

SONS OF JOHN ELLISON MAXFIELD AND SARAH ELIZABETH BAKER HELPING THE HANDCART COMPANIES

Sons of John Ellison Maxfield and Sarah Elizabeth Baker were among those who went to the rescue of the last two handcart companies to arrive in the Salt Lake Valley in 1856 (Martin and Willies).

Word reached the Valley telling of the plight of the companies during October Conference. Everyone immediately went to work preparing to help them. Aunt Sarah said she and her mother stayed up all night baking thin crackers, as many others also did. The crackers were then taken by men on horseback so they could reach the starving people sooner. They found them eating bark from the willow trees. No doubt Elijah Hiatt Maxfield was one of those who went on horseback. The other men with their teams and wagons left as soon as they could get food and clothing ready to take with them.

In the article published in the Collier's Magazine for July 6, 1956 by Wallace Stegner, called "ORDEAL BY HANDCART: " he has this to say about the Mormon trek:

"They were strange looking pioneers, sallow men and women of the cities, old people, frail children, but they struggled indomitably on foot across 1,400 miles of savage prairie and mountains through blazing heat and howling blizzards, defeating death itself in one of the most stirring episodes in the expansion of the West."

"This was the true climax of the historical movement known as the Mormon Migration. One of the great human rivers that poured into the West and peopled it. Oregon, California, and Great Salt Lake City were the three goals of the earliest Western Pioneers. The Mormon sanctuary at the edge of the Great Basin attracted fewer immigrants than the other two but those upon whom it exerted its pull came like filings to a magnet drawn by intense religious zeal."

"Most of them were from abroad, chiefly from Scandinavia and the British Isles, The Church authorities, pondering ways to bring settlers to Zion when neither the converts nor the Church's Perpetual Emigration Fund could raise more than a few dollars a head had devised the handcart plan."

"In the summer of 1856 between two and three thousand people organized in five great caravans would try this method. "The first two caravans which traveled only a day or two apart, were a large company and the scattered deaths, were not more frequent than in the usual wagon train. Their story is only the story of a march. They clogged on under the

searing August sun, took shelter as they could from wild weather of the plains, waded the rivers, patched up their warped and rickety carts, saw Indians, saw buffalo, had a little fresh meat but rarely enough; and they watched the landmarks of the long Mormon Trail fall steadily behind them; the forks of the Platte, Ash Hollow, Chimney Rock, Scott's Bluff, Fort Laramie, Valley of the Green River, Fort Bridger, Echo Canyon, etc. etc."

"On 26 September 1856, on a fine fall day the first company, poorly dressed, hungry and faint reached the mouth of Emigration Canyon from which the first pioneers had looked upon the Salt Lake Valley nine years before. The second company arrived a few days later."

"Two weeks after the first two companies left Iowa City, a group composed mainly of Welshmen took out after them. This third party had such a phenomenally luck passage discounting the usual discomforts of the trail and the occasional and expected deaths that they seemed to demonstrate beyond all doubt the excellence of the handcart plan. In spite of the presence of many old people (one woman seventy-three years old walked every step of the way), this company averaged twenty miles a day, as against the ordinary ox - train average of a little better than ten. They came into the Salt Lake Valley with loud hosanas only a week behind the first parties."

"But, later that summer two more companies would try it and theirs was a different story" Some of them didn't sail from Liverpool England until the end of May. Upon arriving in America during the first days of July, they at once traveled by train to Iowa City where they found no handcarts prepared and no seasoned lumber to build them from. More than 1,000 strong, they waited a long, worrisome time until 260 carts could be made from green wood. On July 15, 500 of them finally got away. The other 576 did not get on the road until July 26."

"As far as the Missouri they fared well. The first party, under Captain Willi, arrived on August 11; the second under Captain Martin on the 22 while the Willie Company was still resting in Florence and mending its carts."

"Reunited in a great mass meeting, the two companies debated whether or not to take the chance of starting across so late in the season. They made the mistake that many a party of western travelers more seasoned than they had made; they gambled on the weather."

"On each cart, as insurance, they laid an extra hundred pounds of flour and the human draft animals pulled this overload bravely enough, and the carts bore it until they crossed that invisible line that divides the humid Midwest from the arid West. Then their green carts began to warp and disintegrate and collapse; their shrieking wooden axles wore down under the grinding of the sand. Patching every night, greasing the axles with soap or

bacon rind or whatever would slip, they hurried on, the two companies about a week apart. Behind both came two Mormon parties traveling by ox-drawn wagon and hurrying even more belatedly to beat the onset of winter.”

“Knowing they were dangerously late, the pilgrims on foot hated the delays of their collapsing carts. And then came something more serious: One night a stampeding herd of buffalo came right through their camp, and when they crawled out from under the carts and rounded up all the cattle they could find, they were 30 head short. Those had been not only draft animals for their commissary wagons but beef insurance, and the flour they had to unload from the wagons and pull on the handcarts strained their crazy carts as much as their endurance.”

