

“ONE LONG FUNERAL MARCH”: A REVISIONIST’S VIEW OF THE MORMON HANDCART DISASTERS

Will Bagley

AS 1855 DREW TO A CLOSE, all was not well in Brigham Young’s Great Basin Kingdom. A plague of locusts that had been developing since the previous year became a crisis—an apostle estimated that grasshoppers had destroyed one fifth of Utah’s crops by July 1854—and the following winter was bone dry. An even worse grasshopper infestation returned in the spring of 1855. By late April the *Deseret News* reported that the pestiferous creatures were “threatening to destroy all vegetation as fast as it appears.”¹ By mid-May, the party that accompanied Governor Young to the capital at Fillmore “found nearly all the wheat eat up by the Grass hoppers all the way from

WILL BAGLEY {wlbagley@xmission.com} is a Wallace Stegner Centennial Fellow at the Tanner Humanities Center and the Wallace Stegner Center at the University of Utah. Utah State University Press published his biography, *Always A Cowboy: Judge Wilson McCarthy and the Rescue of the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad* in 2008. He is the editor of the Arthur H. Clark Company’s KINGDOM IN THE WEST series. Volume 12, of the series, *Innocent Blood: Essential Narratives of the Mountain Meadows Massacre*, edited with David L. Bigler, appeared in October 2008. The Clark Company will issue the first volume of a planned tetralogy, *The Long and Perilous Journey: The Story of the Oregon & California Trails*, in 2009.

¹D. Robert Carter, “Fish and the Famine of 1855–56,” *Journal of Mormon History* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 95, 97.

Salt Lake City,” a distance of 150 miles.² The territory “seems to be one entire desolation,” Apostle Heber C. Kimball wrote to his son in England at the end of May 1855, “and, to look at things at the present time, there is not the least prospect of raising one bushel of grain in the valley this present season. Still,” he added hopefully, “the grasshoppers may pass away, so as to give us a chance to sow wheat late, and also some corn.”³

By July, when not a drop of rain had fallen, a full-blown drought developed, creating suffocating clouds of dust. The parched canyons, north and south, began to burn. Embittered Utes told Andrew Love of Nephi that “the Mormons cut their timber & use it & pay them nothing for it, & they prefer burning it up.”⁴ Kimball’s hopes that late plantings could produce a crop proved optimistic. “There are not more than one-half the people that have bread,” the apostle reported glumly the next spring, “and they have not more than one-half or one-quarter of a pound per day per person.” Famine stalked the territory. Even Kimball and Brigham Young put their families on rations.⁵

Young himself had to “say something with regard to the hard times” as 1856 began. “I do not apprehend the least danger of starving, for until we eat up the last mule, from the tip of the ear to the end of the fly whipper, I am not afraid of starving to death.”⁶ At the same meeting, Jedediah Grant, Young’s counselor in the First Presidency, took the same bold tack: he was “glad that our crops failed. Why? Because it teaches the people a lesson, it keeps the corrupt at bay, for they know that they would have to starve, or import their rations, should they come to injure us in the Territory of Utah.”⁷ But during that grim winter and spring of 1856 thousands of desperately worried

²Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1898*, typescript, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–85), May 15, 1855, 4:320.

³Heber C. Kimball, Letter to William Kimball, May 29, 1855, *Millennial Star* 17 (August 18, 1855): 518–19.

⁴Andrew Love, Journal, July 26, 1855, photocopy of holograph, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.

⁵Heber C. Kimball, Letter to William Kimball, April 13, 1856, *Millennial Star* 17 (July 26, 1856): 476.

⁶Brigham Young, January 27, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1855–86), 3:196.

⁷Jedediah M. Grant, January 27, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:201.

Utahns were already surviving on grass and thistle roots as they watched their livestock starve.

To complicate matters, almost five thousand new settlers had arrived in the territory in 1855, the third largest emigrating season Utah had yet witnessed, but it came at a substantial cost. "When br. Erastus Snow arrived, on the 1st of this month, he came in the morning and informed me that he had run me in debt nearly fifty thousand dollars; he said, 'Prest. Young's name is as good as the bank,'" Young complained to a September congregation. Snow obviously considered that he had been authorized to borrow the equivalent of a million of today's dollars, but Young was not happy. Speaking in the Bowerly, he said that Snow had used his name "without my knowing anything about it" and had "run us in debt almost fifty thousand dollars to strangers, merchants, cattle dealers, and our brethren who are coming here." Young said men who had taken Snow's drafts wanted their money immediately, and he felt "hunted, like one that is their prey ready to be devoured. I wish to give you one text to preach upon, 'from this time henceforth do not fret thy gizzard.' I will pay you when I can and not before." Young added, "It is the poor who have got your money, and if you have any complaints to make, make them against the Almighty for having so many poor. I do not owe you anything."⁸ Recalling such debts five years later, he observed, "I cannot chew paper and spit out bank notes."⁹

THE GATHERING

To this day, one of the thirteen Articles of Faith that form the foundation of the Latter-day Saint faith proclaims, "We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and, that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory." Although this doctrine has receded in importance and has no particular salience today, it was a key belief for early Latter-day Saints who anticipated the Second Coming in their own lifetimes. Failure to heed the call was dangerous. When John Jaques's sister-in-law questioned the wisdom of the handcart plan, he rebuked her in the pages of the *Millennial Star*:

⁸"Remarks," September 16, 1855, *Deseret News*, September 26, 1855, 226.

⁹"Remarks," October 6, 1860, *Deseret News*, October 17, 1860, 258.

“Joseph Smith prophesied that those who would not gather to Zion when their way was opened, should be afflicted by the devil.”¹⁰

Brigham Young stoutly and repeatedly preached the urgency of gathering. The Church existed “to roll on the work of the last days, gather the Saints, preach the Gospel, build up cities and temples, send the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth, and revolutionize the whole world.”¹¹ Escaping from “Babylon,” or the larger society, was necessary for both temporal and spiritual salvation; Zion would provide the only safety in what was seen as the havoc and chaos that would precede the Millennium. A sympathetic U.S. Army observer, Lieutenant John W. Gunnison, concluded that the citizens of Utah were “satisfied to abide their time, in accession of strength by numbers, when they may be deemed fit to take a sovereign position,” but Brigham Young was impatient to set in motion the events that would usher in the Second Coming.¹² He wanted to “show what the Lord is going to do in the latter days, the great miracles he will perform, the gathering of his people, the saving of his Saints, the building up of Zion, the redeeming of the house of Israel, the establishing of the New Jerusalem, the bringing back of the ten tribes, and the consuming of their enemies before them, overthrowing kingdoms, &c., &c., and this is proclaimed to both Saint and sinner.”¹³

Thus, the urgency of gathering had both spiritual and political motivations; and its dramatic achievements—a total of sixty to seventy thousand emigrants arrived before the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869—cannot conceal the lamentable fact that the Mormon gathering to Zion was consistently underpowered, underfinanced, and, most significantly, underfed. In 1849, the Church set up

¹⁰Stella Jaques Bell, ed., *Life History and Writings of John Jaques, Including a Diary of the Martin Handcart Company* (Rexburg, Ida.: Ricks College Press, 1978), 74, quoting *Millennial Star*, June 14, 1856, 367. Smith’s actual quotation was, “I prophesy, that that man who tarries after he has an opportunity of going, will be afflicted by the devil. Wars are at hand; we must not delay.” Quoted in Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 43.

¹¹Brigham Young, September 16, 1855, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:5.

¹²John W. Gunnison, *The Mormons, or, Latter-day Saints, in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake* (1852; rpt., Brookline, Mass.: Paradigm Publications, 1993), 23.

¹³Brigham Young, June 8, 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, 10:26.

the Perpetual Emigrating Fund (PEF) as a revolving account to help bring poor converts to Utah, trying to stretch scarce resources; it also developed plans such as the Ten and Thirteen Pound Companies to expedite European emigration to the Great Basin.¹⁴ But now, “There must be a change in the way of the gathering, in order to save them [the poor] from the calamities and the scourges that are coming upon the wicked nations of the earth,” Wilford Woodruff said.¹⁵ Brigham Young sincerely believed that faithful Latter-day Saints must seek refuge in Zion to avoid the horrors of the pending apocalypse that would soon ravage Babylon. He foresaw the last days as a “sermon that will be preached with fire and sword, tempests, earthquakes, hail, rain, thunders and lightnings, and fearful destruction.”¹⁶

From a less millennial perspective, Mormon leaders felt a deep sympathy with their poor European converts and sought to deliver them from the desperate conditions that Charles Dickens described so powerfully and which most of them had experienced firsthand as missionaries. Certainly the Church’s own resources were stretched thin. The concept of the handcarts was, itself, an attempt to stretch them further. However, one of the unforeseen negative consequences of poverty on both sides of the ocean was that Brigham Young and his agents failed to allocate enough resources to ensure that Church-supported-and-sponsored emigration was safe and successful. This article thoroughly examines the combination of ambition, mismanagement, hope, misguided faith, tightfistedness, and bad luck that took such a toll on all ten handcart companies.

By the end of 1855, the Perpetual Emigrating Fund had brought 3,441 emigrants to Utah.¹⁷ The inspiration for the handcart scheme was rooted in the fund’s many problems. Despite much creative financing, the plan was quickly mired in debt, which even the 10 percent annual interest rate often imposed on its patrons failed to miti-

¹⁴For an excellent study, see Polly Aird, “Bound for Zion: The Ten and Thirteen-Pound Emigrating Companies, 1853–54,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 300–325.

¹⁵Wilford Woodruff, October 6, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 4:96.

¹⁶Brigham Young, July 15, 1860, *Journal of Discourses*, 8:123.

¹⁷PEF clerk John T. Caine, Report to Alfred Cumming, February 1, 1860, quoted in James Buchanan, *Message of the President*, House Exec. Doc. 78, 36th Congress, 1st Session, 1860, Serial 1056, 46.

gate.¹⁸ A frontier economy as cash-starved as early Utah's offered few opportunities for new emigrants to repay the principal, let alone the interest; and as the 1850s progressed, such prospects were getting worse. During the winter of 1855–56, Brigham Young reported a catastrophic loss in the territory of “probably two thirds of our entire stock.”¹⁹ The crushing drought, which lasted until 1857, further devastated Deseret's already troubled economy. By early 1855, the outstanding balance that 862 debtors had created since 1849 owed to the PEF totaled more than \$100,000. After Erastus Snow reported the extent of the PEF's expenditures in September 1855, Young made clear to an audience in the Old Tabernacle that debt repayment was a high priority: “I want to have you understand fully that I intend to put the screws upon you, and you who have owed for years, if you do not pay

¹⁸PEF clients signed a contract promising that, after their arrival in Utah, “we will hold ourselves, our time, and our labour, subject to the appropriation of the Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company until the full cost of our emigration is paid, with interest if required.” “Emigration Department,” *Millennial Star* 18, no. 2 (January 12, 1856): 26. B. H. Roberts claimed that these terms were not vigorously enforced and that the usual interest rate of 10 percent was not imposed in cases of misfortune and if “there was anything like promptness in the payment.” Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 3:410. Yet at the conclusion of his handcart articles, John Jaques wrote that the PEF company should “freely and fully cancel the indebtedness for passage, if any remains, of every member of this unfortunate and sorely tried emigrant company,” and further urged: “If anybody ever worked his passage, to the uttermost farthing, these poor emigrants did. They paid not only the principal, but the interest also, with the latter rigorously compounded. They paid it in the hardest and most precious and most costly coin—by enduring daily hard labor, wasting fatigue, and pinching privations, by passing through untold hardships, by suffering cold and hunger, wretchedness and starvation, nakedness and famine, by frozen limbs and injured health and broken constitutions and many by giving their earthly all.” John Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, January 19, 1879, 1.

¹⁹Brigham Young, Letter to Charles C. Rich, April 3, 1856, Brigham Young Collection, Historical Department Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter LDS Church History Library). As with many items from this collection, I am indebted to Ardis E. Parshall for her generosity in sharing it with me.

up now and help us, we will levy on your property and take every farthing you have on the earth.”²⁰ Those who wanted to leave the territory found that Young’s statement was not an empty threat.²¹

The fund was only one factor contributing to the LDS Church’s dire financial straits. “The people must know that I know how to handle money and means,” Young said a year later, “and I never supposed that anybody had a doubt of it.”²² In fact, Brigham Young’s record of financial mismanagement, for a variety of reasons, is impressive. He took an interest so keen in local industries that it amounted to micro-management; and his ambitious plans required importing industrial machinery to manufacture iron, sugar, pottery, paper, wool, and salt. Leonard Arrington’s magisterial economic history documents losses of \$12,000 invested in pottery in 1853, at least \$8,500 spent on a paper mill by 1857, and more than \$100,000 on the failure of the Deseret Manufacturing Company to make sugar from beets. Fifty-two ox teams were to haul the heavy boilers, vacuum pans, pumps, and raspers for the sugar factory across the plains in 1852, only to stall in Echo Canyon when winter set in. Hauled into the valley in the spring of 1853 and set up in today’s Sugarhouse, it commenced operations; but by 1856, it was abundantly clear that no one in Utah had the skills required to make sugar successfully. As for the Deseret Iron Company, when it folded in 1858, it had directly expended at least \$150,000 “to produce nothing more than a few andirons, kitchen utensils, flat irons, wagon wheels, molasses rolls, and machine castings.”²³

Yet despite the failure of these enterprises, Brigham Young had

²⁰Brigham Young, September 16, 1855, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:6.

²¹For barriers to leaving Utah, see Polly Aird, “‘You Nasty Apostates, Clear Out’: Reasons for Disaffection in the Late 1850s,” *Journal of Mormon History* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 146–50.

²²Brigham Young, “Remarks,” *Deseret News*, November 12, 1856, 283.

²³Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (1958; rpt., Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press and the Tanner Trust Fund, 1993), 114–15, 117–20, 127. As Morris A. Shirts and William T. Parry, “The Demise of the Deseret Iron Company: Failure of the Brick Furnace Lining Technology,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 23–35, point out, a variety of technological and mechanical problems caused the failure of the Iron Mission, despite the heroic efforts of its missionaries. For the sugar effort, see Charles L.

accumulated a personal fortune. In April 1855, “Young consecrated to himself as trustee-in-trust [of the LDS Church] a long list of real and personal property valued at \$199,625”—more than \$4 million dollars in 2005—including an African servant girl worth \$1,000.²⁴

Young’s desire to create enterprises that would “let home industry produce every article of home consumption” is easy to defend: Given Utah’s harsh environment, the territory’s economy desperately needed expansion.²⁵ But as the handcart disasters revealed, Young operated what is best understood as a command economy; and for two decades, he tightly controlled how the community developed its resources. As he said in 1867, “The man whom God calls to dictate affairs in the building up of his Zion has the right to dictate about everything connected with the building up of Zion, yes even to the ribbons the women wear; and any person who denies it is ignorant.”²⁶ Cooperative efforts—irrigation, agricultural, and settlement projects—showed considerable success using this model, as would organizing a rescue effort. But such a system lacked a competitive edge and failed to promote individual initiative. The staggering loss of life among the 3,210 oxen that hauled 513 tons of freight to Utah in 1855 suggests a possible consequence of this approach. In November, Brigham Young reported that 722 of the animals had died, a mortality rate of 22.5 percent among the six trains he listed. But 47 percent of the oxen who had hauled Erastus Snow’s church train to Utah were also dead.²⁷ By the next spring, “a great part of the church herd perished” due largely to the devastating drought that was ravaging the territory.²⁸ But it also probably reflected the lack of interest herdsman showed in the welfare of animals they were assigned to tend but did not own—and the loss of

Schmalz, “The Failure of Utah’s First Sugar Factory,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 36–53; Will Bagley, “Why Didn’t the Sugar House Make Sugar?” *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 15, 2001, B1.

²⁴Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 146–47; and “The Inflation Calculator,” <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/> (accessed August 13, 2006).

²⁵Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 113.

²⁶Brigham Young, February 3, 1867, *Journal of Discourses*, 11:298.

²⁷Brigham Young, “To Those Who Are Engaged in Freighting on the Western Waters,” *Deseret News*, November 21, 1855, p. 292, col. 4.

²⁸William Chandless, *A Visit to Salt Lake; Being a Journey across the Plains, and a Residence in the Mormon Settlements at Utah* (1857; rpt., New

these animals immensely complicated planning for the 1856 emigration.

As a result, Brigham felt encouraged to revive what he called “my old plan.” As Robert Lang Campbell, a former clerk in Joseph Smith’s office, carried the mail east from Salt Lake on May 21, 1850, his party had met a Scotsman pushing a wheelbarrow, who told the Mormon couriers that several companies had offered to haul his provisions and bedding. The hard-charging Scot “thanked them kindly, but wished to be excused, as he could not wait on the tardy movements of a camp. He never was afraid of the Indians stealing his horses, and he never lost any rest dreading a stampede.” Campbell wrote from Kanesville that one of the Mormons, John O. Angus, called the wheelbarrow man “the fulfillment of a Mormon prophecy. Three years ago he had heard a Mormon prophet declare that they would travel the plains with wheelbarrows.”²⁹

While no other documentation of this prophecy has been found, LDS Church leaders began seriously considering cheaper ways to cross the plains as early as 1851. “Some of the children of the world, have crossed the mountains and plains, from Missouri to California, with a pack on their back to worship their god—Gold,” proclaimed the First Presidency, then consisting of Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Willard Richards. (Richards authored this general epistle.) “Some have performed the same journey with a wheel-barrow, some have accomplished the same with a pack on a cow.” Others had made the trek with wagons or carts made “without a particle of iron, hooping their wheels with hickory, or raw hide, or ropes, and had as good and safe a journey as any in the camps, with their well wrought iron wagons.” Faithful Mormons could do the same. “Families might start from 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 cumbrous herds, which they are obliged to drive miles to feed. Do you not like this method of travelling? Do you think salvation costs too much? If so,

York: AMS Press, 1971), 143.

