Babylon to Zion on Forty-Two Dollars: The Disaster of the Willie Company and an Evaluation of the Handcart System

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BABYLON TO ZION ON FORTY-TWO DOLLARS: THE DISASTER OF THE
WILLIE COMPANY AND AN EVALUATION OF THE HANDCART SYSTEM

by

Larry R. Moses

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INTRODUCTION

In 1847, the Mormon Church began a migration to the Great Salt Lake Basin, their Zion in the mountains. This pilgrimage was to continue for over a half century, and out of it was to come one of the truly epic stories of the western settlement. Before leaving Nauvoo, these self-styled Saints of the modern era pledged themselves to set up a system to transport all of their members to Utah, regardless of their financial status. The vow was renewed at the October 1849 Conference held in Salt Lake City. President Heber C. Kimball, first counselor to Brigham Young, suggested that a fund be set up to help the poor to reach Utah, his proposal was accepted by a unanimous vote, and the First Presidency issued a call for contributions.

During the first year, the Salt Lake Valley Saints collected $5,000.¹ The Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company came into existence in 1851, with the power to raise funds, own property, and issue securities.² The funds for the company were to be acquired entirely by donations; tobacco smokers and tea drinkers were encouraged to give up these habits and to use the money to build the Perpetual Emigrating Fund.³


The fund reached a total of $150,000 between 1852 and 1855, and during this period a shift in the purpose of the fund took place.

As early as 1837, Mormon missionaries converted people in the British Isles, and these new Saints were interested in joining the rest of the flock in Zion. A majority of converts were from the poorer classes and needed help to reach Utah. The Perpetual Emigrating Fund's purpose was enlarged to gather the Saints from the British Isles. One of the features of the fund that appealed to the people in the Valley was that it assisted in bringing friends and relatives to Zion. The fund was to be continued by new donations and the repaying of the money by those who had used the services offered.

By this it will readily be discovered, that the funds are to be appointed in the form of a loan, rather than a gift; and this will make the honest in heart rejoice, for they love to labor, and be independent by their labor, and not live on the charity of their friends, while the lazy idlers, if any such there be, will find fault, and want every luxury furnished them for their journey, and in the end pay nothing.⁴

At first in selecting the people for assistance, the skilled were given special consideration. By 1856, the need for skilled workers diminished, so the major consideration was the faithfulness of the individual wanting help to come to Zion. The selection of which Saints would be assisted in their travel to Zion was left to the bishops of the various wards in the British Isles.

Brigham Young began in 1855 to fear the pressure of the gentile⁵ world closing in on his religious community. The arrival of new Saints

⁴Piercy, p. 22.
⁵Gentile is the term used by the Mormons for all non-Mormons.
would insure the growth, not only of population, but also of those skilled to produce tools and other needed supplies. Brigham Young decreed:

Let all things be done in order, and let all the Saints, who can, 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 gird up their loins and walk through, and nothing shall hinder or stay them.6

The decree was enthusiastically accepted by the British Saints; and with Franklin Richards, President of the British Isle Mission, spreading the word 1300 to 1500 Saints responded to take part in the handcart adventure. Financial strain had made the old method for transporting the Saints impossible. As early as 1851, Brigham Young had suggested the possibility of the Saints walking to Utah. The idea that one should walk to the West was not new; as not only many of the gold seekers had walked to California, even the earlier Saints had walked most of the way using their ox teams and wagons to carry provisions. President Young also felt this could well be a test of faith:

If any apostatize in consequence of this regulation so much the better that such deny the faith before they start than do so, for a more trifling cause, after they get here; and if they have not faith 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 exellation and eternal lives.7

Financial necessity, however, became the major reason for

6Deseret News (Salt Lake City), October 31, 1855, p. 268.
7Ibid., p. 268.
adopting the handcart method. The Perpetual Emigrating Fund was in a state of bankruptcy. The grasshopper plague of 1855, followed by a severe winter; the failure of the emigrants to repay the loans; and a slackening of donations had depleted the funds. The equipment purchased with the initial contributions in 1849 had by 1856, reached a stage where replacements were needed. Over half the cattle owned by the Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company starved during the winter. A requirement preventing the Saints from replenishing their funds on the way forced cost up. President Young decided to cut the expense from Liverpool, England, to Utah from sixty dollars to less than forty-two dollars per head. The program envisioned by the President included far more than just the use of handcarts. Experienced men, with the cattle and supplies needed to make the trip successful, were to be provided from Utah. The President suggested the establishment of settlements along the route to alleviate the need for carrying a great number of supplies. However, the completion of the Union Pacific soon made these settlements unnecessary.