"Fort Laramie saw the Willie Company on September 1. Ahead lay 500 more miles, the hardest 500, mountainous all the way and at high altitudes where the cold came early. They had had their deaths, but they were still in fair condition. Counting heads and estimating daily marches, Willie cut their flour allowance from a pound a day per head to three quarters of a pound. The harder the road and the longer the marches, the smaller their rations. and the frailer their strength. Some of them threw away belongings, lightening the carts for the last lap. They could not hope to reach Salt Lake Valley on the food they had but they hoped for supplies at South Pass or Fort Bridger, and they sent word on ahead by some fast traveling returning missionaries.”

"Nights were cold and got colder as they labored up the Sweetwater River and climbed the long hard grade toward the Continental Divide. There were more' deaths. The older and weaker 'members drooped and failed under the grind, stumbled into camp with faces drawn and set with exhaustion, and sometimes they lay down for a moment's rest and died without ever knowing how completely worn out they were. 'Life went out,' a survivor wrote afterward, 'as smoothly as a lamp ceases to burn when the oil is gone.' At first the deaths occurred slowly and irregularly, but in a few days at more frequent intervals, until we soon thought it unusual to leave a campground without burying one or more persons... " many a father pulled' his cart with his little children on it until the day preceding his death.”

"There was a gray day in October when the people plodding along in a long ragged column felt something brush their faces and looked up. Snow. They did not stop their patient dull plodding. Even when two mounted strangers who said they were messengers from a relief party en route from Salt Lake appeared out of the snow-filled afternoon, the pilgrims had little left to rally with. Foot after tired foot, they forced themselves on a few more miles and camped in some willows. When they awoke, the snow was a foot deep,

their few starving draft animals were scattered in the storm, and there were five new corpses to be buried.”

“Without strength to hunt their stock or walk farther, they stalled there in the snow, and because the ground was hard-frozen and their strength was gone, they could not now even dig graves for their dead but simply buried them together in a snowdrift.”

"Several days behind them 5' the Martin party had reached Red Buttes and the last crossing of the Platte. They had not lost as many oxen as the Willie party and had thus fared a little better; but their situation was even more desperate because they had farther to go. The hundred buffalo robes they had bought in Fort Laramie were a mixed blessing: A family might keep warmer because of them but die of hauling the extra weight. Some families had already thrown theirs away. Before them the Platte River ran slush, and ice, and there was no ferry.”

"Grimly fathers picked up their children and waded out into the river; women hiked their skirts and waded after them. Blue, shivering, starving, they huddled into camp on the other side, and that was where the first snow caught them.”

"For three days they sat there; they could do nothing else. Deaths got so frequent they had to appoint a burial squad of the strongest men. Margaret Dalglish, a stout Scotch girl worn down to skin and bones but still keeping up, looked across at another young girl by the fire one evening and saw her die in the act of raising a cracker to her mouth. A day or two later she watched as 18 of their company were buried in one snow grave.”

"When the storm blew out, they wallowed on a few miles toward the Sweetwater River, but before they reached it another three-day storm halted them.”

“A woman named Elizabeth Kingsford, alarmed when her husband was not even able to swallow his morsel of supper, wrapped him in their blankets and lay down beside him with all her clothes on. About midnight, terribly cold, she rolled closer and put her hand on him and knew that he was dead. She cried out, but her cries brought no one. The rest of the night she lay grim and dry-eyed beside her husband’s corpse, and when the camp could move again, she struggled on with her three children.”

“A night or two later they were so worn out that nobody in the group had strength to pitch their tent. The mother sat down on a rock with one child in her lap and one huddled against each side, and so sat out the night without hope, almost without thought, without anything left except the indomitable spark that would not quite flicker out.”

"In Salt Lake City the missionaries bearing news of the Willie and Martin companies arrived during the October Conference of the Church when all the settlers from all the

settlements in Zion were gathered for exhortation and renewal. Brigham Young adjourned the conference and called for wagons, supplies, and volunteers. This was the short of operation at which the Mormon people had always been as good as anyone in the world. They had met enough crises together to know how, and they were bound by a sense of brotherhood to the converts struggling toward them across the mountains. Twenty-seven young men took off with wagonloads of food, warm clothing, and bedding.”

“The rescuers themselves had nothing easy to look forward to; A forced drive across three or four hundred miles of wintry mountains. They crowded their teams recklessly day after day, looking ahead for the vanguard of the walkers. But the mountain valleys reached on, snowy and empty. The ramparts of Echo Canyon bounced back the thud and rattle of their broad tires. They rose out of the canyon and saw the shining Uinta’s to the southward and the great high Wyoming plain ahead, and still no one appeared.”