²⁹Robert Campbell, July 7, 1850, “Interesting News from the Plains,” *Frontier Guardian*, July 24, 1850, 1–2.

it is not worth having.”³⁰

**“CAUSE THE NATIONS TO TREMBLE WITH FEAR”:
THE HANDCART PLAN**

If this 1851 epistle was a trial balloon, the response was not so enthusiastic that Church leaders acted on it immediately. It was not until late September 1855 that Young instructed Franklin D. Richards, British Mission president, to implement “my old plan,” because “we cannot afford to purchase wagons and teams as in times past. . . . Make hand-carts, and let the emigration foot it, and draw upon them the necessary supplies, having a cow or two for every ten.” He laid out his reasons: “They can come just as quick, if not quicker, and much cheaper—can start earlier and escape the prevailing sickness which annually lays so many of our brethren in the dust.”³¹

Two days before this letter to Richards, Brigham Young had written to Apostle John Taylor in New York, which shows that he had given a carpenter’s thought to specifications for the carts:

Take good hichory [sic] for the axle trees, and make them say, two inches in diameter at the shoulder and 1¼ at the point, say four and a half feet from point to point, make the hubs out of hardhack or iron wood, or if they cannot be had, get young hickery [sic], small and tough and turn them out about six inches long and five or six inches in the diameter—drive the spokes in bracing while the hub is green so it will tighten while seasoning, the same as Chairs are made—line the inside with good sole leather for [the hub] boxes—make spokes of good tough hickory long enough so as to make the wheel about four and a half or five feet high, it draws much easier high than low. The axle should be up high enough for a man to draw on the level—the rims should be split out of hickory like the rim to a spinning wheel, only thicker, fastened and lined with green hides when they can be obtained. The boxes made out of ½ or ¾ inch stuff—the whole to be made strong but as light as possible. They will have to be provided a few cows but they should be of the best quality. If it is once known that such a company is on the plains there will be no difficulty in having

³⁰“Sixth General Epistle of the Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Deseret News*, November 15, 1851, p. 2, col. 4.

³¹Brigham Young, Letter to Franklin D. Richards, September 30, 1855, “Foreign Correspondence,” *Millennial Star* 17 (December 22, 1855): 813.

the brethren from this place meeting them with provisions nearly if not quite half way. Many of them that will come have friends here that will be on hand for this business. In this way we can still operate, and I believe successfully too, much more so than yoking up wild Buffaloes, as you remember you once proposed as an alternate.³²

Tight finances made the handcart plan appealing, especially given the shortage of oxen. However, the decision was not a clear choice between “handcart brigades or suspend[ing] operations.”³³ After the 1856 disaster, the Church spent no PEF money on the last five handcart trains. The majority of Mormon emigrants still came by wagon train even during 1857, 1859, and 1860 when the handcarts were used. Rather, as this article documents, Brigham Young chose to spend the Church’s scarce dollars on freight operations and other speculative ventures. The “down-and-back” system that formally replaced handcarts in 1861 ultimately proved to be the most effective way of transporting converts to Utah.³⁴ Mormon freighters were already experimenting with such a system in 1856, as Abraham O. Smoot’s activities that spring suggest.

In late October 1855, the First Presidency issued another general epistle announcing the handcart plan. It called on all the faithful to “gather up for Zion and come while the way is open before them; let the poor also come, whether they receive aid or not from the Fund; let them come on foot, with hand carts or wheel barrows.” The handcarts would save “the immense expense every year for teams and outfit for crossing the plains” and the new system would eliminate “the expense, risk, loss and perplexity of teams” so that more Saints could “escape the scenes of distress, anguish and

³²Brigham Young, Letter to John Taylor, September 28, 1856, Raymond Taylor typescript, John Taylor Family Papers (1883–1994), Ms0050, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

³³“Leaving No One Behind: The Story of the Handcart Pioneers,” <http://www.lds.org/newsroom/showpackage/0,15367,3899-1-34-2-447,00.html> (accessed August 13, 2006).

³⁴For an excellent examination of the subject, see William G. Hartley, “Down-and-Back Wagon Trains: Travelers on the Mormon Trail in 1861,” *Overland Journal* 11, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 23–34; and William G. Hartley, “Brigham Young’s Overland Trails Revolution: The Creation of the ‘Down-and-Back’ Wagon-Train System, 1860–61,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 1–30.

death which have often laid so many of our brethren and sisters in the dust." The presidency promised to send faithful and experienced leaders with suitable instructions "to some proper out-fitting point to carry into effect the above suggestions." However, participants "are expected to walk and draw their luggage across the plains, and . . . they will be assisted by the Fund in no other way." As this decree made clear, all who received aid in 1856 from the PEF would be required to use handcarts, so the handcart parties were often referred to as the P.E. Fund passengers, company, or emigration. But the decree also contained an implicit promise: "Let them gird up their loins and walk through, and nothing shall hinder or stay them."³⁵

The epistle took a hard line with those who quailed at the prospect of walking twelve hundred miles: "If any apostatize in consequence of this regulation, so much the better, for it is far better that such deny the faith before they start than to do so, for a more trifling cause, after they get here." The epistle again stressed the primacy of faith: "If they have not faith enough to undertake this job, and accomplish it too, they have not faith sufficient to endure, with the saints in Zion, the celestial law which leads to exaltation and eternal lives."³⁶

British convert John Jaques penned an enthusiastic endorsement of the scheme for the *Millennial Star*: "Know ye not that it is the holy ordinance of the Lord, revealed through His Prophet Brigham, for the redemption of the humble, faithful poor, and that it will be blessed and sanctified of Him to the salvation of thousands who are not too proud to be saved in His appointed way, while many of those who despise that way will be left to perish in Babylon?" Jaques, who had joined the Church in 1845, personally embraced the plan and amplified the promise of safety implied in the epistle: "The Lord has promised, through His servant Brigham, that the hand-cart companies shall be blessed with health and strength, and be met part way with teams and provisions from the Valley. And I am not afraid to prophesy, that those who go by hand-carts, and continue faithful and

³⁵"Thirteenth General Epistle," *Deseret News*, October 13, 1855, 268–69, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-8202,00.html> (accessed July 22, 2006).

³⁶*Ibid.*

obedient, will be blessed more than they have ever dreamed of.”³⁷

The year before, Brigham Young, despite the devastating winter that added new holes to Utah’s belt-tightening, had ordered Erastus Snow in St. Louis to find a steamboat engine, apparently to use on the Great Salt Lake. Snow attempted to comply but reported in February 1855 that he had showed Young’s specifications to several experienced engineers and machinists who “all speak very discouraging of your contemplated experiment.” The experts estimated that the specified engine would weigh 13,000 pounds, and all agreed “that if we get up the article you call for, it will not give satisfaction neither in making Salt or propelling your boat.”³⁸

Undeterred, Young ordered Apostle Snow to purchase an engine and ship it overland. Obediently, Snow loaded five wagons with the disassembled parts and sent them west in the summer of 1855 with the Salt Lake-bound “Church Train” under Isaac Allred. Underpowered and undermanned, Allred’s train crawled west at a glacial pace, and gave up only about thirty miles beyond the Missouri River and ten miles west of the horrific scene where wolves had pawed up the graves of more than thirty Mormon emigrants who had died of cholera in June 1855 at Deer Creek in Kansas. Allred’s teamsters dragged the five wagons “into a farmers yard & placed them in his care till next spring,” the company’s clerk wrote in August.³⁹

Despite the famine winter of 1855–56, Young did not give up on

³⁷John Jaques, “Emigration by Hand-Carts,” *Millennial Star* 18, no. 24 (June 14, 1856): 370. Jaques’s hard experience with the Edward Martin Company did not fulfill his prophecy.

³⁸Erastus Snow, Letter to Brigham Young, February 20, 1855, Brigham Young Collection. Abraham Smith, a Chicago shipwright, offered his services after he learned from the newspapers that Young intended “to build a Steamer to run on Salt Lake.” Abraham Smith, Letter to Brigham Young, June 24, 1856, Brigham Young Collection. I must thank Edwina Jo Snow for alerting me to the existence of this steam engine while I was preparing comments on her excellent paper, “Tortoise Race: Ox-Train Freight-ing and the 1855 Mormon Overland Emigration,” presented at the 2006 Mormon History Association meeting in Casper, Wyoming.

³⁹Isaiah Moses Coombs, Diary, August 9, 1855, holograph, LDS Church Library, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-4703,00.html> (accessed August 6, 2006). The grave of my great-great grandmother, Julia Ann Grant Bagley, was probably among those rav-

his steamboat engine. In April 1856, he dispatched Abraham O. Smoot and Ira Eldredge to rescue the stalled equipment. Before Erastus Snow headed back to St. Louis in April, Young spelled out his expectations: "You will attend to this business very carefully and strictly, particularly with regard to the steam engine, as I wish it brought on this season perfect in every particular, and should you find the least essential portion lacking it will be necessary for you to see that any such deficiency is made up."⁴⁰ Even more ambitiously, Young wanted to import machinery to the territory for a woolen mill that same season. He received word from James H. Hart, presiding elder in St. Louis during Erastus Snow's absence, that the mill weighed an estimated "45 Tons" and would require about twenty "extra strong wagons" to transport it to Utah.⁴¹

"I MAY BE OBTUSE": MISCOMMUNICATION AND CONFUSION

Ironically, as the handcart plan rolled forward, the Mormon leader had already come up with another visionary undertaking that might have made the handcart system successful: the Brigham Young Express and Carrying Company (also known as the Y.X. or B.Y.X. Company). Its strategy was to develop a series of "ranch forts" along the trail, where substantial settlements would provide way stations for emigrant, mail, and freight traffic at key locations such as the Loup Fork of the Platte River, Deer Creek, Devil's Gate, and the Last Crossing of the Sweetwater. Young planned to use the federal mail contract he won through Hiram Kimball as the foundation for this major freighting operation. Historian Norman F. Furniss accurately captured the scope of this ambitious plan when he noted that control of the mails would let Young inspect all the official correspondence coming into the territory, and "it is possible that Young even hoped to use the company as an instrument to control the economic life of much of the West."⁴²

Before word of Kimball's contract arrived, the venture began as a private business proposed on January 9, 1856, that would compete

aged by wolves.

⁴⁰Brigham Young, Letter to Erastus Snow, April 10, 1856, Brigham Young Collection.

⁴¹James H. Hart, Letter to Brigham Young, September 23, 1855, Brigham Young Collection.

⁴²Norman Furniss, *The Mormon Conflict, 1850-1859* (New Haven,

directly with the government's mail service. Later that month, the Utah Territorial Assembly incorporated the "Deseret Express and Road Company" at the end of its annual session. The first of two mass meetings in Salt Lake revealed the proposed corporation's expansive vision of "establishing a daily express and passenger communication between the western States and California, or, more extendedly, between Europe and China." Both Mormon and non-Mormon leaders in Utah supported the proposal, and the *Deseret News* warned: "Unless the powers at Washington are more alive to the rapid strides of internal progression, they may soon bid farewell to their transportation of the mails."⁴³

The express was organized as a joint stock company in early February 1856, and Brigham Young announced its plans to engage "in the transportation of letters and papers, and, so soon as may be of passengers and freight." The large and enthusiastic audience that gathered in the old tabernacle subscribed for a thousand miles' worth of shares—Governor Young offered "to take stock and furnish 300 miles of the route" on his own hook. The assembly "unanimously voted to sustain the chartered company in carrying a daily express from the Missouri river to California, and in extending the line as fast and as far as circumstances may permit."⁴⁴ Not everyone was so enthusiastic, with a famine stalking Utah. After a rousing meeting at the end of January promoting the plan, Hosea Stout thought "many large speeches were made to 'Buncum' but everyone seems to be in favor of such."⁴⁵

To start operations, Young assigned veteran South Pass trader Bill Hickman to carry the mail from Independence to Fort Laramie and Porter Rockwell to take it from Laramie to Salt Lake.⁴⁶ "Forts will be established along the line at distances of twenty-five miles—seventy in number, I believe," John G. Chambers, an 1853 PEF emigrant,

Conn.: Yale University Press, 1960), 52.

⁴³"Mass Meeting," *Deseret News*, January 30, 1856, 4–5.

⁴⁴"Express Line" and "Mass Meeting," *Deseret News*, February 6, 1856, 5.

⁴⁵Juanita Brooks, ed., *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), January 26, 1856, 2:590.

⁴⁶Harold Schindler, *Orrin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 224–26.

wrote from Salt Lake. "Whether this scheme will fail in consequence of the scarcity of provisions remains to be seen."⁴⁷

Despite Brigham Young's plan to provide self-sufficient stops along the trail that could sell supplies to passing emigrants and the take-charge tone of the October 1855 epistle, he unaccountably failed to think through the requirements of his plans. He called nineteen men as missionaries to begin building the necessary supply stations, but the general lack of both men and money in the territory meant that the system could not hope to play much of a role in helping the first handcart trains.⁴⁸ Young had always appointed someone "to superintend the emigration in the West," but this year, Church leaders in the East waited in vain for instructions.

By late November 1855, Apostle John Taylor wrote Young that he had "carefully considered" the requirements of handcart emigration and appointed a committee in St. Louis made up of missionaries who had walked across the plains to determine what supplies a cart and four persons would need. They suggested sixty pounds of breadstuffs and sixty of meat, a pound of tea and some sugar, twenty pounds of cooking utensils, plus clothing, bedding, and a tent, for a total of 449 pounds. In addition, there should be a cow for each two carts or eight persons and a wagon with three yoke of oxen for every ten carts. "The above is predicated upon the calculation of being met [with additional supplies] at the upper crossing of the Platte or the Devil's gate," Taylor cautioned Brigham Young.⁴⁹ Taylor expressed public support for the scheme—but with qualifications: "In regard to the feasibility of the enterprise, men of course, differ in their opinions, and we must confess that on its first introduction our prejudices were strong against it; we thought it looked too much like hard work for men to perform labor that has hitherto only been considered proper for beasts of draught and burden," Taylor wrote in *The Mormon*, published in New York, "but like many others with whom we have conversed on this subject, the more we investigate it the more are we satisfied of its practicability."⁵⁰

A year later, Taylor, recapping events of the past year, acknowledged receiving Young's orders regarding "the manufacture of

⁴⁷John G. Chambers, *Western Standard*, May 17, 1856.

⁴⁸Schindler, *Orrin Porter Rockwell*, 226.

⁴⁹Taylor, Letter to Young, November 21, 1855.

⁵⁰"Hand Carts for the Plains," *The Mormon*, December 1, 1855, 2.

Hand-Carts, their size, material, dimensions &c. and various instructions pertaining to the emigration, not only in relation to an early start, but also positive instructions that *no indebtedness should* be incurred.”⁵¹ These instructions did not name an emigration agent for the summer of 1856, but the capable and compassionate Taylor “felt it a duty incumbent upon me to make all preliminary arrangements for the furtherance of the interests of the emigration.” He informed Young of this independent action in January 1856, three months after the First Presidency’s epistle, and confessed his reaction to the hand-cart plan: “At first sight it looked rather like ‘Jordan’s a hard road to travel.’”⁵² Still, Young did not follow up with detailed instructions. In his letter in February 1857, after the dimensions of the disaster to the Willie and Martin companies had become apparent, Taylor expressed the frustration that he and his associates had felt about who Brigham Young had intended to manage the 1856 emigration: “I may be obtuse and so may those who were with me; but however plain your words might be to yourself on this matter, neither I nor my associates could understand them.”⁵³

Taylor continued to fill the executive vacuum during the spring of 1856, knowing that the first emigrant-bearing ships had sailed from England by February. At St. Louis Taylor ordered one hundred carts built out of seasoned wood to Young’s specifications. He warned Young in January 1856 that contracting for them farther west was dangerous because of shoddy workmanship. He himself had purchased a wagon wheel at Kaneshville to his regret. “If the wheels should break down on the road,” Taylor cautioned, “the company would be ruined.”⁵⁴ By late April 1856, Taylor felt “deeply solicitous for the welfare of the travelling Saints, and more especially am I anxious that everything shall be conducted properly, with due care and safety, and as far as may be practicable, for the comfort of those who may be going by hand-carts.” It was, he noted, “a new project, and will require our greatest attention and vigilance.” As directed, Taylor’s agents surveyed a new northern route from New York to the frontier and made

⁵¹John Taylor, Letter to Brigham Young, February 24, 1857, 5–6, Brigham Young Collection; emphasis Taylor’s.