The program once designed could only be completed by a special group of people. The Crimean War, the potato blight, and the unemployment situation all increased emigration from the British Isles and Northern Europe. While all of these economic reasons are important, no single one will explain the migration of the Saints. The same drive

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8 Hubert Howe Bancroft, History of Utah (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), p. 422.


10 By 1860 the railroad had reached Denver and migration was slowed by the Civil War until 1865. Four years after the war the transcontinental line was completed.
evident in the middle-easterners' trek to the Holy Lands, the zeal that sent children in masses to liberate Jerusalem from the infidels can be seen in the handcart emigrants. If it was only a case of economics, the emigrants would never have gone beyond the fertile lands of Iowa.

To them Zion was a place of freedom and opportunity, a place where they could go where they could worship God and build a home in the everlasting hills... that unfathomable faith, that magnetic pull that nothing else mattered.\footnote{Eliza M. Wakefield, The Handcart Trail (1949), Microfilm, Utah State University Library.}

Between the years of 1856 and 1860, a total of ten handcart companies made the journey across the plains. Eight of the trips were rather uneventful. The story of one of the two companies not so fortunate is the subject of this paper. This is the story of the fourth handcart company of 1856, their tragedies, heartbreaks, and the ultimate joys of the arrival in the Salt Lake Valley.
LIVERPOOL TO FLORENCE

The gathering of the Saints at the port city of Liverpool was the first step toward America. Liverpool was the center of all emigration to America. The Mormon Church gathered converts from all of Europe and sent them to America from Liverpool. This city was chosen because it had the most regular transportation to America. The Mormon emigrant suffered far less than the average pilgrim. The typical emigrant arrived in Liverpool and fell prey to the shysters who sold passage aboard the various ships, which often did not exist. The gentile emigrant had to find a place to stay, and doorways often served as homes. The Mormon agents contracted ships and quarters for the converts before they arrived in Liverpool. Often the quarters were empty warehouses, but this afforded protection from both the thieves and the elements. The Church supplied a companionship and a sense of belonging not enjoyed by the average emigrant, and the rural converts found themselves less out of place in the city than their gentile counterparts.12 The trip aboard ship was more pleasant for the Mormon emigrant, for it was better organized, and the security of a group helped alleviate the problems with the crew and the lack of clean quarters. The Mormon ships became showplaces for emigrants who were to travel to America. The ships were kept clean, and food was

12 For a general study of the effects of emigration on the individual emigrant, the reader will find Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1951), of great value.
rationed by the church organization established aboard the vessel. A night guard was elected for protection against the crew.\footnote{Eliza Young in Young's Wife No. 19: On the Story of a Life in Bondage: being a Complete expose of Mormonism and Revealing the Sorrows, Sacrifices and Suffering of women in Polygamy (Hartford, Conn.: Dustin Gilmore and Company, 1895), repudiates this statement as do Stenhouses, they describe the ships as similar to slave galleys. The books are both completely antagonistic and one must challenge the objectivity of the authors.} Boredom was diverted by speeches, concerts, and organized games.

On May 1, 1856, the Saints boarded the sailing ship Thornton, and this day was marked by the birth of a son to Sister McNeil. The child was named Charles Thornton McNeil and was to be one of the few blessings of the trip. Captain Collins gave the orders and set sail for America with 746\footnote{James G. Willie's Narrative, History of Brigham Young, MS, Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah, in his report to Brigham Young gives the figure of 741.} Saints of which 484 were Perpetual Emigrating Fund emigrants destined to cross the plains by handcart.\footnote{J. F. Wells (ed.), The Contributor Representing the Young Men's Improvement Association of the Latter-day Saints XIV (Salt Lake City: 1892), p. 20.} The sailing day was marked by one of the two marriages conducted on the trip. Sister Jessie Ireland was married to Allen Findlay, the ceremony being quietly performed in the cabin by Elder Atwood.\footnote{Ibid., p. 21.} With the birth and the marriage lending an air of merriment, the Saints turned to the business of traveling to Zion.