“By Fort Bridger they were seriously alarmed and would have pushed on even faster, but a new storm came blindingly out of the north and stopped them. That was the night of October 20th. That same night Captain Willie and one companion, frostbitten and exhausted and riding two worn-out animals, appeared out of the blizzard to tell them that if they didn't come at once there was no use to come at all.”

"They broke camp at once and started again. Even these, trail wise and hardy and young and well fed, had all they could do; but they did not stop again until they reached the camp where the 'Willie Company lay. The night before rescue reached them, nine more had died. The rest had not eaten for 48 hours.”

"The rescuers built up great fires, distributed clothes and bedding, and handed out food. But even though the company had lost a sixth of its original number, there were still more than 400 people, far more than the rescue party could feed, or clothe.”

And beyond them lay the Martin Company as bad off or worse. The rescuers divided, one-half staying to help the Willie Company on toward Fort Bridger, the others pushing on to find the Martin party. They found it camped and waiting for the end between Red Buttes and the Sweetwater. In their hurry and weakness many had thrown away too much. Some of them now were without bedding, and some of the children were barefoot in the snow. They had no food except a little stringy beef from draft animals that had worn themselves out in the harness, and even that food had given them dysentery. Since the party crossed the Platte nine days before, 56 had died.”

"Even then, with both handcart companies located and the stalled wagon trains still farther back reached with supplies and encouragement, rescue was far from sure. Exhaustion and death were not rendered impossible because a few men had arrived with a few

pounds of food and a great load of hope. The deaths went on, and it took days of toil and agony to work the stricken camps along the road to the Green River. There they met more supply wagons rushed through by Brigham Young and where there was shelter and firewood. As quickly as they could, the rescue wagons loaded up the weakest and started them for Salt Lake City. The stronger ones came along under their own power, but with a broad, broken trail to follow and with constant help when they needed it. Much of the Martin company's gear was left with that of the two wagon trains at Devil's Gate, with a wintering party to look after it. The wagon trains never did reach Salt Lake that season but wintered at Fort Bridger."

"It is hard to imagine the emotions of rescue, the dazed joy of being snatched from the very toppling brink, and hard to feel how hope, that has been crushed little by little, day by day, until it is apparently dead, can come back with a rush, like life itself returning. It is quite as hard to visualize the hardship that even rescue entailed, that jolting, racking, freezing, grief -numbed, drained, and exhausted 300 miles on through the winter mountains to sanctuary. In Echo Canyon, between the battlements of red sandrock, a child was born in one of the wagons. How his mother survived long enough to bring him to life will never be fully understood by anyone who reads his story. He was wrapped in the "garments," the holy underwear of one of the young rescuers, and they named him, with a haunting appropriateness, Echo. Against all probability, both he and his mother lived."

"The first of the rescued reached Salt Lake on November 9th, a day of tears and thanksgiving. For many days afterward the others were straggling in, some riding the wagons, some still grimly hauling their battered carts, still defiantly on their own legs. Margaret Dalglish, that gaunt image of Scotch fortitude, dragged her pitiful handful of possessions to the very rim of the valley, but when she looked down and saw the end of it, safety, the city of the Saints, she did something extraordinary. She tugged the cart to the edge of the road and gave it a push and watched it roll and crash and tumble and burst apart, scattering down the ravine the last things she owned on earth. Then she went on into Salt Lake to start the new life with nothing but her gaunt bones, her empty hands, her stout heart."

That is the story of one of the worst disasters in all the history of Western settlement. Other tragedies have taken the imaginations of historians more, for some reason, perhaps because the Mormons have been considered a 'peculiar' people and the civilization they established in the valleys of the mountains an eccentric one. The three successful handcart caravans and the two tragic ones are an overlooked episode in our histories of the West. The grisly story of the Donner party in the Sierra Nevada in 1846, and the almost-as-grisly experience of John Charles Fremont's party in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado two years later are known to hundreds where the story of the handcart

companies is known to one. But Fremont lost 11 men, the Donner party about 40. The Willie and Martin handcart companies, never able to count their casualties with accuracy, lost well over 200 people. If the nerve and endurance and faith necessary to break the Western wilderness had a single climatic illustration, it was here.

Perhaps their suffering seems less dramatic because the handcart pioneers bore it meekly, praising God, instead of fighting for life with the ferocity of animals and eating their dead to keep their own life beating, as both the Fremont and Donner parties did. And assuredly the handcart pilgrims were less hardy, less skilled, less equipped to be pioneers. But if courage and endurance make a story, if human kindness and helpfulness and brotherly love in the midst of raw horror are worth recording, this half -forgotten episode of the Mormon migration is one of the great tales of the West and of America.