⁵²John Taylor, Letter to Brigham Young, January 18, 1856, Brigham Young Collection.

⁵³Taylor, Letter to Young, February 24, 1857, 5–6.

⁵⁴Taylor, Letter to Young, January 18, 1856.

preliminary arrangements for campgrounds.

These valiant efforts and hard work undoubtedly prevented untold suffering, although they were inadequate to meet the enormous need. Young, in addition to not naming an emigration agent in the eastern United States, had not designated a similar agent in Europe, leaving European Mission President Franklin D. Richards to manage as best he could from Liverpool. In early April 1856, Brigham Young proudly informed Apostle Charles C. Rich, then in California, that Richards had asked Taylor to “make arrangements for the transmission [by handcart] for . . . 10,000 souls.”⁵⁵

On June 30, Young expressed only optimism to the harassed Taylor, who spent the spring and summer in St. Louis, Washington D.C., and New York: “We are pleased with the start the hand cart trains are making this season and have no fears but the plan will prove eminently successful,” he wrote confidently. “It must be a novel sight to see the Saints gathering at Iowa City and starting out with their hand carts on foot for home, will it not prove another testimony to the world of the workings of the Lord with His people! and is the time far distant when the name of the people of God and their Zion & the fame thereof will cause the nations to tremble with fear.” Responding to Taylor’s warning about the urgency of meeting the emigrants with supplies, Young was reassuring in that same June 30 letter: “We expect to start teams with provisions to meet the emigration so soon as we can get flour from the present harvest.”⁵⁶ Since the grain harvest in Utah is usually in August, Young clearly expected the handcarts to make it nearly the whole way on their own without reprovisioning. Although Taylor’s panel of experts had recommended allocating a wagon and three yoke of oxen for each fifty persons “to convey the sick, &c.,” Young rejected the suggestion on July 28. “I will say that it is all right not to provide wagons for infirm persons to accompany the hand carts for it would encourage infirmity or rather laziness which is quite as bad. There would soon be but few able to walk if such arrangements were made. We have hauled such characters with worn out, broken down cattle long enough & we hail this year’s operations

⁵⁵Brigham Young, Letter to Charles C. Rich, April 3, 1856, Brigham Young Collection; John Taylor, Letter to Franklin D. Richards, March 4, 1856, LDS Church Library.

⁵⁶Brigham Young, Letter to John Taylor, June 30, 1856, Brigham Young Collection.

as breaking through and throwing off an immense burden which has long oppressed us.”⁵⁷

Meanwhile, multiple causes of a disaster in the making were piling up: The late start of the last Mormon emigrants from Britain, lack of a leader assigned to run the plan, the uncertainty about how large that year’s emigration would be, and difficulties in building enough handcarts.⁵⁸

THE SUFFERINGS OF THE PEOPLE: THE FIRST THREE TRAINS

The first three of the year’s five handcart trains left Iowa City between June 9 and 23, 1856, under the command of Edmund Ellsworth, a son-in-law of Brigham Young, Daniel D. McArthur, and Edward Bunker. The three parties totaled almost eight hundred men, women, and children, mostly converts from England, Wales, and Scandinavia, with about thirty former Waldensians from Italy’s northern provinces who joined Ellsworth’s company. They mustered a total of 158 handcarts supported by only eight wagons, half of the 10:1 ratio Taylor’s experts had recommended.⁵⁹

In addition to the five handcart companies, thirteen wagon and freight trains, plus several unidentified companies, accompanied the Mormon overland emigration in 1856. (See Table.) After the departure of Edward Bunker’s third handcart train, Jacob Croft, Canute Pe-

⁵⁷Brigham Young, Letter to John Taylor, July 28, 1856, Brigham Young Collection.

⁵⁸Handcart expert Don Smith labeled as myth the story that handcarts were built of green wood and so fell apart on the arid plains. Carrie A. Moore, “Most Handcart Treks Successful, BYU Historian Says: 150th Anniversary Includes Discussion and Re-Enactments,” *Deseret Morning News*, June 10, 2006, <http://deseretnews.com/dn/view/0,1249,640185890,00.html> (accessed July 18, 2006). However, a handcart builder near Iowa City in late July 1856 wrote in a letter to the editor, “If a brother comes in camp and don’t catch hold of an axe and cut down a tree for to make hand carts, or break in a pair of oxen, or make himself useful in some way, he is but little respected. This is the place to make a man know himself.” *The Mormon*, August 16, 1856, 2, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-8716,00.html> (accessed August 11, 2006).

⁵⁹These numbers are from the LDS Church’s Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website: <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/content/0,15757,3957-1-2117,00.html> (accessed November 16, 2007).

TABLE
THE TEN MORMON HANDCART COMPANIES

<i>Company</i>	<i>Left</i>	<i>No. People</i>	<i>No. Carts</i>	<i>Arrive SLC</i>
<i>Five in 1856</i>				
Ellsworth	06/09/56	275	52	09/26
McArthur	06/11/56	222	480	9/26
Bunker	06/23/56	300	60	10/02
Willie	07/15/56	500	120	11/09
Martin	07/28/56	575	146	11/30
<i>Two in 1857</i>				
Evans	05/22/57	149	28	09/11-12
Christiansen	06/15/57	330	68	09/13
<i>One in 1859</i>				
Rowley	06/09/59	235	60	09/04
<i>Two in 1860</i>				
Robinson	06/06/60	233	43	08/27
Stoddard	07/06/60	126	22	09/24

Source: William G. Hartley, "Handcarts," in Allan Kent Powell, ed., *Utah History Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 243. Some of these numbers are ap-

erson, and John Banks led wagon trains west before James Willie left Iowa City in July. After August 1, wagon parties under the command of William B. Hodgetts, Dan Jones and John A. Hunt, Abraham O. Smoot, Orrin Porter Rockwell, John C. Naegle, Henry Boley, Benjamin L. Clapp, J. W. Hawkins, and Benjamin Matthews set out from the Missouri. Many of these trains were hauling freight for Salt Lake merchants, while others were identified as "Church trains," but the sources are unusually silent about who contracted for the Church train cargos, and who stood to profit from them is cloaked in mystery. For example, who funded A. O. Smoot's operation is never spelled out. In addition, some 153 known individuals went overland with unidentified companies. Many of these trains carried both passengers and freight, and the last to depart, notably the Hunt and Hodgetts

trains, often shared the trials that afflicted the Willie and Martin companies.⁶⁰

Rebecca Bartholomew and Leonard J. Arrington concluded that Young had “sent routine supply wagons to several companies out to several companies he knew to be on the road: Abraham Smoot’s Church supply train, the Walker and Gilbert and Garrish private merchant trains, an immigrant company from Texas, and the Church herd with accompanying wagons.” The authors note that B. H. Roberts “raises the question of what became of these supply trains, which seem to have played no role in the rescue.”⁶¹

As Dan Jones made clear, some of the goods he and about twenty-five men were left to guard at Devil’s Gate that year “belonged to the last season’s emigrants. The wagon companies freighting them through agreed to deliver them in Salt Lake City”: some of this freight probably belonged to handcart emigrants. “These goods were to be taken in and delivered as by contract,” Jones claimed, but when Salt Lake merchant and recent apostate Thomas S. Williams tried to claim the freight he apparently had under contract, Jones refused to deliver it because Williams lacked “an order from the right parties.”⁶²

The problems inherent in the new system became apparent immediately. Even Ellsworth’s first company had to wait more than a month at Iowa City for its carts to be built. “Our hand-carts were of a poor description,” Ellsworth himself complained on reaching Salt Lake, “but they had to be experimented upon, and the experiment made this season has been at our expense.”⁶³ The initial companies received the best-built carts that year, but even so, they began breaking down immediately. “We had them to eternally patch, mornings, noons and nights,” Daniel McArthur later told Wilford Woodruff. In

⁶⁰Again, this analysis is based on data from the LDS Church’s Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website.

⁶¹Rebecca Bartholomew and Leonard J. Arrington, *Rescue of the 1856 Handcart Companies*, Charles Redd Monographs in Western History, Series No. 11 (Rpt., Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 5 and 52 note 14.

⁶²Daniel W. Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians: A True and Thrilling Narrative of the Author’s Experiences among the Natives*. (1890; rpt., Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1960): 106–10.

⁶³Edmund Ellsworth, “Account of His Mission By Elder Edmund Ellsworth, and His Experience in Leading the First Hand-Cart Company,” *Deseret News*, October 8, 1856, 243.

addition to the physical fatigue of hauling the handcarts was the mental fatigue of their noise: "They mowed and growled, screeched and squealed, so that a person could hear them for miles." McArthur spent two weeks at the Mormon frontier depot at Florence, Nebraska, refitting the vehicles.⁶⁴

All three parties experienced large defections. Twiss Birmingham noted that fifty members of Bunker's Welsh Company "stopped on the road," while the Ellsworth Company's official journal listed thirty-three members who had "backed out."⁶⁵ Some of these problems were the inevitable accompaniment of transcontinental travel, not attributable to the handcarts. Midsummer weather on the plains produced violent extremes, and the people suffered from heat stroke, lightning strikes, and rattlesnake bites.

Perhaps most seriously, there was never enough to eat. One of Edmund Ellsworth's wagons contained, not food, but soap. Although the problems of short rations would take a murderous toll among the Willie and Martin companies, hunger accompanied the earlier trains as well. "At night we often went to bed without supper," remembered Mary Powell Sabin, a twelve-year-old making the trek with her family. She was captivated by the beauty of the campsite at Deer Creek. "It was so charmingly sylvan with little groves here and there and a bright clear creek lined with timber" that she proposed to her father, "Let's build a little log house and stay in this place always." He asked what they would do for food. "Do as we're doing now," Mary said. "Go without."⁶⁶

"There was very little food to cook and we were too tired to cook it," Lotwick Reese recalled. "We had very very hard times, with scarcely enough food to sustain life and body." At Fort Bridger Reese's mother traded everything the family owned, "a few silk handker-

⁶⁴Daniel D. McArthur, Report to Wilford Woodruff, January 5, 1857, Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (chronological scrapbook of typed entries and newspaper clippings, 1830-present), under date of September 26, 1856, 3, LDS Church Library.

⁶⁵Andrew Galloway, Edmund Ellsworth Emigrating Company Journal, LDS Church Library, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-2888,00.html> (accessed April 2, 2007).

⁶⁶Mary Powell Sabin, Autobiography, 1926, 10-14, LDS Church Library.

chiefs, etc.,” for something to eat.⁶⁷ William Knox Aitken wrote that they arrived “wearied and worn down, the bones almost through the skin, not only of myself but of all that were in the company, having walked from Iowa city to the Great Salt Lake city, a distance of 1,350 miles, and were half starved to the bargain, our whole allowance being 12 ounces of flour per day, and we did not even get so much.”⁶⁸

“I never was so hungry in my life,” Archer Walters wrote. “My children cry with hunger and it grieves me and makes me cross.” At that point, Ellsworth had cut the ration to a half pound of flour per day. Walters had the impression that this situation was not debilitating: “I can live upon green herbs or any thing and do go nearly all day without any and am strengthened with a morsel.” Despite Walter’s optimism, however, in 1937 the family believed he “died from dysentery caused by eating corn-meal and molasses, and aggravated by his weakened condition and lowered resistance resulting from exposure, under-nourishment, and physical exhaustion during the thirteen hundred mile journey of the first handcart company.” The so-called “relief” wagons met his company near today’s Glenrock, Wyoming, but the handcart pioneers were expected to pay for the flour.⁶⁹ The grim reality (discussed below) is that, until October, there was no organized charitable or Church-sponsored effort to supply the handcart companies. Twiss Bermingham noted that the flour would cost “18c per lb. [payable] when we get to the city.” Bermingham considered that the “conduct of the men from the Valley who came to meet us was disgraceful.”⁷⁰

All three of the first handcart captains faced charges of abusive leadership. Archer Walters complained about “some young sisters

⁶⁷Lotwick Reese, “History,” in Joyce Doerfler Hunter, comp., *The Life Story of Lavina Reese Hunter Doerfler*, copy at LDS Church Library, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-2946,00.html> (accessed November 16, 2007).

⁶⁸William Knox Aitken, “Adventures of a Mormon,” *London Advertiser*, August 9, 1857. Aitken left Utah the next spring with “300 souls in all . . . all determined to get off or die.”

⁶⁹Archer Walters, Journal, July 1, 22, and September 1, 1856, LDS Church Library. Walters’s journal was serialized in the *Improvement Era* from October 1936 to April 1937. He died a few miles west of South Pass: the story of his death appeared in the *Improvement Era*, April 1937, 253.

⁷⁰Twiss Bermingham, “To Utah—By Hand,” *American Legion Maga-*

with Bro. Ellsworth always going first which causes many of the brothers to have hard feeling.”⁷¹ Margaret Stalle Barker charged that Ellsworth badly mistreated the Italian converts in his party, “even depriving them of food.” Barker repeated claims that Ellsworth “sold part of the food that should have gone to the saints.” As her father, Jean Pierre Stalle, was dying of starvation, his wife, Jeanne Marie Gaudin-Moise, “climbed to the wagon to have a few last words with her husband. Ellsworth came with a rope and cruelly whipped her until she was forced to get down.”⁷² Still, others considered Ellsworth’s leadership inspired. Teenage Mary Ann Jones recalled that a large band of Indians stopped his train on the Platte River and demanded food. “They were in war paint and were very hostile. Captain Ellsworth asked all of us to pray for him while he talked to them. He gave them some beads and they let us go on. For this we were very thankful,” she remembered. “I have never regretted the trip,” she wrote years later, but at that point, she was Ellsworth’s plural wife. Ellsworth married both her and a second woman from his handcart party, Mary Ann Bates, on the same day in October 1856.⁷³

Ellsworth was not the only handcart captain who managed to combine courtship with leadership. One telling vignette of the Martin Company captures the hunger of the emigrants, the high-handed behavior of the captain, and his favoritism. Far out on the plains, Edward Martin loaded a hundred pounds of flour onto Elizabeth Sermon’s cart, ordering her not to touch the flour or let her children ride. Finally, she recognized the injustice. “I stopped my cart at noon that day, took the flour out of my cart and threw it on the ground. I told the Captain Martin if I and my children could not eat some of it, I would not draw it any further, it is my duty to look after my husband

zine, July 1937, 27, 58–61.

⁷¹Walters, *Journal*, July 1, 1856.

⁷²Barker, *Reminiscences*, in Rebecca Cardin Hickman, “History of Susanna Goudin Cardon,” 8, item 2, in “Biographical Sketches of the Cardon family, 1934–1960,” LDS Church Library.

⁷³Mary Ann Jones Ellsworth, *Diary [sic] of Mary Ann Jones (Age 19) on Her Trip Across the Plains*, LDS Church Library. For the marriages, see LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen, eds., *Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856–1860, with Contemporary Journals, Accounts, Reports; and Rosters of Members of the Ten Handcart Companies* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1960), 57.

and family first.” Martin told her she must be obedient and threatened to leave her “on the plains as food for the wolves.” Sermon retorted, “Brother Martin, leave those two girls you have in your carriage for food to the wolves, not me.”⁷⁴

Another single young woman, Elizabeth Lane Hyde, went lame in the Black Hills. Despite her disability, Edward Bunker refused to let her put a small bundle on a wagon. John Cousins, a fellow traveler “carried me on his back through many rivers, and when Captain Bunker put me out of the wagon at Laramie River, he picked me up and carried me through the water.”⁷⁵ According to an Icelandic veteran of Daniel McArthur’s company, the train’s thirty children were gathered together every morning and sent ahead in one bunch, apparently to keep them from holding up progress. “They were driven along with willows and had to keep walking as long as they could. No use to cry or complain. But along during the day when it was hot they were allowed to rest and were given food. They were often 2 or 3 miles ahead of us,” Thordur (later called Theodore) Dedrickson remembered. “It was hard for parents to see their little 5 and 6 year olds driven along like sheep.”⁷⁶ This practice continued, for 1857 handcart emigrant C. C. A. Christensen, later famous as a folk-artist, remembered that early in the morning “the children who could walk—some even under the age of four—were sent ahead, accompanied by their sisters, partly to avoid the dust and partly to walk as far as possible before the burning sun and exhaustion would make it necessary to put them in the handcart.”⁷⁷

Daniel McArthur’s “Crack Company” and Edmund Ellsworth’s party competed to see who would be the first handcart train to reach the Salt Lake Valley. Ellsworth pushed on during a rainstorm in Echo

⁷⁴Elizabeth Sermon Camm, Letter to “My Dear Children,” March 16, 1892, LDS Church Library.

⁷⁵Elizabeth Lane Hyde, “Autobiography [sic] of Elizabeth L. Hyde,” *Woman’s Exponent*, August 15, 1896, 29.

⁷⁶Theodore Dedrickson, “One of the First,” in Kate B. Carter, ed., *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 20 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1958–77), 7:486–87.

⁷⁷C.C.A. Christensen, “By Handcart to Utah,” translated by Richard L. Jensen, *Nebraska History*, Winter 1985, 337–44, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-4958,00.html> (accessed April 9, 2007).