The company was placed in the charge of Elders James G. Willie, Miller Atwood, Jacob A. Ahmensen, and Moses Claugh.\footnote{Ibid., p. 20.} The Saints had
only the Church in common, and it soon became apparent that the first order of business was the organization of the ship on the order of the Church. The ship was divided into seven wards. Ward presidents were picked, a captain of the guards and a clerk to keep the journal were also selected. Elder Willie was elected president, and this role was of great importance religiously and secularly. This leadership was an important distinguishing factor of Mormon migration. The typical emigrant suffered from a lack of leadership, and many hardships were therefore encountered. It was the President who appointed the cleaning crews, the cooks, the men to help the crew, and who dealt with the captain of the ship. The selection of Willie as President was logical for he had made the complete trip going both east and west. Being one of four to have crossed the plains, his experience was to prove of great value.

James Grey Willie was born in Murrell Green, Hampshire, England, November 1, 1814. He was educated at Tauton and upon graduation worked as a clerk in a Bristol dry goods shop. In 1835, he made his first journey to America, where he took a job with a tanning company in New York City. He became a convert to Mormonism in 1842 and married Sister Elizabeth A. Pettit the same year. In 1847, Willie and his wife crossed the plains in Captain J. B. Noble's fifty of Jedediah M. Grant's hundred, arriving in the Salt Lake Valley on October 2,


In 1852, leaving a wife and three children, Willie answered the call to a mission in England, and became president over the Southampton Conference. He was to suffer with the other Saints on the journey to the Valley, and for a while was in danger of losing both legs from the frost. On his return to Salt Lake, in 1856, he was appointed bishop of the seventh ward and remained in that post until he was called to Mendon in 1859. Willie served as water-master of Mendon in 1860, as postmaster in 1861, and helped establish a cooperative store of which he became superintendent and clerk. He died at age 81, leaving a wife, three girls, two boys, and upward of thirty grandchildren.

A typical day aboard ship began with the cleaning crews working below decks as early as four a.m.; at six, the cooks were up and the first ward served breakfast. At eight a.m., the company was on deck for religious services and instruction for the work to be done that day. Captain Collins allowed the Saints to hold services as often as they pleased, and frequently the ship's officials would join the Saints in song. Captain Collins was careful to see that the crew never interfered with the meeting of the emigrants. Once a week all the women brought the laundry on deck and washed the clothes in salt water. Games were organized for the children, and often the day was

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20Ibid., p. 251.


22Carter, Treasures of Pioneer History V, p. 251.

23Wells, p. 21.
spent helping the crew sail the ship. The evening may have been passed listening to a concert and always ended with a prayer meeting.

On May 6, the second child was born aboard the Thornton. Sister Moulton had a son, her ninth child, who was blessed Charles Alma.\(^{24}\) The rest of May is marked with tragedy; Rachiel Curtis, seventy-five years old, died on May 7, setting off a string of deaths. Ten-year-old Rasmin Rasmusen died on May 8; she was followed by a still-born on the 21st, and a one-year-old boy died on the 28th.\(^{25}\)

On May 29 events of a lighter nature took place as Sister Sarah Hains was married to Brother Samuel Cook, by Elder Willie. The Captain allowed the ceremony to be held on his deck so the whole company could enjoy the festivities. Elder Willie read about marriage from the Doctrine and Covenants. The Saints gave three cheers for the Captain, three cheers for the crew, three cheers for the officers, and three cheers for the couple. The American flag was run up the staff, the marriage was concluded, and the ship for a short time was once again in a festive mood.\(^{26}\) Three more deaths occurred aboard ship: Thomas Peterson, seven years old, died as a result of a fall from the upper-deck; a three-year-old girl, and Mark Lark, ten years old, died of consumption. Three days from New York Elder Willie called the Saints to a general meeting and gave a talk he entitled

\(^{24}\)Carter, Treasures of Pioneer History V, p. 261.

