buffalo near Wood River and thirty of the oxen were lost. The one yoke remaining for each wagon was unable to pull the loads of some 3000 pounds over the rough roads and the beef cattle, cows, and young stock were put under the yoke. Even then another sack of flour had to be added to each cart to lighten the weight of the wagons.

It was in this time of perplexity that a group of Mormon apostles and leaders — including F. D. Richards, who had acted as Young's agent in England, and Joseph A. Young, a son of the prophet — passed the weary converts, camping with them one night. At their request for fresh meat the fattest calf was killed, though the immigrants themselves

were short of food. In their carriages drawn by four horses or mules the leaders drove rapidly ahead of the crawling caravan, pausing only long enough to point out the best ford for the crossing of the North Platte. "They stood and watched us wade the river—here almost a mile in width, and in places from two to three feet deep," wrote one of the company. "Our women and girls waded, pulling their carts after them."

The officials promised to leave supplies for the detachment at Fort Laramie but when the tattered and footsore immigrants reached there in September none had arrived. The supply of flour on hand, it was estimated, would not last until they reached their destination and unless relief reached them from Salt Lake there was no possibility of obtaining any more. It was decided to reduce the ration from a pound per day to twelve ounces for working men, nine ounces for women and old men, and from four to eight ounces for children, and to make every effort to travel faster.

As the caravan trailed up the Sweetwater River toward South Pass the nights became colder and the mountains were covered with snow. Forging the river chilled the exhausted travellers and their supply of clothing and bedding was inadequate to protect them from the cold. Exhaustion, cold, and lack of food soon showed results. The old and weak began to die: at first only an occasional grave was needed, but soon one or two persons were buried at

each camping place. Dysentery was added to their enemies and the young and strong also began to die. There were no medicines and no opportunity for caring for the sick. Men frequently pulled the handcart, on which were the supplies for their families and perhaps the children themselves, until the day preceding their death. Those wholly unable to walk were put in the wagons and when there was no room there, were hauled on the handcarts, jolting slowly over the rocks and sand of the trail or tipping this way and that as they were pulled across the creeks and ravines.

It was in this desperate situation that the caravan was met by Joseph A. Young, who had watched the company ford the North Platte. Apprehensive of the fate of the immigrants he had no sooner reached Salt Lake City than he reported their situation to his father and was immediately ordered to meet the two detachments with supplies. Pushing on ahead of the wagons with one companion he met the fourth company in the midst of its first heavy snow storm. After announcing the coming supply train he went on eastward to meet the fifth group, whose situation was even more precarious.

With renewed hope the converts pushed desperately ahead, doubling teams when the worn out cattle were unable to pull even the diminished loads. Next morning they woke to find the snow a foot deep, their hungry cattle had strayed away, some of the exhausted animals had perished, and worse than all,

five of the company had died during the night. There was no flour and only a little hard bread which had been secured at Fort Laramie. To move through the snow in their starving and exhausted condition was impossible and it was determined to send two men — Captain Willie and a companion — ahead to hurry the supply train, and to await their coming in camp. Two of the worn-out oxen were killed for food and this meat, a few pounds of sugar and dried apples, a part of a sack of rice, and some twenty or twenty-five pounds of biscuits was all the food for the company until help arrived.

For three days they remained there — hungry, cold, many of them ill, the cattle dying of starvation. On the evening of the third day came the wagons which had halted on account of the snow storm, the teamsters not realizing that the handcart immigrants were actually starving. Wild scenes of rejoicing met the relief party and new hope of reaching Zion inspired the immigrants.

A part of the supply train continued eastward to meet Martin's party and the others took charge of the party in camp and began the slow return to Salt Lake. Those too weak to walk were permitted to ride in the wagons but even here they suffered intolerably from the cold. Many froze their feet and had to be carried from place to place. Food and renewed hope failed to save some of the sufferers. At the camp on Willow Creek fifteen persons were buried, their bodies stiffly frozen.

Perhaps in the history of the United States there are few pictures more pathetic than this company of Mormon converts as they straggled along through the snow, afraid to sit down to rest lest they perish with the cold, the oxen as dejected as the people. One elderly man — a farm laborer from Gloucestershire — unable to pull his cart, trudged along for a while with his little son, carrying in his stiff hands his cherished gun. At last he could go no farther and lay down in the snow, wrapped in an old quilt given him by a kindly companion. An ox team returning for the stragglers rescued him late at night, but he died before morning. Scenes like these were not uncommon. Sometimes three or four of the human teams combined to pull the carts but this was slow work and necessitated much additional walking.

After crossing South Pass, however, the suffering gradually diminished: the weather became warmer and they were met by wagons loaded with food sent out by the Mormon people. On the ninth of November, some four months after their start from Iowa City, the fourth detachment reached Salt Lake City, the Mecca of their pilgrimage of three thousand miles by steamer, one thousand miles by rail, and fifteen hundred miles on foot.

Sixty-seven of this company, however, had fallen by the way. The fifth detachment lost even more heavily: about one-fourth of the party perished during the journey. The tragedy of these two companies led to the exchange of recriminations and

charges between the Mormon leaders, and though at least three other companies were sent across the plains in 1859 and 1860, none were organized after the latter date. The ox team and the railroad took the place of the "divine plan".

RUTH A. GALLAHER