Canyon until after dark on September 22, to preserve his lead. “Knight coming on and the people very weary traveling, our Captain persisted in continuing our journey over a divide, which made it very hard to ascend and descend a distance of six miles, and all in the dark—and no light only as the lightening flashed, the [rain] pouring down in torrents all the time,” returning missionary William Butler recalled. Although Butler was ill, he “was left behind to travel or die.” He gave himself a priesthood blessing; and “from this very moment the pain left me and I was able to resume my journey, it being very dark, insomuch that I could not see the road. I fell down a great many times over all manner of rocks, steep places and holes.” He met an Italian convert with his little girl. “I tried to get him to come along with his hand cart, but not understanding his language, nor he mine, so he did not follow me.—he died during the night, and they fetched him into camp in the morning.” Next he stumbled across a young English girl, apparently six-year-old Hannah Clarke, “who was alone and had lost her way—she was crying and in great trouble.—I went to her, and fetched her into Camp,—the gratitude of the girl and her parents and relatives. was unbounded,” Butler recalled. The next day the company “gathered up the dead and buried them.”⁷⁸ The camp’s clerk loyally reported, “The wagons hauling the tents did not arrive in camp until midnight, and the emigrants suffered considerable from the cold through being wet; yet all seemed cheerful.”⁷⁹

Ellsworth won the race, but not by much. The First Presidency, a militia detachment of Nauvoo Legion lancers, a brass band, and a large crowd greeted the first two handcart companies to emerge from Emigration Canyon on September 26, 1856.⁸⁰ Despite his sometimes callous rhetoric, Brigham Young was not a heartless monster: the gauntness and exhaustion of these pioneering parties left the prophet visibly shaken. Charles Tredeser, an eyewitness, reported:

⁷⁸William Butler, Journal [sic], Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Collection, 1828–1963, reel 11, item 3, LDS Church Library, punctuation added. An expurgated version of Butler’s account appeared in Daughters of Utah Pioneer Lesson Committee, comp., *An Enduring Legacy*, 12 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1978–89), 8:79–80.

⁷⁹Andrew Galloway, Journal, September 22, 1856, in *Journal History*, September 26, 1856.

⁸⁰“The First Hand-Cart Companies,” *Deseret Weekly News*, October 1, 1856, 236.

“Bro. Brigham was introduced to them as they formed in line, and he was so much affected with the spectacle, he could only say: My good people I am glad to see you, God bless you all. He hurried away, he could say no more.”⁸¹ William Butler of the Ellsworth Company also remembered that Brigham Young “felt very bad for the sufferings of the people.”⁸²

Mormon estimates indicate that thirty members of the first three handcart companies died, a fairly standard death toll for overland travelers. Despite the obvious problems with the handcart system, all the Mormon authorities hailed it as a great success. “Prest. Young has declared from the beginning that it was a practical safe operation, his sayings in this, as in all other cases have proven true,” Wilford Woodruff wrote after watching the first two handcart companies arrive.⁸³ “And thus has been successfully accomplished a plan, devised by the wisdom and forethought of our President, for rapidly gathering the poor,” the *Deseret News* announced. Brigham Young told the Ellsworth party “that we had fulfilled a prophecy.”⁸⁴ The McArthur Company arrived later the same day. The third company, under the direction of Edward Bunker, left Iowa City on June 23 and reached the Salt Lake Valley on October 2. But the last two handcart companies still on the trail would not fare so well.

**“THEY EXPECT TO GET COLD FINGERS AND TOES”:
BLUNDERS AND DISASTER**

Three weeks before these first handcart companies reached the Salt Lake Valley, Franklin D. Richards was optimistically dispatching the last two—the Martin and Willie from Florence. “The operations of the season are likely to turn out quite as favorably with regard to cost of outfit as we have at any time expected or hoped,” he reported on September 3 in a letter later printed in the *Millennial Star*. “But for the lateness of the rear companies everything seems equally propitious

⁸¹Charles Tredese, “Correspondence from Great Salt Lake City,” *The Mormon*, November 29, 1856, 3.

⁸²Butler, Journal.

⁸³Wilford Woodruff, “Correspondence from Utah,” September 30, 1856, *The Mormon*, November 15, 1856, 3.

⁸⁴“The First Hand-Cart Companies,” *Deseret Weekly News*, October 1, 1856, 236; Sabin, Autobiography, 14.

for a safe and profitable wind-up at the far end.”⁸⁵ Richards had just made the most deadly blunder of 1856. James Willie’s handcart train left the emigration depot at Florence on August 16, while poorly organized detachments of Edward Martin’s party did not leave the Missouri until early in September.

Richards himself followed in his comfortable and swift carriage, passing both companies and reaching Great Salt Lake City on October 4. He met three small parties “who had come out with flour for the companies” near South Pass in late September, but they were not part of Brigham Young’s plan, announced to George Q. Cannon and insisted upon by John Taylor, to send supplies out to meet the emigrants. Patriarch John Smith was heading east to meet his brother with two men; he turned around to return to Salt Lake City with Richards. On their way back, they met three or four wagons under a William Smith and a man named Talcott, the *Deseret News* reported during the third week in October.⁸⁶ “It was common for traders to travel east from Salt Lake to meet incoming trains and sell them goods,” historian Tom Rea observed. “The three small resupply parties that Richards encountered were probably such traders.”⁸⁷

This raises a perplexing question: what happened to the relief trains that figured so prominently in planning the system? By the end of September, Brigham Young had not sent a single wagonload of supplies to reprovision the Willie and Martin trains: he did, however, send “a relief wagon with flour” that reached A. O. Smoot’s “Church Train” at the Upper Crossing of the Platte on October 2. “The promised supply stations had not been established for the first migration in 1856, and the relief wagons that were to meet the emigrants in Wyoming often did not arrive until long after they were desperately needed,” historian Lyndia McDowell Carter concluded.⁸⁸

The low quality of the handcarts provided to the last two companies—and the delay in building them—proved equally problematic.

⁸⁵Franklin D. Richards, “Foreign Correspondence,” *Millennial Star* 17 (October 25, 1856): 682.

⁸⁶Franklin D. Richards and Daniel Spencer, “Journey from Florence to G. S. L. City,” *Deseret News*, October 22, 1856, 258.

⁸⁷Tom Rea, *Devil’s Gate: Owning the Land, Owning the Story* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 264 note 18.

⁸⁸Lyndia McDowell Carter, “The Mormon Handcart Companies,” *Overland Journal* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 11.

“The carts were poor ones, with wooden axles, leather boxes, and light iron tires, and the squeaking of the wheels, through lack of sufficient grease could often be ‘heard a mile,’” recalled John Jaques, who traveled in the Martin Company.⁸⁹ “We expected to find these vehicles already at hand on our arrival at Iowa City,” Elizabeth Kingsford remembered. “This work consumed between two and three weeks of time, in which we should have been wending our way to Salt Lake City.”⁹⁰ As with the first three companies, the poorly built carts proved to be difficult to use and broke down with alarming regularity. Danish handcart captain John A. Ahmanson, who reached Utah with the Willie Company in December 1856 (only to turn around and leave forever the next April), called these vehicles “*tohjulede Menneskepiner*,” which has been translated as “two wheeled instruments of human torture” but might be bettered rendered as “two-wheeled torture devices.”⁹¹

“When we had a meeting at Florence, we called upon the saints to express their faith to the people, and requested to know of them, even if they knew that they should be swallowed up in storms, whether they would stop or turn back,” a defensive Franklin D. Richards later explained. “They voted, with loud acclamations, that they

⁸⁹Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” January 19, 1879, 1.

⁹⁰Elizabeth Kingsford, *Leaves from the Life of Elizabeth Horrocks Jackson Kingsford* (Ogden, Utah: n. pub., 1908), 2.

⁹¹Edith Matteson and Jean Matteson, “Mormon Influence on Scandinavian Settlement in Nebraska,” in *On Distant Shores: Proceedings of the Marcus Lee Hansen Immigration Conference, Aalborg, Denmark, June 29–July 1, 1992*, edited by Henning Bender, Birgit Flemming Larsen, and Karen Veien (Aalborg, Denmark: Danes Worldwide Archives and Danish Society for Emigration History, 1993); digital copy at <http://www.xmission.com/~nelsonb/nebraska.htm> (accessed August 15, 2006). John A. Ahmanson, *Vor Tids Muhamed* [The Mohammed of Our Times] (Omaha, Neb.: Press of the Danish Pioneer, 1876), 24, republished as *Secret History: A Translation of Vor Tids Muhamed*, trans. by Gleason L. Archer (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 35. Archer translated the phrase awkwardly as “two-wheeled man-tormentors.” As the original title indicates, Ahmanson was not a fan of Brigham Young. He was wealthy enough to own a wagon; but at Franklin D. Richards’s request, he led the ninety-three “indigent Danes” in James Willie’s fifth company on foot, “even though it was obvious that that journey would prove extremely difficult.” *Ibid.*, 28–29.

would go on,” which Richards said would “bring the choice blessings of God upon them.” Had not the Lord’s anointed promised those who embarked on this untested scheme that “nothing shall hinder or stay them”? Speaking on October 15 with the first rescue party still a week away from the Willie Company, Richards was startlingly optimistic. “About one thousand” Saints were still on the trail “with hand-carts,” he acknowledged. “[They] feel that it is late in the season, and they expect to get cold fingers and toes. But they have this faith and confidence towards God that he will over-rule the storms that may come in the season thereof and turn them away, that their path may be free from suffering more than they can bear.”⁹² Richards’s mistake must be seen as a tactical error that was part and parcel of Brigham Young’s larger strategy of getting as many people to Zion as cheaply as possible. The inexperienced European Saints’ willingness to trust him locked in the bad decision, even though better counsel was at hand.

Mormon Battalion veteran Levi Savage Jr., returning from a mission to the Far East after circling the globe, had never crossed the northern plains before, but a decade’s experience in the Far West gave him a clear picture of the challenges that lay ahead. In Iowa City on August 12, camping with the Willie Company, he recorded in his journal: “I myself am not in favor of, but much opposed to taking women & Children through destitute of clothing, when we all know that we are bound to be caught in the Snow, and Severe colde w[e]ather, long before we reach the valley.” Savage was exactly right: on September 5, the company journal recorded that snow stopped the first handcart company, led by Ellsworth, in its tracks not far west of today’s Casper, Wyoming. The previous night, “it got very cold & rained for several hours so that we could not Light a fire.”⁹³ On August 13, forty-two-year-old returning missionary James Willie, captain of the fourth company, exhorted the five hundred Saints under his command “to go forward regardless of Suffering even to death.” Willie had crossed the plains in 1847 with Jedediah Grant’s company and again on his way to four years of service in the British Mission.

Willie then gave Savage permission to speak, even after Savage

⁹²Franklin D. Richards, “Discourse,” *Deseret News*, October 15, 1856, 252–53.

⁹³Andrew Galloway, Ellsworth Company Journal, September 4–5, 1856, LDS Church Library.

warned that he could not support Willie's decision. The veteran frontiersman "Said that we were liable to have to wade in Snow up to our knees, and Should at night rap ourselvs in a thin blanket. and lye on the frozen ground without abed; that was not like having a wagon, that we could go into, and rap ourselves in as much as we liked and ly down. No Said I.—we are with out waggons, destitute of clothing, and could not cary it if we had it. We must go as we are." He did not oppose the handcart system, he added loyally. "The lateness of the Season was my only objection." Savage "Spoke warmly upon the Subject, but Spoke truth, and the people, judging from appearance and after expressions, felt the force of it. (but yet, the most of them, determond to go forward if the Authorities Say so.)" Willie was unwavering and discounted Savage's concerns. "I had Spoken nothing but the *truth*," Savage wrote, underlining the word "and he and others knew it."⁹⁴

John Chislett, one of the Willie Company survivors, wrote one of the first and most powerful recollections of the handcart experiment. "Levi Savage used his common sense and his knowledge of the country," he recalled. "He declared positively that to his certain knowledge we could not cross the mountains with a mixed company of aged people, women, and little children, so late in the, season without much suffering, sickness, and death." He ascribed to Savage a statement not in Savage's journal but true to his character. One of the leaders, William Kimball, Heber's oldest son, scoffed "that he would guarantee to eat all the snow that fell on us between Florence and Salt Lake City." In Chislett's telling, Savage said, "Brethren and sisters, what I have said I know to be true; but, seeing you are to go forward, I will go with you, will help you all I can, will work with you, will rest with you, will suffer with you, and, if necessary, I will die with you. May God in his mercy bless and preserve us. Amen."⁹⁵

Cascading mistakes created the catastrophe that played out between the Platte River and South Pass that fall. Brigham Young's response to the disaster has been highly praised. On October 4, Franklin D. Richards's "Swiftsure train" of returning missionaries reached the valley and informed Brigham Young that more than a thousand people were still hundreds of miles from Salt Lake. Young ordered

⁹⁴Levi Savage, Journal, August 12, 13, 1856, holograph, LDS Church Library.

⁹⁵"Mr. Chislett's Narrative," in T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1873), 817.

parties to head for South Pass with supplies not only for the last handcart companies, but for about 450 emigrants struggling west with the wagon trains under William Hodgetts and John Hunt, and, as it turned out, Smoot's groaning freight wagons. (He did not, as is commonly reported, halt the church's semi-annual conference to start the rescue effort.)⁹⁶ Young delegated responsibility to raise forty teamsters, sixty spans of mules or horses, and twelve tons of flour to the city's bishops. He underestimated the number needing rescue somewhat: "There are still 970 Saints on the plains with the Hand Carts, some of them will not be in untill November," he informed Silas Smith on October 4, the day Richards's "Swiftsure" wagon train reached Salt Lake Valley.⁹⁷ A month later, Young wrote to George Q. Cannon: "We were not aware of their being upon the plains until the arrival of F. D. Richards, Daniel Spencer and others of the returning missionaries."⁹⁸

This statement shades the truth. On June 19, Daniel Spencer had written to Young from Iowa City—the letter was printed in the *Deseret News* on August 6—describing the departure of the first two handcart companies and the organization of Edward Bunker's third train. The first two parties were "interspersed with very old and very young. They are not more than ordinarily strong, and the lists will show that they have not an extra supply of men. But they are all strong in God, and have faith in the fulfillment of the words of his prophets." Spencer expected the emigrants who had sailed from England on the *Thornton* and *Horizon* to arrive within days: "They will together have

⁹⁶Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 122–23. On November 30, Young spoke at the Sunday morning meeting giving instructions about receiving the Martin Company, which arrived that day, and cancelled the afternoon meeting. This incident, which happened almost two months after the October conference, has been assigned to the more dramatic first public announcement, where Young said, "Go and bring in those people now on the plains." He then warned, "You will sink to Hell, unless you attend to the things we tell you." *Ibid.*, 121; emphasis in original.

⁹⁷Brigham Young, Letter to Silas Smith, October 4, 1856, Brigham Young Collection.

⁹⁸Brigham Young, Letter to George Q. Cannon, November 4, 1856, in Roger Robin Ekins, ed., *Defending Zion: George Q. Cannon and the California Mormon Newspaper Wars of 1856–1885*, Vol. 5 of the KINGDOM IN THE WEST (Spokane, Wash: Arthur H. Clark Co., 2002), 214.

nearly 1200 souls to go by the hand carts,” Spencer reported.⁹⁹

“We have received advices that about two thousand Saints are expected to cross the plains this year on foot with hand carts,” Young informed George Q. Cannon on August 4, reporting the content of Spencer’s letter. “Over eight hundred had started, and the remainder were to start in a few weeks per last advices.” Young knew that the window for setting out to cross the plains safely was open only from late April to early August at the latest. There was, arguably, time to send a message east with explicit instructions to Richards and Spencer not to send out any more companies that season. Instead, Young seems to have held two contradictory ideas simultaneously. The first was that Richards and Spencer would automatically halt the emigrants. After Richards and Spencer arrived in Salt Lake, Young explicitly stated that “they would [should] have known better than to rush men, women and children on to the prairie in the autumn months, on the 3d of September, to travel over a thousand miles.”¹⁰⁰ But in his August 4 letter to Cannon, he seems to have assumed a trouble-free passage. He expressed no worry, concentrating instead on what he considered the good news: “Thus you perceive that the work is rolling forth, and many of Israel are gathering home to Zion.”¹⁰¹

However, the hazardous situation did not escape at least one member of the First Presidency. At the end of August, Daniel H. Wells, wrote to Louis Robison at Fort Bridger, “We have received no definite news concerning the Hand cart trains consequently do not know when we shall visit your place. Our trains are sure to be very late.”¹⁰²

**“SUCH OPERATIONS WILL FINANCIALLY USE US UP”:
THE RESCUE**

A popular view is that the rescuers mobilized immediately at

⁹⁹Daniel Spencer, “Correspondence,” June 19, 1856, *Deseret News*, August 6, 1856, 178.

¹⁰⁰Brigham Young, “Remarks,” November 2, 1856, *Deseret News*, November 12, 1856, 283.

¹⁰¹Brigham Young, Letter to George Q. Cannon, August 4, 1856, Brigham Young Collection. One can only speculate on how Brigham Young might have reacted had Richards actually had the good sense to stop the last two handcart trains at the Missouri.

¹⁰²Daniel H. Wells, Letter to Lewis Robison, August 30, 1856, Brigham Young Collection.