\(^{25}\)Wells, p. 21.

\(^{26}\)Taylor, p. 199.
"What they are Going to America For." 27 On June 14, 1856, the
Thornton docked at New York City and was met by Apostle John Taylor
and Elder Nathaniel H. Felt. With the help of Taylor and Felt all
the Saints were processed through Ellis Island by June 15. The
Atlantic trip was marked by seven deaths, three births, and two
marriages.

After dealing with emigration authorities, the Saints faced a
day trip to Toledo, Ohio. The first segment of the journey in
America was made by rail and terminated at Dunkirk, New York. The
Saints then boarded the steamship New Jersey 28 and followed the banks
of Lake Erie to Toledo, Ohio, arriving on June 21. 29 In Toledo, the
Saints met their first opposition in America. Railroaders ridiculed
this strange band of pilgrims and violence threatened. Fortunately,
the train for Chicago was on its way before any physical harm could
befall them. 30 The company was delayed three days in Chicago while
a bridge across the Missouri River was repaired and on June 26, the
company was in Iowa City, 31 the starting point for the handcart
companies. The rail and steamboat trip from New York City to Iowa
City cost eleven dollars each. 32 The mode of travel was a baggage
train; and at these prices no comforts were included.

27 Latter-day Saints Millennial Star (Liverpool), July 26,
1856, p. 478.
28 Willie's account gives the name of the ship as the Jersey City.
29 W. J. G. W., p. 21.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 G. A. Larson, Mormon Handcart Story (Salt Lake City: Deseret
Iowa City brought disappointment and another delay for the company. The Church officials at Iowa City, who thought the last handcart emigrants had arrived, were surprised to see these converts and had prepared neither shelter nor handcarts for them. It took a great amount of work to get the number of carts needed; and haste required the use of green lumber, increasing the weight of the carts.33

The handcart was described in the Salt Lake Tribune as follows:

The open handcart was made of Iowa hickory or oak, the shafts and side pieces of the same material, but the axle generally of hickory. In length the side pieces and shafts were about six or seven feet, with three or four binding crossbars from the back part to the fore part of the body of the cart; then two or three feet space from the latter bar to the front bar or singletree for the lead horse or the lead man, woman or boy of the team.

The carts were the usual width of the wide-track wagon, so as to fit the wagon tracks across the meadows of Iowa and the buffalo pastures of Nebraska and Wyoming. Across the bars of the bed of the cart we generally sewed a strip of bed ticking or a counterpane . . . . The covered or family cart was similar in size and construction with the exception that it was made stronger with iron axle about an inch in thickness at the shoulder and 3/4 inch at the point. It was surmounted by a small wagon box, three or four feet long with side and end boards about eight inches high.34

After three weeks of working and living in inclement weather, the Saints welcomed the opportunity to leave for Florence, Nebraska (formerly Winter Quarters).


34Salt Lake Tribune, January 4, 1914.
Stegner describes one group of handcart emigrants as follows:

In all its history; the American West never saw a more unlikely band of pioneers than the four hundred odd who were camped on the banks of the Iowa River at Iowa City in early June, 1856. They were not colorful only improbable . . . . There were more women than men, more children under 15, than either. One in every ten was past 50, and the oldest a woman of 75 . . . . They looked more like the population of a poor farm on a picnic than like pioneers about to cross the plains.35

Pushing and pulling their handcarts Willie's improbable pioneers left Iowa City on July 15, 1856. The new kind of exertion took a large toll in minor injuries, for it was on this segment of the trip to Zion that the feet and hands were to be toughened up for the more desolate area of the plains.