Brigham Young's command, backtracked the trail, gathered up the suffering handcart pioneers, and swept them into the Salt Lake Valley in a matter of days. In fact, the rescue was a long-drawn-out struggle against savage weather, crippling human debilitation, and strained resources. As a result, the rescue was too late even for some of the living. Once again, the mustered supplies were inadequate to meet the needs. "The brethren and sisters so opportunely relieved expressed unbounded gratitude for the prompt, energetic and ample aid sent to their relief," trumpeted the *Deseret News*. "And well might they be astonished to meet clothing, provisions, men and teams so liberally and bountifully provided without money and without price, a circumstance so entirely unusual in their former experience."¹⁰³ Like much that appeared in the Church's official organ that fall about the handcarts, this picture was not entirely true. Brigham Young shifted responsibility for the rescue onto the weary shoulders of his followers, who were still reeling from the consequences of drought and famine. The response was indeed generously heroic, but it was barely adequate to meet the demands of the crisis.

Historian David L. Bigler has called the two-month struggle "the most desperate rescue operation in western history." By the time the belated relief wagons rolled out of Salt Lake City on October 7, the final two handcart companies had taken a terrific beating. "Seventeen pounds of bedding and clothing proved inadequate to keep exhausted emigrants warm," Bigler wrote. "First to droop and die were the old and infirm. Soon the burial ritual each morning began to include the bodies of younger members, mainly men." The trek became, remembered Samuel Jones of the Martin Company, "one long funeral march." Even after the first rescue party found the Willie Company at the Sixth Crossing of the Sweetwater on October 21, 1856, the ordeal continued. "The relief they provided was only temporary, just enough to get the company moving again, but inadequate to stop its suffering."¹⁰⁴

Still twenty-seven hard miles from South Pass and 257 miles from Great Salt Lake City, the Willie Company climbed over

¹⁰³"The Companies Yet on the Plains," *Deseret News*, November 26, 1856, 301.

¹⁰⁴David L. Bigler, *Forgotten Kingdom: The Mormon Theocracy in the American West, 1847-1896*, Vol. 2 of KINGDOM IN THE WEST (Spokane, Wash.: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1998), 111-13, 115. The Jones quotation is

Rocky Ridge, through deep snow on October 23, 1856. "A Severe day. The wind blew awful hard, and colde," wrote Levi Savage, who was serving as a captain of a hundred. The train's few surviving teams were hauling wagons "loaded down with the Sick, and children" so thickly stowed he feared some of them would smother. Long after dark, exhausted survivors staggered into camp, where "but few tents were pitched, and men, women, and Children Sit shivering with colde around their Small fires." Just before daylight a wagon arrived with the stragglers. "Some badly frozen; Some dying, and Some dead. It was certainly heartrending to hear Children crying for mothers, and mothers, crying for Childrin," Savage wrote.¹⁰⁵

Almost 120 miles behind the Willie train, Edward Martin's party had ground to a complete halt just a few miles beyond an arduous crossing of the ice-choked North Platte River on October 19. Fifty-six men, women, and children had died of starvation and exposure by the time the company reached the Red Buttes. Here they stayed, unable to make even a mile of progress in the deep snow until, on October 28, Joseph A. Young, Daniel W. Jones, and Abel Garr, riding horseback found the immobilized train. They brought word that supplies were waiting for them fifty miles away at Devil's Gate. "When they first made their appearance," wrote James Godson Bleak, later the chronicler of St. George, "I do not think there was one in Camp but shed tears of joy."¹⁰⁶

With this new hope, the survivors of the Martin Company staggered on. But even after reaching the six rescue wagons at Devil's Gate in early November, the Martin Company's suffering intensified.¹⁰⁷ The teamsters had already given supplies to the Willie Company, so the food that remained "was soon exhausted among so many hungry souls," survivor Samuel Jones re-

on page 113.

¹⁰⁵Savage, Journal, October 23, 1856, LDS Church Library.

¹⁰⁶James Godson Bleak, Journal, October 28, 1856, LDS Church Library, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-7523,00.html> (accessed September 5, 2006). For an indepth examination of Bleak and particularly his England-and-emigration diary, see Brandon J. Metcalf, "James G. Bleak: From London to Dixie," this issue.

¹⁰⁷Jaques, "Some Reminiscences," *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 15, 1879, 1.

called.¹⁰⁸ To complicate matters, the Hodgetts and Hunt trains, carrying freight and some 450 additional mouths to feed, caught up with the last handcart party on October 14 as the Martin Company was crossing the North Platte near today's Casper, Wyoming. Snow stopped all travel, and it took more than two weeks for all these trains to reach Independence Rock, only fifty miles to the west. Just beyond Devil's Gate, the soaked and exhausted emigrants crossed the ice-choked Sweetwater with the heroic assistance of David P. Kimball, George W. Grant, Stephen W. Taylor, and C. A. Huntington. "The water and ice took me up to the waist, and the clothes had to dry on me. That was a terrible night," Samuel Jones wrote.¹⁰⁹ The party sought refuge in what they called Martin's ravine, "a little cove in the mountains where the wind could not have such a clean sweep at us," thirteen-year-old Heber McBride later remembered.¹¹⁰ The exact locale of this site, now known as Martin's Cove, is not certain, but the presumed spot has become a pilgrimage site for modern Mormons.

"We stayed in the ravine five or six days on reduced rations," Samuel Jones continued. "One night a windstorm blew down almost every tent. Many perished of cold and hunger at this place." The battered survivors waited out relentless blizzards and grinding cold for almost a week, then abandoned most of their carts and staggered on. Fifty years later, Jones could still recall "the pinched, hungry faces, the stolid absent stare, that foretold the end was near, the wide and shallow open grave, awaiting its numerous consignments. The start from that place in the wagons when the camp broke up; the looks of the living freight; the long cold rides, the longer nights; the pitiless sky, the lack of sleep; many dozing down by the fire and turning at intervals all through the night, and so on, and on."¹¹¹ This ordeal continued all the way to the valley.

In an odd exercise of what Mormon leaders called "theo-democracy," at the same October conference where Brigham Young had ordered the first wagons back along the trail, Heber C. Kimball moved "that Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Jedediah M. Grant go

¹⁰⁸Jones, "Experience of S. S. Jones," 20.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Heber McBride, *Autobiography*, ca. 1868, typescript, 9-15, LDS Church Library.

¹¹¹Jones, "Experience of S. S. Jones," 20.

back to help the P. E. Fund Emigrants.” The motion was “Unanimously negated,” but twelve days later Brigham Young decided to take Kimball, Grant, and Daniel H. Wells “to visit the Shoshones near Forts Bridger and Supply and Green River crossing, and to cheer the hearts of the emigrants.”¹¹² Three days later at East Canyon, Young “was so suddenly seized with a severe attack of illness that . . . he returned to the city in the evening.”¹¹³ The other three men also cut short their plans to meet the incoming handcart emigrants.

At that point, men, women, and children were suffering and dying in the snow-choked mountains; but rather than acknowledging their misery, Heber C. Kimball lashed out on November 2 at his concerned congregation in the Old Tabernacle: “There is a spirit of murmuring among the people, and the fault is laid upon brother Brigham.”¹¹⁴ The comment inspired a remarkably revealing set of remarks from the leader he was defending: “There is not the least shadow of reason for casting such censure upon me,” Brigham Young responded in the same meeting. He then cast about for a more likely target for the public’s anger and found it in “elders [in the] East” and “our Elders abroad.” Had he been able to manage the emigration from Liverpool, Young claimed that he could have brought many more people to Utah “provided I could have dictated matters at every point. That is not boasting; I only want to tell you that I know more than they know,” he preached. “But what have we to do now? We have to be compassionate, we have to be merciful to our brethren.” The rest of the remarks dealt not on the needs of the starving, freezing emigrants, but with the expense of the rescue. “It will cost this people more to bring in those companies from the plains, than it would to have seasonably brought them from the outfitting point on the Missouri river,” he complained. “We need all our teams and means to prepare for those persons who are coming, instead of crippling us by taking our bread, men and teams and going out to meet them.” Continu-

¹¹²“Minutes of the Semi-Annual Conference, October 6, 1857,” *Deseret News*, October 15, 1856, 256. As noted, the reference to PEF emigrants means the handcart pioneers in 1856, since the fund underwrote no other sort of travel in 1856.

¹¹³Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” January 19, 1879, 1.

¹¹⁴Heber C. Kimball, “Remarks,” November 2, 1856, *Deseret News*, November 12, 1856, 282.

ing the present system of ox trains “will financially use us up.” He bitterly remarked that he had been “about half mad ever since, and that too righteously, because of the reckless squandering of means and leaving me to foot the bills.” Yet again he publicly scolded Erastus Snow for incurring “over sixty thousand dollars of indebtedness incurred for me to pay. What for? To fetch a few immigrants here, when I could have brought the whole of them with one quarter of the means.” He rambled on: “I cannot help what is out of my reach, but I am on hand to send more teams, and to send and send, until, if it is necessary, we are perfectly stopped in every kind of business.” He could send more teams, he acknowledged, “but I do not intend that the fetters shall be on me another season.”¹¹⁵

Apparently believing his rhetoric had reduced the crisis to manageable proportions, Brigham Young turned his attention to his cherished steam engine. On October 16, Salt Lake County sheriff Robert Taylor Burton and George D. Grant’s relief train met Abraham O. Smoot’s Church train eighty miles east of Fort Bridger at the Big Sandy. They provided his train with eighteen or nineteen men, “several span of horses & mules & wagons, also Beef, Flour & Vegetables.”¹¹⁶ Smoot’s freight train was in desperate shape, but these diverted animals and supplies could have helped rescue starving handcart pioneers.

On October 28, as disaster overwhelmed the last two handcart companies, Smoot reported to President Young from Fort Bridger. Traveling about a week ahead of the Willie Company, the twenty-two heavily laden “Church Wagons” in his freight train had kept crawling forward despite “a long & tedious snow storm” that had battered the party “for the last 7 or 8 days.” They had managed to reach the fort, but the teams had given out. Continuing on was not possible. Now Smoot informed Young that he thought he would store “the Books, Thrashing machine, your Engine & fixtures & a part of the nails, glass & groceries & perhaps a portion of the Dry Goods” at the post for the

¹¹⁵Brigham Young, November 2, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 4:69.

¹¹⁶Caleb Grant, Report, December 12, 1856, in Church Emigration Book, LDS Church Library.

winter.¹¹⁷ Smoot's train left "8 Wagons & their freight" behind when it left the fort on October 30.¹¹⁸

Smoot's decision seems to have been a prudent one, but Brigham Young had other ideas. Franklin Benjamin Woolley, one of Smoot's teamsters, recalled that the train continued on to Echo Canyon. Here "Bro Smoot received a letter from Bro Young directing him to bring all the goods in and if he had not enough teams to call upon the brethren who were out in the mountains with ox teams to assist the hand cart emigrations, to assist in bring[ing in] the wagons."¹¹⁹ Smoot's clerk, Caleb Grant, confirmed that, on November 3, "we met an express from the Governor, stating that some one was to return & bring on from Bridger the wagons & freight we had left there as well as several useless & tired out cattle left there by us."¹²⁰

Smoot assigned the twenty-two-year-old Woolley and a single companion to do the job. On November 4, the two met the survivors of James G. Willie's company on Bear River. Willie was unable to walk, and rescue leader William H. Kimball had departed that morning for Salt Lake to "report the condition of things in the mountains." He left the party in charge of Mormon Battalion veteran William Hyde and a man named Gould. Two days earlier, the Willie Company "had not teams enough to haul the feeble that were left behind." Now the company learned "that President B. Young had sent word that some freight still lying at 'Fort Bridger' was to be brought in this season & that some teams and men of our company were needed to go on to 'Bridger,'" William Woodward wrote in the camp journal. "Several teams & men were selected for the trip."¹²¹ Woolley recalled he had to do "considerable talking to some of the brethren who feared the season was too late to venture back to the

¹¹⁷Abraham O. Smoot, Letter to Brigham Young, October 28, 1856, Brigham Young Collection. "Had I met at or near the South Pass 40 yokes of good fresh cattle as I anticipated we should have been able to have brought all the Freight in," Smoot told Young, "but, why they have not met me, you know better than I."

¹¹⁸Grant, Report, December 12, 1856.

¹¹⁹Franklin Benjamin Woolley, Autobiography [ca. 1856], 15, LDS Church Library, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-2799,00.html> (accessed July 31, 2006).

¹²⁰Caleb Grant, Report, December 12, 1856.

¹²¹William Woodward, James G. Willie Emigrating Company Jour-

fort with cattle.”¹²² Willie’s party was still eighty miles from Salt Lake. The Martin Company was still trapped at Martin’s Cove, where the next day their “ration of flour was reduced to 4 oz. and 2 oz for the children.”¹²³

The month of November—now full winter—ground on. Bad news poured into Salt Lake from the mountains. “It is not of much use for me to attempt to give a description of the situation of these people,” George D. Grant wrote to Brigham Young from Devil’s Gate on November 2, but his report provided grim details on the extent of the disaster and the condition of the Martin train and its “between five and six hundred men, women and children, worn down by drawing hand carts through snow and mud; fainting by the way side; falling, chilled by the cold; children crying, their limbs stiffened by cold, their feet bleeding and some of them bare to snow and frost.” The sight was almost too much for “the stoutest” of these veteran frontiersmen, “but we go on doing all we can, not doubting nor despairing,” Grant reported. “Our company is too small to help much, it is only a drop to a bucket, as it were, in comparison to what is needed.” Grant reported that only about one in three of the members of Martin’s company was able to walk. “Some of them have good courage and are in good spirits; but a great many are like children and do not help themselves much more, nor realize what is before them.” Accompanied by Abel Garr, Joseph A. Young arrived in Salt Lake at 4:00 A.M. on November 13 and delivered the grisly report to his father.¹²⁴

Two days earlier, an express rider had brought distressing news “from Fort Bridger to the effect that C N Spencer & John Van Cott having been to the Sweet Water and hearing nothing of the last train of Hand Carts had returned and returning had caused all the teams which had gone on the road to help them” to likewise turn back to

nal, November 4–9, 1856, LDS Church Library, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-7439,00.html> (accessed September 5, 2006).

¹²²Woolley, *Autobiography*, 15, LDS Church Library.

¹²³Bleak, *Journal*, November 5, 1856.

¹²⁴George D. Grant, “The Companies Yet on the Plains,” and “Express,” both *Deseret News*, November 19, 1856, 293.

ward the valley, wrote Hosea Stout.¹²⁵ Lewis Robison and Thomas D. Brown had sent the letter with courier John Tobin five hours after Spencer and Van Cott had arrived at the post at 1:00 P.M. on November 9. They had been to Independence Rock, where they found the snow ten inches deep and heard no news about the last two handcart companies. Fearing for their own safety, they turned back. “At 5 this eveg. judge our surprise on seeing the arrival of 50 or 60 good fat teams bound for the city!” Robison wrote to Young on November 9. The relief effort was collapsing. Robison reported that only George Grant’s ten wagons were still attempting to find the Martin Company and “the balance are pretty near all on the return! Our Beef is out, & we have a very small supply of flour here.” Robison blamed Van Cott and Spencer—“these noble philanthropists”—for the breakdown of the relief effort, which was clearly in bad shape. “Some are complaining that they could go no farther for want of provisions, others out of the same Co[mpan]y are offering their flour for sale to me,” Robison added.¹²⁶

Brigham Young immediately dispatched William H. Kimball, Joseph Simmons, James Ferguson, and Hosea Stout “as an express to go and turn the teams East again.” Stout reported that seventy-seven teams “had now arrived at Fort Bridger and was now only waiting word from Prest. Young.” On the morning of November 12, they met Van Cott near the summit of Big Mountain, less than twenty miles from Salt Lake, Spencer having slipped by the men and “gone home in the night.” Van Cott “justified himself for returning and abandoning the Hand Cart Company as he could get no information of them and had concluded they had returned to the states, or Stopt at Larimie, been killed by the Indians or other wise gone to the devil and for him to have gone further was only to loose his team and starve to death himself & do no good,” Stout reported. “So on these vague conclusions he had not only turned back but had caused all the rest of the teams to return and thus leave the poor suffering Hand carters to their fate.” Kimball reprimanded Van Cott “severely for his course”; and after Kimball read him a letter from Brigham Young addressed to “Brethren on the Road,” the chastened Van Cott “turned back and

¹²⁵Brooks, *On the Mormon Frontier*, November 11, 1856, 2:605.

¹²⁶Lewis Robison, Letter to Brigham Young, November 9, 1856, Brigham Young Collection.

went with us.”¹²⁷

Meanwhile, the Willie Company struggled west into the Great Salt Lake Basin. Eight more members of the company, ranging in age from eight to sixty-six years, died before they reached the valley. A snowstorm caught them in Echo Canyon on November 5 and left the people “much exposed to cold from lying on the cold ground.” It continued snowing most of the next day, November 6, as the company forded the Weber River. “The camping ground presented a most dismal appearance, as we rolled on to it there being much snow on the ground & it being late at night,” camp journalist William Woodward wrote.¹²⁸

Abraham O. Smoot’s church freight train rumbled into Great Salt Lake City on November 9, the same day as the survivors of the Willie Company. Three days later, the *Deseret News* saluted the handcart veterans and “the thankful and joyous spirit they manifested.” The article reported, inaccurately, that the train’s mortality rate had been far less than that in many wagon companies. “The eminent feasibility of the hand-cart movement had been previously demonstrated,” the *News* trumpeted, “its healthfulness is now proven by the experience of this company.”¹²⁹

Back at Fort Bridger, Franklin Woolley “succeeded in obtaining enough [men and teams] to answer my purpose and brought everything in, in good condition.” His obedient teamsters dragged the steam engine, threshing machine, nails, glass, and dry goods out of Fort Bridger and, with Herculean effort, brought their cargo the rest of the way over Big Mountain and into the Salt Lake Valley on before the shattered remnants of the Martin Company arrived on November 30. The *Deseret News* did not report Woolley’s arrival or even mention the steam engine. Perhaps Brigham Young parked it in some corner of his estate over the winter, since it disappears from the historical record for months. Exactly what Young intended to do with a steamboat on the Great Salt Lake is not clear. William Chandless, a sympathetic British visitor to Salt Lake in 1855, heard “it was in contemplation to start a small steamer on Salt Lake, that in high water might run up the Jordan near the city and connect it with the most northern settle-

¹²⁷Brooks, *On the Mormon Frontier*, November 12, 1856, 2:605–6.

¹²⁸Woodward, Willie Emigrating Company Journal, November 4–9, 1856.

¹²⁹“Arrivals,” *Deseret News*, November 12, 1856, 285.

ments; or even up Bear River, if emigration should come by a more northerly route than at present." Chandless observed that importing such machinery involved "vast expense and difficulty" and made such "a scheme, even if otherwise practicable, quite visionary, until the Mormons have extended their ironworks; machinery, if imported, could be applied to fifty more useful purposes."¹³⁰

The steam engine might have been part of an ambitious plan to transport coal from Sanpete County, across Utah Lake, and down the Jordan River, even though the Jordan was not navigable and it would have required substantial effort to make such a plan feasible.¹³¹ Alternatively, it may be that the Mormon leader actually had no clear idea about its purpose, for, in March 1857, Young sent the engine south to the iron works at remote Cedar City to replace two 30-horsepower engines that had arrived a year earlier "but had not worked well." The Deseret Iron Company paid \$2,181 for the engine it had not requested.¹³²

The Martin Company staggered westward from Devil's Gate in a kind of fatalistic numbness for almost another month. It was not until the party reached Fort Bridger in late November that enough wagons arrived that the survivors could be loaded aboard and hauled into the valley. "Notwithstanding some deaths and the suffering and frost bites since leaving the North Fork of the Platte," the *Deseret News* cheerfully proclaimed, "we can plainly recognize the kind hand of an overruling Providence in opening a way of escape for so many, in dictating wise and timely counsels to the living Oracles."¹³³ It did not report the number of fatalities among the Martin Company, which was the hardest hit, nor was any count made of the permanent injuries caused by malnutrition and frostbite requiring amputation.

"We have quite a task upon us this season," Brigham Young had announced in the old adobe tabernacle on November 30, the last Sunday of the month, "for when the last hand-cart company arrives and is comfortably disposed of, we still have about 400 more brethren and

¹³⁰Chandless, *A Visit to Salt Lake*, 140.

¹³¹I am indebted to Lyndia McDowell Carter for this suggestion.

¹³²Shirts and Shirts, *A Trial Furnace*, 379–80. Young canceled another order for a steam engine for the iron works that he had sent to Erastus Snow. Horace S. Eldredge, Letter to Brigham Young, May 25, 1857, Brigham Young Collection.

¹³³"Arrival," *Deseret News*, December 3, 1856, 309.

sisters who are yet beyond Fort Bridger, probably near Green river." He was speaking of the last independent wagon companies, made up of emigrants who had financed their own passage and commercial freight wagons. They were stranded 170 miles from Salt Lake on Green River, Young said, "subsisting upon cattle that drop down through weakness and exposure, which is certainly hard fare. Still, do not be scared, for they will eat and live and come here." He assigned the task of raising fifty more relief teams to Utah and Tooele counties.¹³⁴

Brigham Young announced that the afternoon meeting would be cancelled to prepare for the Martin Company survivors, then expected momentarily. "The Bishops will distribute them as the people can receive them," he ordered, pledging himself to shelter those who could not find other homes. Praying for their welfare was good, he advised, but it would not replace "baked potatoes, pudding, and milk. . . . Some you will find with their feet frozen to their ankles; some are frozen to their knees and some have their hands frosted. They want good nursing," he said. "We will continue our labors of love, until they are able to take care of themselves, and we will receive the blessing. You need not be distrustful about that, for the Lord will bless this people; and I feel to bless them all the time, and this I continually try to carry out in my life."¹³⁵

The congregation spilled out of the tabernacle on the southwest corner of the Temple Block onto East Temple Street just as the Martin Company arrived. "The meeting of the emigrants with relatives, acquaintances, and friends was not very joyous. Indeed it was very solemnly impressive," recalled John Jaques. Friends and strangers took the survivors into their homes "while they thawed the frost out of their limbs and recruited their health and strength." With impressive understatement, Jaques concluded, expressing the belief that "none of the emigrants would be willing to endure another such a journey under any circumstances whatever. One in a lifetime is enough."¹³⁶

Even before the arrival of the Willie Company on November 9, the extent of the disaster had shocked the inhabitants of Great Salt Lake City and the debate over who was to blame for the debacle had al-

¹³⁴Brigham Young, "Remarks, November 30, 1856," *Deseret News*, December 10, 1856, 320.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*

¹³⁶John Jaques, "Some Reminiscences," *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 22, 1878, 1.

ready begun. Speaking in the Old Tabernacle on November 2, Heber C. Kimball had rebuked the congregation, mimicking their reproaches: "What an awful thing it is! Why is it that the First Presidency are so unwise in their calculations?"¹³⁷ An angry Brigham Young had demanded: "What is the cause of our immigration's being so late this season? The ignorance and mismanagement of some who had to do with it." He tempered this chastisement with the grudging admission: "Still, perhaps, they did the best they knew how." He was reluctant to "attach blame to either" Daniel Spencer or Franklin D. Richards, but then his fury broke out again: "But if, while at the Missouri river, they had received a hint from any person on this earth, or if even a bird had chirped it in the ears of brs. Richards and Spencer, they would have known better than to rush men, women and children on to the prairie in the autumn months, on the 3d of September, to travel over a thousand miles." Young tacitly admitted that his own desire for a massive emigration that season may have made his lieutenants overzealous: "We have not expressly, and with a penalty, forbidden the immigration to start late." But he completely rejected the question of his own accountability and threatened: "If any man, or woman, complains of me or of my Counselors, in regard to the lateness of some of this season's immigration, let the curse of God be on them and blast their substance with mildew and destruction, until their names are forgotten from the earth."¹³⁸

Young's two counselors loyally agreed. Kimball blamed Satan: "The devil has tried to hedge up the way, so that we should not bring about the wise plans devised by our President, and has tried to make those plans look as disagreeable and as miserable as possible." Kimball added a threat of his own: "Not one of you will ever go through the straight gate into the kingdom of God, except those that go through by that man."¹³⁹ Jedediah M. Grant extended Brigham Young's defense to the whole First Presidency: "I do not believe that the biggest fool in the community could entertain the thought that all this loss of life, time, and means, was through the mismanagement of

¹³⁷Heber C. Kimball, "Remarks, November 2, 1856," *Deseret News*, November 12, 1856, 282–83.

¹³⁸Young, "Remarks," November 2, 1856, 283.

¹³⁹Kimball, "Remarks," 282–83.

the First Presidency.”¹⁴⁰

On November 16, with the desperate Martin Company still limping through the mountains, Brigham Young again addressed the Saints. “I believe it is better for the people to lay down their bones by the way side, than it is for them to stay in the States and apostatize,” he said. The Saints had the power and ability to help the handcart victims, so it became their duty to do so. “But if there had been no other way the Lord would have helped them, if he had had to have sent his angels to drive up buffaloes day after day, and week after week.”¹⁴¹ Despite his sympathy for the survivors, Young minimized their misery, writing expansively but inaccurately to George Q. Cannon on December 7, 1856: “The relief so promptly, freely, liberally and timely sent from here was so blest in rescuing them that but few, comparatively, have suffered severely, though some had their feet and hands more or less frosted; yet the mortality has been much less than attends well fitted animal trains traveling in good season.”¹⁴²

**“THE HAND CARTS NOW OR DIE”:
THE HANDCART MISSIONARIES AND THE 1857 TRAINS**

“We are not in the least discouraged about the handcart method of travelling,” Brigham Young asserted boldly after the Willie Company’s arrival. The First Presidency, unable to admit the handcart experiment had failed and refusing to give up the plan, officially pronounced it a success in a general epistle on December 10, 1856: “This season’s operations have demonstrated that the Saints, being filled with faith and the Holy Ghost, can walk across the plains, drawing their provisions and clothing on hand carts. The experience of this season will of course help us to improve in future operations; but the plan has been fairly tested and proved entirely successful.” The epistle also claimed that the system was “as easy as and indeed easier than that method hitherto practiced; and the women endured the trip

¹⁴⁰Jedediah M. Grant, “Discourse, November 2, 1856,” *Deseret News*, November 12, 1856, 284.

¹⁴¹Young, “Remarks, November 16, 1856,” *Deseret News*, November 26, 1856, 298.

¹⁴²Ekins, *Defending Zion*, 216.

quite as well, in comparison, as the men.”¹⁴³

Despite such assurances, the disaster that befell the Willie and Martin companies “turned people against handcart travel,” historians LeRoy and Ann Hafen concluded. “A dramatic and successful demonstration of the efficiency of handcart travel was needed. This might have the desired psychological effect and restore the humble vehicle to favor.”¹⁴⁴ On February 1, 1857, Heber C. Kimball hinted that the First Presidency planned to send the missionaries called that spring east in handcarts.¹⁴⁵ On the morning of April 23, 1857, Brigham Young gave a rousing send-off to about seventy “Handcart Missionaries” bound for the Missouri River equipped with redesigned handcarts.¹⁴⁶

In contrast to the ten celebrated westbound handcart trains, this hand-picked company is practically forgotten. Its purpose was to demonstrate that the handcart system was eminently workable when properly managed. These missionaries had a number of advantages over the European converts who made up most of the handcart emigrants. Their simple presence in Utah showed they were veteran frontiersmen who already reached the isolated territory over the long trails from the Missouri River, California, or other points in the Far West. They did not have to endure a stressful trans-Atlantic sea voyage and an exhausting train trip but could make a fresh start. Although their early departure virtually insured they would encounter extreme weather while crossing South Pass, the party could count on improving conditions rather than face a steadily deepening winter. Significantly they were all male, and

¹⁴³Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 144; and “Fourteenth General Epistle,” *Deseret News*, December 10, 1856, 313–14, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-8764,00.html>, (accessed July 22, 2006). The epistle was accurate on one point: modern studies show that women not only endure ordeals involving starvation as well as men, but they survive at higher rates. The epistle also recommended improvements in the design of the handcarts and sending the “very aged and infirm” in a separate train. “By observing these suggestions it is believed that, with one four or six mule team to each two hundred persons, the emigration will be much facilitated at a still lessened expense.”

¹⁴⁴Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 143–44.

¹⁴⁵Heber C. Kimball, “Remarks,” February 1, 1857, *Journal of Discourses*, 4:208.

¹⁴⁶See Karen Ann Griggs, “Handcarts Going East: The 1857 Missionaries,” *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2009): forthcoming.

nearly all of them were young and healthy.¹⁴⁷ As Ann Eliza Webb Young put it, “They had the advantage in everything.”¹⁴⁸ Most significantly, they each carried more than one hundred pounds of provisions: these benefits allowed them to cross the last five hundred miles to Florence, Nebraska, “in 18 days traveling from 25 to 35 miles per day & our Load averageing from 150 to 200lbs,” as British convert and Salt Lake actor Phillip Margetts wrote.¹⁴⁹

Perhaps the handcart missionaries’ greatest asset was their devotion to the cause, which Margetts expressed in lyrics he set to the tune of the “O Susanna”:

Some men would ask, “why do you start
with carts, come tell, I pray?”
We answer when our Prophet speaks
the Elders all obey;
Since Brigham has the way laid out
that’s best for us, we’ll try,
Stand off you sympathetic fools,
the hand carts now or die.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷Canadian missionary John N. Wakley, age thirty-seven, was an exception. He suffered from recurring bouts of rheumatic fever and was just beginning to learn to read. “The nights were cold and the missionaries must sleep on the ground, and John suffered greatly,” his youngest daughter recalled. According to his companions, sometimes he needed to cling to his cart simply to rise from the ground in the morning. “Therefore, when I think of that valiant band of men, the handcart missionaries, I always seem to see the figure of my father, always in the rear, but determinedly facing east and never ready to quit,” she wrote. See Ida Wakley Brown, “Pioneer: The Life of John Nelson Wakley,” Chapter 4 of Darrel La Mar Wakley, *Downey and Beyond*, digital family history, <http://www.ida.net/users/lamar/pioneer1.html> (accessed November 18, 2007).

¹⁴⁸Ann Eliza Young, *Wife No. 19, or the Story of a Life in Bondage* (Hartford, Conn: Dustin, Gilman & Co., 1875), 227.

¹⁴⁹Phillip Margetts, Letter to Elizabeth Margetts, June 14, 1857. My thanks to Michelle Margetts for providing her transcription of her distinguished ancestor’s holograph letter.

¹⁵⁰Phillip Margetts, “Correspondence,” *Deseret News*, May 20, 1857, 88.

Ann Eliza Webb Young's credibility is easily attacked, especially since she thought the handcart system ended with the trek of these missionaries, but her comments are based on information from her father, wagonwright Chauncey Webb. Webb, who directed construction of the 1856 carts, was on his way east in 1857 to build wagons for the BYX Company. Webb overtook the handcart missionaries at Devil's Gate, where, according to his daughter, he "found them completely jaded and worn out. In truth, they were almost dead from weariness. They travelled slowly, making long stops to rest, and finally they reached the Missouri River in a perfect state of exhaustion. They left their carts there with the utmost willingness, showing wonderful alacrity at abandoning a 'divine' scheme."¹⁵¹

The missionaries themselves hailed the trek as a great success: "We traveled with our hand-carts across the plains to Florence, Nebraska Territory, without horse, mules, cow, or any other animal to assist: drawing in them our provisions, bedding, cooking utensils, tents, &c., at which place we arrived in the full enjoyment of health on [June 10, 1857], making the entire trip from point to point in 48 days," read the official report by Daniel Mackintosh, the "Clerk of the Hand-Cart Company." He added, "but out of that number, we lay by to rest, repair carts, &c., 7½ days, which would make the total number of traveling days 40½, and we would remark that we are satisfied that the trip can be accomplished in a shorter period, say from 30 to 35 days."¹⁵²

Margetts's letter to his wife was also upbeat, but virtually every sentence begins with enthusiasm and concludes with a more realistic description: "I will not attempt to relate to you all the incidents which happened on our trip suffice it to say that in all our hardships the Lord was with us & blessed us," then added fervently, "and thank God it is over now." He praised the system as "the prettiest way to travel that ever was but we traveled quick which made it hard work for some." Even his expressions of affection reveal the difficulty of the trek: "I thought of you when I have come into Camp with my feet all—all Blisterd & fatiged in body with no one to Console me but him

¹⁵¹Ann Eliza Young, *Wife No. 19*, 227.

¹⁵²Daniel Mackintosh, "Correspondence of Elder Daniel Mackintosh," *The Mormon*, July 4, 1857, 3, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-8890,00.html> (accessed July 26, 2006). My great-great-grandfather, David Brinton, was captain of the fourth ten in the party.

witch is above all. Then as soon as we arrived in Camp the next thing was to do another half days work that was to get Chips & Cook supper.”¹⁵³

Good publicity did not conceal the fact that several hundred disillusioned Mormons, including a large number of handcart veterans, desperately wanted to escape the promised land they had sacrificed so much to reach. As early as January 7, 1857, Brigham Young wrote to George Q. Cannon, who was then editing the *Western Standard* in San Francisco: “It is rather warm for the wicked, and we expect when spring comes there will be a scattering out of such as cannot abide righteousness.”¹⁵⁴ He claimed that he would be glad to see them go but insisted that emigrants who owed money to the PEF pay up before departing. While such demands were perhaps understandable, given the cash-starved economy, it added a final bitterness to the feelings with which many of the disillusioned departed.

For example, eight members of the Hillhouse family came to Utah in 1856 with the second handcart company under Daniel McArthur. When they tried to leave the next spring, Jeannette Hillhouse recalled that they were pursued and captured by “a posse of seven mounted Danites” who, “with drawn revolvers” ordered them to return “under penalty of instant death.” They did, in fact, arrest her husband, apparently for debts owed to the Church; but Jeannette pressed on with her three-year-old and baby, saying her family “had starved while there for want of work.” She apparently joined a party of some three hundred defectors that included William Aitken, who had also come in Daniel McArthur’s second handcart company. Aitken said that they had only “a little provisions” but were “all determined to get off or die.”¹⁵⁵

Frederic Loba, a Swiss apostate, told an improbable tale to the *New York Times*. Brigham Young had organized four hundred “Wolf

¹⁵³Phillip Margetts, Letter to Elizabeth Margetts, June 14, 1857.