A large number of these people wore heavy new shoes that blistered and peeled their feet. They went barefoot but their feet cracked in the hot dust and bled from thorns and prickley pears . . . . Scores were sent to the overloaded wagons. Finally, because the drivers refused to take anymore, clothing and bedding were thrown from many carts to make room for the sick and disabled.36

The trials of getting used to the method of travel, not withstanding, the trip through Iowa, for the most part, was a pleasant experience for the Saints. Iowa was fairly well settled by 1856, and this made it possible for the pioneers to acquire food along the way. The weather, while hot, favored the travelers, for it was also dry. The people of Iowa met the Saints with actions that ranged from friendliness to threats of violence. A sheriff's posse stopped the caravan

35Stegner, Mormon Trail, p. 221.
with a warrant to search for women who had been reportedly tied to the bottom of the wagons. The posse seemed rather disappointed to not find ladies in distress, and the Mormons were allowed to continue on their march west. In Des Moines, a Mrs. Charles Good, living up to her name, presented the company with fifteen pairs of children's shoes. The trip through Iowa took twenty-six days and decreased the company by nine people, one man dying and eight people defecting. The defections were for the most part young girls who stayed and married Iowa farm boys. Upon learning of these defections, Brigham Young made the following statement:

You have heard the brethren relate their trials through Iowa; it is a wicked place. Those regions of the country and the locality of the afflictions that have come upon this people.

On August 11, 1856, the Saints arrived in Florence, Nebraska; the first and most pleasant part of the handcart trip was over. The next five days were spent repairing the handcarts and formulating the companies into their final units. The Willie company was composed of a little over four hundred Scots, English, Scandinavians, and

38Ibid.
40Roberts, p. 88.
41Deseret News (Salt Lake City), November, 1956. Mrs. T. B. H. Stenhouse has nothing good to say about the trip through Iowa; and in this she appears overly critical which is typical for her book, An English Woman in Utah: The Story of a Life’s Experience in Mormonism (London: Sampson Law, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1880).
Germans.\textsuperscript{42} Of the four hundred odd Saints traveling in the Willie company, only four had crossed the plains before: Willie, Atwood, Woodward, and Savage. Of the four experienced pioneers, only Savage opposed leaving for Utah so late in the season. The emigrants themselves were entirely ignorant of the hazards of the journey before them, and they were willing to accept the decision of the Church leaders who had been of so much help in getting them this far.

Levi Savage, who was returning from a two-year mission in Siam and Ceylon, advised the company to go into winter quarters:

> People well mounted, or even with good ox teams, could safely and easily make the journey . . . but for a band of people like ourselves with aged folks, and women, and little children to attempt it so late is little short of madness.\textsuperscript{43}

Savage saw he would not be able to forestall the whole company, so he suggested that at least the very old and sickly should remain behind. After relating the belief that the trail would be strewed with the bones of the aged, if they undertook the journey, approximately one hundred people heeded his words and remained behind.\textsuperscript{44} The issue became a test of faith, and Levi Savage was chastized for a lack of belief. The Saints were sure God would take care of his chosen people; had He not guided the Israelites to the "Promised Land"?

\textsuperscript{42}The exact number of the Willie Company varies from source to source. Mulder in Homeward to Zion: Historical Accounts by Contemporary Observers (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958) gives the low figure of 400. Hafen's Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration 1856-1860 (Glendale, California: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1960), gives the figure 500.

\textsuperscript{43}Stenhouse, An English Woman in Utah, p. 128.

\textsuperscript{44}Carter, Treasures of Pioneer History V, p. 253.
One of the elders even offered to eat all the snow that fell between Florence and Salt Lake City. 45

The unfavorable weather associated with the Missouri River region, the relatives waiting for them in the Valley, and the religious zeal to reach Zion all served to cause the Saints to leave for Salt Lake City in spite of Savage's warnings. Although, realizing that he had lost the argument, Savage continued to affirm the truth of his prediction and decided to accompany the group to provide a helping hand. With repairs completed and supplies loaded, the Saints headed for the Little Poppillion River to meet their ox carts. On August 18th, the ill-fated party left for the Valley of their dreams.