¹⁵⁴Brigham Young, Letter to George Q. Cannon, January 7, 1857, *Western Standard*, February 21, 1857, 2, in Ekins, *Defending Zion*, 234.

¹⁵⁵Jeannette Hillhouse, “Story of the Hillhouse Family,” in Mrs. E. F. Hollibaugh, *Biographical History of Cloud County, Kansas: Biographies of Representative Citizens* [Kansas City?]: Author, 1903), 539–45; and Aitken, “Adventures of a Mormon.” Jeannette Hillhouse established a successful “dress-making establishment” in Plattsmouth, Nebraska, where her husband joined her more than two years later after barely escaping the fate of the Fanch-

Hunters” whose duty “was to assassinate every person who should attempt to leave the Valley without permission of the Prophet.”¹⁵⁶ Leonard Arrington claimed, “There is no evidence that debtors were abused or that the indebtedness was held *in terrorem* over them,” but block teachers were required to file annual reports on the status of each family’s debt to the PEF and its ability to pay.¹⁵⁷ The restrictions of their freedom to travel were dramatic and strictly enforced. “Those too poor to pay what they owed, such as most PEF emigrants, had no choice but to remain in Utah,” concluded Polly Aird in her article on 1857 defections.¹⁵⁸

THAT WEARISOME JOURNEY OVER THE PLAINS: THE HANDCART TRAINS OF 1857, 1859, AND 1860

In the wake of the Martin and Willie company tragedies of 1856, and after the comedic charade of the handcart missionaries the following spring, five more handcart parties crossed the plains: two in 1857, one in 1859, and two final trains in 1860. The turmoil caused by the Utah War dramatically reduced all Mormon emigration in 1858.

Disturbingly, despite the December 1856 epistle’s pledge “to improve in future operations,” the five handcart companies that followed those of 1856 still suffered from food shortages and mismanagement.¹⁵⁹ The PEF offered no support, and all later handcart emigrants had to pay their own way at an estimated fifty dollars apiece, or more than one thousand contemporary dollars.¹⁶⁰ Given the hard lessons of 1856, the lack of responsibility represented by sending the 1857 handcart trains west without enough supplies to reach South Pass is breath-

er Party while traveling with the “Dukes” train through southern Utah in September 1857. For more, see Bagley and Bigler, *Innocent Blood*, 157.

¹⁵⁶Frederic Loba, “Utah and the Mormons,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1858, p. 4, cols. 5–6.

¹⁵⁷Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 102.

¹⁵⁸Aird, “You Nasty Apostates, Clear Out,” 136, 150.

¹⁵⁹Traditionally, the westbound handcart companies are numbered sequentially so that the first five traveled in 1856, while the sixth through tenth followed between 1857 and 1860.

¹⁶⁰Whether this estimate included the cost of a handcart is not clear. See the Christiansen Company narrative, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/narrative/0,18046,4981-1-88,00.html> (accessed November 16, 2007). “The fare was \$20.00,” according to Theodore

taking. In the wake of the 1856 handcart disasters, Young did take positive steps to avoid a similar catastrophe. In April 1857, the Deseret Express was transformed into the Brigham Young Express and Carrying Company. At Young's request, early in 1856 John Taylor had sent Bishop Andrew Cunningham to establish the first of some seventy-five planned Y.X. supply-and-relay stations at Beaver Creek near the Loup Fork, some 925 miles east of Salt Lake. In June 1857 Horace Eldredge appointed Joel Hills Johnson to preside over the settlement on Beaver Creek, now named Genoa "after the birthplace of the great discoverer of the American continent."¹⁶¹ In Salt Lake, Brigham Young was working hard to add more stations at critical points in today's Wyoming, such as Deer Creek, near today's Glenrock; Horseshoe Creek, now two miles from Glendo; La Bonte Creek, ten miles south of Douglas; and at Devil's Gate, Rocky Ridge, and Fort Supply, an existing Mormon settlement near Fort Bridger.¹⁶²

"The Y.X. Co. is in a flourishing condition, we are sending out from 40 to 65 animals every mail, which we wish to increasingly continue until we get the road stocked with 1800 horses & mules," Young informed George Q. Cannon on the Fourth of July. "We have sent Elders A. O. Smoot & N. V. Jones with 80 men, to locate permanent stations in the Black Hills, which we design as resting places to those of our emigration who have not means to come through, or who may be too late as was the case last fall. Of course we shall plentifully supply them with provisions &c."¹⁶³

But the government terminated Brigham Young's mail contract shortly after it ordered troops to Utah, and all the investment in the Y.X. Express literally went up in smoke. "Nearly \$200,000 was expended during the winter of 1856-57 to establish way stations, purchase teams and wagons, hire help, and to buy equipment and other supplies," historian Leonard Arrington concluded. "The resources of

Dedricksson, an 1856 handcart pioneer. Biographical sketch, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 7:486-87.

¹⁶¹Joel Hills Johnson, Journal, June 1 and 9, 1857, <http://heritage.uen.org/companies/Wc18f9c7f10851.htm> (accessed August 24, 2008).

¹⁶²Stanley B. Kimball, *Historic Resource Study: Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior/National Park Service, 1991): 69-70, http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/mopi/hrst.htm (accessed July 18, 2006).

¹⁶³Young to Cannon, July 4, 1857, in Ekins, *Defending Zion*, 242.

the Church were almost exhausted in this venture.”¹⁶⁴

The result was hunger for the 1857 handcart pioneers. The 149 members of Israel Evans’s sixth handcart company, Robert Fishburn recalled, “finished up everything we had in the company in the shape of provisions,” before reaching Fort Laramie. Evans informed his charges there were supplies stored at Horseshoe Creek and “then asked us how we felt about handing over our outfits, which consisted of our handcarts, teams and wagons, tents, cooking utensils, etc., to the Church when we arrived in Salt Lake City,” in exchange for enough food to complete the journey. “We very willingly agreed to hand them over rather than starve.” Fishburn admitted that his companions “could not help but feel that somebody was at fault for the scanty supply of provisions furnished us.” Still, he loyally added, “we could not do otherwise than acknowledge the hand of a kind and over-ruling Providence in blessing his servant Brigham with wisdom and foresight sufficient to cause such an abundance of provisions to be sent out and stored at different points.”¹⁶⁵

“We were only poorly supplied with provisions when we left Florence and had a thousand miles of wilderness to cover before we could expect any more,” acknowledged C. C. A. Christensen, traveling in the seventh company. The smoked pork, beef jerky, sugar, coffee, and salt initially provided for the handcart trekkers “lasted only about three weeks in most cases, and after that there was naturally flour, flour, flour, and only flour to eat. With this they baked bread, cooked porridge, gruel, soup, coffee, pancakes, and several other nice dishes, but still it was just flour, flour, and flour; and at one point the flour was scarce, too.” He summarizes: They were “subjected to almost every deprivation that people could bear and endure, and that for all of thirteen weeks.”¹⁶⁶

Ironically, the Utah Expedition, sent to the territory to restore federal authority, establish a military department, and insure that Brigham Young accepted his replacement as governor, helped to feed the hungry handcart trains. When the 330 members of Christian

¹⁶⁴Leonard J. Arrington, “Mormon Finance and the Utah War,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (July 1952): 219–37.

¹⁶⁵Robert Fishburn, “Pioneer Autobiographies,” in Daughters of Utah Pioneer Lesson Committee, comps., *Chronicles of Courage*, 8 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1990–97), 2:205–6.

¹⁶⁶Christensen, “By Handcart to Utah,” 337–44.

Christiansen's seventh handcart company ran out of supplies on the Sweetwater River, a captain in the army's provision train "approached us and said in a kindly way, that one of his oxen had a crushed foot," Carl Dorius wrote. "If we could use it we were welcome to have it. This came as a blessing, because the company had been without any meat for several weeks. It was a real treat. We ran out of food and sent to Salt Lake City for provisions which came too late to help. One tenth of the company died for want of care and nourishment."¹⁶⁷

That fall, in an eerie repeat of the previous fall's killing weather, the U.S. Army encountered a blizzard, subzero temperatures, and "famished mules" at South Pass. Army sutler William Carter, who later built a ranching and trading empire near Fort Bridger, recalled November 8–9, 1857, as "an awful night. . . . The wind swept with wild fury drifting the snow around us and up across our road. At every half mile a mule was turned loose unable to proceed any further."¹⁶⁸ Similar conditions had killed more than two hundred Latter-day Saints, but "only one man died" during the army's arduous march, "and he had been the victim of lockjaw," concluded historian Norman F. Furniss. He attributes this survival rate to Colonel Philip St. George Cooke's leadership and adequate rations for the men.¹⁶⁹ Late in 1857, Captain Jesse Gove's detailed inventory of the Utah Expedi-

¹⁶⁷Carl Dorius, Journal, translation from Danish reproduced in Earl N. Dorius and Ruth C. Rasmussen, *The Dorius Heritage* (Salt Lake City: E. N. Dorius, 1979), 86–88. Two other members of the company also recalled the same incident with gratitude. James Jensen, "Reminiscences: Biography of James Jensen by J. M. Tanner," 12–41, in *Journal History*, September 13, 1857, 12, 16–22; "Recollections of Kersten Erickson Benson Coming to Zion in 1857," 1–3, in Benson Biographical File, LDS Church Library, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-4956,00.html> (accessed July 20, 2008).

¹⁶⁸William A. Carter, Diary, November 9–10, 1857, Wyoming State Archives, from typescript copy of holograph by David L. Bigler. See also William A. Carter, "Diary of Judge William A. Carter Describes Life on the Trail in 1857," *Annals of Wyoming* 11, no. 2 (April 1939): 75–113.

¹⁶⁹Furniss, *The Mormon Conflict*, 118. Historian John Eldredge's research indicates that the dragoons may have sustained an additional casualty during the blizzard, when a ricochet killed a soldier who was executing dying mules. Personal communication with Will Bagley, notes on Utah

tion's supply wagons at Fort Bridger counted "some 800 heavy wagon loads, 6000 lbs. each," which did not include the three supply trains Lot Smith's raiders burned.¹⁷⁰ These figures represented a ratio of almost one wagon for every three soldiers, based on the army's paper strength of 2,500 men, but a ratio of nearly 2:1 to support its actual total of 1,500 men. In contrast, historian William Hartley estimated that the Willie and Martin companies had only twelve wagons to support 1,075 emigrants.¹⁷¹

"Of course it was a dreadfully hard journey and like the other companies we suffered from lack of food," recalled Hannah Lapish, who traveled with Daniel Robison's ninth handcart party in 1860. She traded her jewelry on the trail for seven hundred pounds of flour that ran out by the time her train reached Green River. "Our company was one of the last companies to make the journey in that pathetic way," she remembered. "We handcart people will never outlive the memory of those experiences."¹⁷²

William Atkin remembered that George Rowley's eighth handcart company found a large bed of prickly pear cactus and "tried many ways to cook them so we could eat them. Some took the last morsel of bacon they had, peeled the prickly pears and fried them, others peeled and boiled them, while other placed in the fire and roasted them, but all to no purpose."¹⁷³

Henry Hobbs, also traveling with the George Rowley Company,

Westerners' fieldtrip, June 29, 2007.

¹⁷⁰Jesse A. Gove, *The Utah Expedition, 1857-1858: Letters of Capt. Jesse A. Gove, 10th Inf., U.S.A., of Concord, N.H., to Mrs. Gove, and Special Correspondence of the New York Herald*, edited by Otis G. Hammond (Concord: New Hampshire Historical Society, 1928), 98, 99.

¹⁷¹William G. Hartley, "Handcarts," in *Utah History Encyclopedia*, edited by Allan Kent Powell (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 243.

¹⁷²Hannah Lapish, Recollection, cited as "Journal" in Handcart Stories, 37-40, LDS Church Library, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-5930,00.html> (accessed July 22, 2006); ellipses omitted. Lapish was the woman whom Sarah Beesley described as "very enthusiastic about" the handcart story.

¹⁷³William Atkin, "Handcart Experience," serialized in *St. George Union*, May 14, 1896, to November 14, 1896. Also in *Heart Throbs of the West*, 6:380-94; and <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0>,

describes their suffering west of South Pass in 1859. "Many of the Saints are faint worn & weary & comming in hours after the rest," Hobbs wrote. "Much of this weakness is caused through the lack of food." He also observed: "Some who have not a sufficient quantity of clothes suffer the cold nights."¹⁷⁴ John S. Stucki of Stoddard's tenth and last handcart company had "just half as much as is considered an average person needs to live on." One of the last two trains went three days without food.¹⁷⁵ "We didn't have any trouble with the Indians," Sarah Beesley, also in George Rowley's 1859 handcart company, recalled. "In fact they saved our lives at various times, such as when they gave us food." She also remembered that California overlanders "often pitied us and gave us food. Yes, I crossed the plains with a handcart once but I am thankful I have never had to again."¹⁷⁶

"Brigham Young has sent out mule teams with 2,500 lbs. of flour and 500 lbs. of bacon, to meet the first hand-cart company of Mormon immigrants," the *New York Times* reported in 1860 as the last of the handcart trains approached Utah. Despite the Mormon leader's best efforts, however, the emigrants' heartrending accounts demonstrate that their needs continuously overwhelmed the available supplies. For example, at one pound a day, the 359 emigrants in the last two handcart trains in 1860 would consume all that flour in a little more than a week. Yet Young convinced even a skeptical newspaper correspondent that he extended "a most fatherly care over his hand-cart brethren and sisters who 'endure to the end' of that wearisome journey over the Plains."¹⁷⁷ Despite the good press and the supply wagon that had reached his party on the trail, the captain of the ninth handcart company, Daniel Robison, wrote to Young in 1860 a week before reaching Salt Lake to report that he had "served out the last of our provisions" that morning on the Weber River. Many in his

18016,4976-4672,00.html, accessed October 10, 2006.

¹⁷⁴Henry Hobbs, Journal, August 19, 22, 1859, holograph, LDS Church Library, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-4680,00.html> (accessed July 20, 2006).

¹⁷⁵John S. Stucki, *Family History Journal of John S. Stucki* (1932; rpt., Bountiful, Utah: Doc Goodie, 1997), <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-6167,00.html> (accessed August 11, 2006).

¹⁷⁶Beesley, "Reminiscences," 34.

¹⁷⁷"From Utah. The Mails—Indian Troubles, August 17, 1860," *New York Times*, September 11, 1860, 8.

company, which had “quite a number sick,” would be “out of provisions to night as they had to breakfast this morning out of what was served to them.”¹⁷⁸

The *New York Times* reported the October 1860 semi-annual general conference at which Brigham Young announced that “the hand-cart system had been pretty well tried, and, though successful in the proper season, yet it was not altogether satisfactory.” It was as close as the Lion of the Lord ever came to acknowledging that the scheme had failed, but he also announced a new policy that one of Mormonism’s finest historians has recognized as an “Overland Trails Revolution.”¹⁷⁹ The Mormon leader now planned “to send ox-teams from this city in the Spring, with missionaries, the teams to return in the Fall with merchandise and emigrants. It appears that this is to be the method of immigration and trade for the immediate future. Last Spring such a train went from here, and it has lately returned with the same oxen, reported in excellent condition, and with scarcely a casualty,” the *New York Times* continued. “One thing was pretty well indicated at Conference—that the Mormon hand-cart system of immigration has had its day.” The correspondent attributed the change to “the awful disasters of the hand-cart expeditions” of 1856, which “still grate horribly on the memory, the remembrance being kept alive by numerous crippled unfortunates, who were frost-bitten during that time of wretchedness, and who ever and anon obtrude upon the site in the streets of this city and the settlements of the territory.”¹⁸⁰

**“DREADFUL STORIES”:
THE HANDCART DISASTERS AND HISTORY**

And what happened to the steam engine after its exile to south-

¹⁷⁸Daniel Robison, Letter to Brigham Young, August 24, 1860, Brigham Young Office Files. Robison later recalled that Bishop Henefer let his company dig potatoes, which, along with fish from the Weber River, gave everyone a “treat.” He also remembered seeing young girls harnessed to their handcart, with “some pushing, some pulling all day long through the hot, dry sand, with hardly enough food to eat to keep life in their bodies.” Daniel Robison, *Life Sketch*, 1900, available at <http://www.alexanderrobison.org/download.htm> (accessed May 28, 2008).

¹⁷⁹Hartley, “Brigham Young’s Overland Trails Revolution,” 1–30.

¹⁸⁰“FROM UTAH. Arrival of Judge Kinney—The Mormon Conference, October 6, 1860,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1860, 5.

ern Utah? Its subsequent history is murky, but at a few minutes past 10 P.M. on February 11, 1870, "President Young discovered that the shed containing the steam engine which runs the DESERET NEWS press was on fire. He immediately gave the alarm and a number of police officers and a crowd of citizens were quickly on the spot and by their united efforts the fire was soon extinguished." The cause of the fire was "involved in mystery," the *Deseret News* reported, but the machine incurred little damage. The *News* thanked "the many present who extended their aid" for "the promptness and energy displayed on the occasion and especially to Bros. William Calder and John Acomb."¹⁸¹ After the arrival of the transcontinental railroad in the territory nine months earlier, steam engines were no longer a rarity in Utah, so whether this was the historic piece of equipment in question is unclear. But given the special vigilance President Young gave to this particular device, perhaps he had formed an enduring bond with the steam engine A. O. Smoot had brought overland in 1856 at the cost of so much suffering and sacrifice.

With the passage of time, a historian could expect the memories of handcart veterans to soften. This is not, surprisingly, the case. Examined in context, even their most positive remarks on the system disappear into tales of hardship and distress. Priscilla M. Evans's oft-quoted comment, "we thought it was a glorious way to go to Zion," referred to the first leg of her 1856 journey across Iowa with Edward Bunker's company; the rest of her brief narrative is a chronicle of hunger and suffering, relieved only by entertaining encounters with Indians. "After months of traveling we were put on half[-]rations, and at one time before help came, we were out of flour, for two days. We shook the flour sacks to thicken the gravy but had no grease of any kind," she wrote.¹⁸² Even C. C. A. Christensen's happy recollection of how his fellow handcart pioneers "greeted with songs of delight the rising sun which let them see Salt Lake City for the first time" included the details that these ragged survivors were "clothed in rags, with almost bottomless shoes on their feet," with "their lips half eaten

¹⁸¹*Daily Desert News*, February 12, 1870, reprinted in the *Desert Weekly News*, February 16, 1870, p. 20, col. 1. My thanks to Dr. John Gary Maxwell for bringing this item to my attention.

¹⁸²Priscilla M. Evans, *Autobiography* [ca. 1914], item 2, 39–41, LDS Church Library, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/source/0,18016,4976-2931,00.html> (accessed November 19, 2007).

up by saleratus dust.”¹⁸³

The fanciful articles printed in the *Deseret News* in the wake of the 1856 decimation and the Fourteenth General Epistle claimed that the handcart “plan has been fairly tested and proved entirely successful”; however, they were simply an attempt “to keep the full horror of the disaster from becoming public, especially in England,” historian David L. Bigler has observed. “But it would be safe to estimate the total number of deaths at well over two hundred, or at least one in five of the last two companies, with many others maimed for life.” The number of those who lost limbs or were otherwise permanently disabled has never been calculated. Like the steam engine, many of them found themselves in the remote settlements of southern Utah. “One thing is certain,” Bigler noted, “the handcart disaster of 1856 was the greatest single tragedy in the history of the nation’s move west in the nineteenth century.”¹⁸⁴

An accurate count of all the handcart fatalities may not be possible. “Censuses of the dead were never taken,” historian Tom Rea observed.¹⁸⁵ In 1960, the Hafens estimated that “about 250” people died while traveling with the ten handcart trains.¹⁸⁶ In 1998, BYU Church history professor Susan Easton Black, relying on experts such as Melvin Bashore, Lyndia McDowell Carter, William G. Hartley, Gail G. Holmes, Michael N. Landon, and Fred E. Woods, presented a low estimate of 252 deaths and a high estimate of 340 or more. Carter, the best expert on the subject, “notes that a lack of accurate detailed records makes determining mortality figures extremely difficult,” but she estimated that between 202 and 267 members of the Willie and the Martin companies alone died on the trail, while perhaps more than seventy handcart pioneers traveling with the other eight trains also died.¹⁸⁷ Current official LDS Church sources document 252 deaths among the first five handcart companies, while the last five companies of 1857, 1859, and 1860 suffered twenty-five fatalities.

¹⁸³Christensen, “By Handcart to Utah,” 344.

¹⁸⁴Bigler, *Forgotten Kingdom*, 118. Bigler cited John Chislett’s estimate that about 150 members of the Martin Company died and James Willie’s report that seventy-seven died in his company.

¹⁸⁵Rea, *Devil’s Gate*, 98.

¹⁸⁶Hafens, *Handcarts to Zion*, 193.

¹⁸⁷Susan Easton Black and others, “I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, July 1998, 40–44.

Only Oscar Stoddard's tenth company claimed to have no deaths.¹⁸⁸ But 1860 emigration agent George Q. Cannon, now an apostle, had prophesied, that, if Stoddard's train "would be humble and faithful[,] not one of them should die on the road to the Valley." Stoddard admitted that a family that had joined his train at the Loup Fork in Nebraska had a sick daughter but she "died in East Canyon, a few miles below the foot of the Big Mountain and was buried there," just short of the valley.¹⁸⁹

These figures reflect only the deaths mentioned in the trail sources, ignoring the large number of those who died shortly after reaching Great Salt Lake City. Several contemporary reports suggest that the total death toll was higher. In response to the exaggerated claim of Frederick Loba, a Swiss apostate, that "*two hundred persons were all that survived*," a correspondent told the *New York Times* in 1858, "The facts are bad enough." This anonymous correspondent claimed that he saw the handcart trains arrive: The first two trains were "in pretty good condition, much fatigued and worn down by their long and arduous march; but the deaths were only about the usual average of emigrant wagon trains." Deaths had been numerous in the Willie Company, "and the survivors were in a wretched state—sick, helpless, destitute of clothing, and in some cases frozen." He claimed that only one-third to one-half of the Martin Company survived, "and on their arrival were in such suffering that many died soon after they arrived. I believe if they had had one hundred miles further to travel, they would all have died." He estimated that "about 500 in all died on the plains, or immediately after their arrival in the settlements."¹⁹⁰ This estimate is no doubt high, but the number of handcart pioneers who died in 1856 on the way to Utah or from the effects of the trek probably exceeded three hundred.

¹⁸⁸See the company narratives and individual journals at the LDS Church's Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website available at <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/content/0,15757,3957-1-2117,00.html> (accessed November 16, 2007). For the Willie and Martin death toll, see Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4:102.

¹⁸⁹Oscar O. Stoddard, Report, in *Journal History*, September 24, 1860, 4.

¹⁹⁰"Mr. Frederick Loba and the Mormons—Highly Interesting Details," *St. Louis Missouri Democrat*, rpt., *New York Times*, May 18, 1858, 4. The

Attempts to tell the entire handcart story sometimes take the position that the Willie and Martin companies merely suffered from a late start exacerbated by poor management but that, in the words of H. H. Bancroft (or, more probably, Franklin D. Richards), “the hand-cart scheme was perfectly feasible.” Contemporary historian Howard A. Christy concluded that the handcart plan “clearly proved its feasibility by the fact that eight of the ten emigrant handcart companies had made the trip as successfully as any wagon company.”¹⁹¹

But at what cost had they achieved this “success,” and was this terrible suffering necessary? True, many if not most handcart survivors lived out their lives as devout Latter-day Saints, and many accepted the experience as a test of faith. They believed that their hard passage had made possible their subsequent lives in Utah, where they had opportunities beyond imagining in their European homelands. “Despite the drudgery and the tragic drama, most of the handcart emigrants felt they had reached their goal and that was what mattered, not what they had gone through to get there,” historian Lyndia McDowell Carter concluded.¹⁹² So, did the end justify the means? Most of those who recorded their experience believed it did and credited Brigham Young for rescuing them. But having survived the experience, few glorified it. “Don’t ask me anything about that,” Sarah Hancock Beesley responded years later when someone pressed her to tell her experience as a handcart pioneer in 1859. “Those are dreadful stories and I don’t see why we shouldn’t try to forget them. I say ‘Bury them with the dead who died on the plains.’ My children have often tried to get me to write my handcart story

anonymous reporter realized that “this communication may have the air of sympathy with the Mormons,” but insisted: “I write neither for nor against them—my only object being to correct a few errors that I thought might have been imbibed by the unwary reader of Mr. Loba’s statements, as well as give a few instances that have come under my own observation.”

¹⁹¹Bancroft quoted in Howard Christy with Christy’s commentary in “Weather, Disaster, and Responsibility: An Essay on the Willie and Martin Handcart Story,” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–98): 9. Richards is widely believed to have written much of the text used in Bancroft’s *History of Utah*.

¹⁹²Carter, “The Mormon Handcart Companies,” 14.

but I will not.”¹⁹³

“1856 was the year of the handcart craze, the three first of which were the craze, and the two last that started from the frontiers so late were crazy,” recalled Samuel S. Jones, who remembered he was in the craziest company of them all, Edward Martin’s.¹⁹⁴ “To all, the journey, with its great and incessant toils, its wearing hardships, and wasting privations, was a hard and bitter experience, wholly unanticipated,” wrote John Jaques, secretary in the offices of Church presidents John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff. “But to many, and especially to women and children who had been delicately brought up and tenderly cared for, and who had never known want nor been subject to hardships previously, as well as to the weakly and elderly of both sexes, it was cruel to a degree far beyond the power of language to express, and the more so for the reason that the worst parts of the experience were entirely unnecessary, because avoidable by timely measures and more sagacious management.”¹⁹⁵

Others were even more forthright about whom they held accountable for so much needless suffering. Elizabeth Camm, who watched her husband die and who amputated her own children’s feet during the Martin Company trek, felt that the missionaries tried to cheat her unbaptized husband while he was buying railroad tickets. “Oh Eliza, you have got among a bad lot,” he reproached her. “All they want is my money. God’s Servants look after the Souls of the Saints, not their purses. Haven’t you done wrong in leaving our home?” he asked. At Iowa City she watched as her treasured possessions and clothing were sold at auction for a pittance. “I noticed it was all bought mostly by Elders from the Valley, they knew the value of it in Utah—so did I when I got there with nothing to wear.” The emigration agents failed to provide the wagons they had promised to transport baggage, personal property, children, and the sick. These wagons

¹⁹³Sarah Hancock Beesley, “Reminiscences,” in *Handcart Stories*, 28–34, LDS Church Library.

¹⁹⁴Jones, “Experience of S. S. Jones,” September 1, 1906, 20. He added, “This is not written in any spirit of complaint. I cannot recall a rebellious spirit or feeling on the trip. We started for Zion, and to help build up the same in the valleys of the mountains, and thank God we are here.” He remained a Mormon stalwart despite his hard experience. The article concluded with a verse from “Come, Come Ye Saints.”

¹⁹⁵Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” January 19, 1879, 1.

“were all loaded with merchandise, they told us, for President Young’s store in Salt Lake,” she recalled, “but that is to his account.”¹⁹⁶

The handcart system never mastered the problem of providing enough food for people who could not haul it themselves in their small human-powered carts. The rationing system that brought even the last “successful” handcart emigrants to the brink of starvation is baffling, and none of the possible explanations for this deficiency is comforting. Yet the failure to adequately provision the handcart train was so consistently repeated that it had to be a matter of policy rather than mere oversight or incompetence. The people who trusted their lives to the missionaries who ran the companies praised compassionate leaders like Daniel McArthur, Levi Savage, George Rowley, and Christian Christiansen, but the immigrants were too often ruthlessly exploited and sometimes cheated. It proved to be an abusive and needless scheme, since the world did not end as Brigham Young predicted it would. It is an inescapable fact that the system resulted in the largest loss of life in the three decades of overland wagon travel on the Oregon, California, and Mormon trails, killing in its first year at least five times as many men, women, and children as perished under very different circumstances with the Donner Party in the Sierra Nevada.

“What have you brought us to, you, yourself in shafts drawing like beasts of burden, your children hungry and almost naked, myself will soon be gone, and My God, what will become of you and the children?” Joseph Sermon asked his wife as he lay dying of starvation and, she said, a broken heart.¹⁹⁷ Essentially, to save money, Brigham Young resorted to turning men, women, and children into beasts of burden and created a system that exploited poor converts to Mormonism. Ultimately, it replaced draft animals with human beings and placed more value dollars on dollars than life itself. “Oh it was so hard,” said Sarah Beesley.¹⁹⁸

Historians have argued ever since 1856 over who was responsible for the disaster. Like Brigham Young, most of them lay the blame on Franklin D. Richards. Young charged his most talented subordinate, Apostle John Taylor, with “saving one and incurring three dol-

¹⁹⁶Elizabeth Sermon Camm, Letter to “My Dear Children,” March 16, 1892, in Joel Edward Ricks Collection, LDS Church Library.

¹⁹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸Sarah Beesley, quoted in Carter, “The Mormon Handcart Companies,” 2.

lars expence” while trying to provide leadership for the handcart emigration. “You must have been misinformed—it is false in toto, and without any foundation or semblance in truth,” Taylor responded vigorously. “I am prepared to meet any man on this or any charge, at any time or place. I have records of my acts which I am not afraid to have scrutinized.”¹⁹⁹

Taylor cast the situation in its true light:

The Hand-Cart system was to me, and to us all, a new operation. I considered that the utmost care and prudence was necessary. I wanted if a train started, to know that it would go through. I knew of the weakness and infirmity of many women, children and aged persons that were calculated to go, [but] I did not consider that a few dollars were to be put in competition with the lives of human beings. I believed it better for a smaller company to go through safe, than for a larger one to perish on the way.²⁰⁰

Taylor forthrightly identified the fundamental problem with the handcart system: it placed more value on money than on human life. By compelling inexperienced and impoverished converts to do the work of animals²⁰¹ on starvation rations, it made overland emigration unnecessarily difficult, if not downright cruel, and led to a loss of life that is ultimately unjustifiable.

So, who was to blame? Even the 1856 handcart veterans seldom asked the question; and when they did, they came to mixed conclusions. John Jaques asked himself who he blamed for his “hard and bitter experience” as a handcart pioneer. “I blame nobody. I am not anxious to blame anybody,” he wrote. “I am not writing for the purpose of blaming anybody, but to fill up a blank page of history with matters of much interest.”²⁰² Others were more direct: “Whether Brigham was influenced in his desire to get the poor of Europe more rapidly to Utah [or] by his sympathy with their condition, by his well-known love of power, his glory in numbers, or his love of wealth, which an increased amount of subservient labour would enable him to acquire, is

¹⁹⁹John Taylor, Letter to Brigham Young, February 24, 1857, 5–6, Brigham Young Collection.

²⁰⁰*Ibid.*

²⁰¹See John Taylor, “Hand Carts for the Plains,” *The Mormon*, December 1, 1855, 2.

²⁰²Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” January 19, 1879, 1.

best known to himself,” wrote handcart-veteran John Chislett. “But the sad results of his Hand-Cart scheme will call for a day of reckoning in the future which he cannot evade.”²⁰³

Few cultures celebrate calamities, but historical disasters such as the hard fate of the Donner Party, the Chicago fire, or the sinking of the *Titanic* hold an odd fascination for Americans. Yet modern Mormonism’s strange attraction to this appalling catastrophe forms a singular addition to the canon. The elevation of the handcart debacle to the status of a sacred legend of the Mormon people may well be unique.

During Brigham Young’s lifetime, no faithful Latter-day Saints ever wrote about the handcart disasters, leaving the story to be told by dissenters and apostates. As Lyndia Carter observed, “a shroud of silence came down for many years and the event was never discussed” because “these handcart company deaths made the church look bad [and] they made Brigham Young look bad.”²⁰⁴ In contrast, Mormons today fondly embrace and celebrate this tragic tale as a testament to their ancestors’ faith and fortitude, while the Corporation of the President has spent millions of dollars acquiring and developing the property now known as the Handcart Ranch near Devil’s Gate and expending political capital in arranging a long-term lease with U.S. Bureau of Land Management for government-owned property.

The volunteer guides at the LDS Church’s Handcart Ranch have told visitors that the reason so many women alone had to push and pull their way across the plains in 1856 was that their husbands had enlisted in the Mormon Battalion, an event that actually took place in 1846. In August 2002, one bright young LDS visitor asked how her grandfather could have served in the Mormon Battalion and still be listed among the handcart rescuers. Edward Bunker, Levi Savage, and Daniel Tyler were all battalion veterans. The guide had apparently never considered the chronological impossibility of events happening simultaneously in 1846 and 1856. Fortunately, the LDS Church History Department has launched an effort to improve the historical narratives provided to visitors at LDS Church historical sites like the Handcart Ranch. Despite such efforts, as this article underwent final revision in 2008, a Salt Lake paper reported how during “the women’s

²⁰³“Mr. Chislett’s Narrative,” 313.

²⁰⁴Christopher Smith, “Tragic Handcart Account Evolved Over the Years,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 30, 2002, A1.

pull” on a Sandy, Utah, Canyon View Stake handcart reenactment, all the men and boys were “sent off—having symbolically died or joined the Mormon batallion [sic]—leaving the women to face Rocky Ridge on their own.”²⁰⁵

No one should ever discount the heroism of those who suffered or died during the handcart ordeal, or ignore the selfless acts of courage by the men and boys who risked their lives to save the victims of this ill-conceived experiment. Nothing could honor that memory better than to deal with this story as honestly as the survivors did in their diaries and memoirs, which Juanita Brooks said “picture the labors and suffering of the handcart pioneers as one long torture.”²⁰⁶ It is time to honor this story and these heroic people with the truth.

²⁰⁵Jessica Ravitz, “Modern-Day Mormon Pioneers: An Outsider Looking In,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 23, 2008, B1, B3.

²⁰⁶Brooks, *On the Mormon Frontier*, 2:601, note 74.