45Stenhouse, An English Woman in Utah, p. 128. This incident is also related in a number of the other references.
FLORENCE TO FORT LARAMIE

The Jensen family took up stations like so many other families: father and son James were the wheel team; younger brothers and sister Karen were the leaders; the mother pushed; one youngster of seven trudged along side, an infant under two rode.46

The above is a picture of one family's method of solving the problem of motivation. This and other means developed by the Saints allowed the pioneers to average twelve to fifteen miles a day.47

The camp would begin to stir as early as four a.m. as the Saints made preparations to be on their way. The camp was broken by seven a.m.; and the Saints would travel until early afternoon, with only one mid-morning break. One day a week was set aside for repairs and for washing clothes, and every Sunday was a day of rest and worship.48

One of the major problems early in the trip was the unchanging landscape; miles would pass, but the ever-stretching plains seemed not to yield under the ever-moving pioneers. Soon the pioneers were traveling into the late afternoon, and at the end of the day the wagons were pulled into a circle with the stock in the center. The evening activities included wrestling, dancing, singing, and always the prayer meeting to close out the day. The evening meeting was

46W. Mulder, Homeward to Zion, p. 174.


48Taylor, p. 239.
also used to reinforce control of the Church officials as obedience to Church doctrine was stressed.49

William Hailey, an elderly man, was lost for the night of August 28th, and spent the evening in the rain; but it seemed to have no ill effects on him.50 When he showed up the next morning, the spirits of the Saints were lifted. Also, on the 29th of August, the first encounter with American Indians was experienced.

As the Saints reached the Wood River, the stopping place for the day, it was discovered that a band of the Omaha Indians had also settled there for the evening. The top officials of the company were invited to the Indian camp, where they were fed and entertained.51 The Saints acquired some meat and buffalo robes and found their first Indian encounter to be a pleasant one.

During the night, the pioneers were caught in a buffalo stampede which scattered their cattle. The 5th and 6th of September were spent searching in vain for thirty head of oxen. Before the stampede, the Saints had traveled 265 miles;52 but without the oxen, the pace was bound to slow down. The beef cattle and milk cows were harnessed, but the undisciplined animals were unable to move the wagons. The wagons had to be lightened and each handcart was loaded with a ninety-eight pound sack of flour.

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50 Wells, p. 135.
51 Ibid.
52 S. F. Kimball's "Belated Emigrants 1856" blames the lost cattle on stealing of Indians and gives the distance traveled before stampede as 315 miles. However, the ideas and figures cited in the paper are the ones that are generally accepted.
Ellen Cantwell was bitten by a rattle snake on the 7th of September, but the excitement of the event was overridden by a sign of much greater danger, for this was the day of the first frost; and the next day was to bring greater apprehension.

Henry Bannister, an ex-cavalry man met the caravan with the first news of Indian atrocities. In four days, F. D. Richards and the rest of the Iowa officials caught the pioneers at the Platte River and brought more tales of Indian raids. The Saints became convinced that God had spared them to carry out their holy mission.

Willie killed the best calves for a feast in honor of the Church officials and Richards gave the evening speech. Learning of Savage's stand at Florence, Richards rebuked him. (Little did he realize in a few months he would be held responsible for the Saint's not listening to Savage.) Richards finished his talk by saying that it would snow to the right and left of them, but their path would remain clear.

The next day the Saints crossed the Platte and headed west again; the roads became worse and the carts began to collapse. The Saints began to use their bacon and anything else to grease the axles. Had the Saints been more experienced, they would have known the grease would collect sand, which would wear the wooden axle like emery paper. When a handcart collapsed, often it was left behind; and the family set off with only what they could carry.

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55 There are a number of accounts of a woman named Stewart, who had fallen behind the company, and her encounter with wolves. All but Mrs. Stenhouse recount her rescue. Mrs. Stenhouse goes into great and gruesome detail in describing the fate of the poor woman.
The Saints arrived at Fort Laramie and received some buffalo robes and a small amount of rations. The provisions promised by Richards were not there, and to get provisions the Saints had to pay $2.00 per hundred pounds of flour.56

56 Carter, Treasures of Pioneer History V, p. 254.
DISASTER, DEATH AND DEVOTION

With the coming of October, the Saints began that portion of the trip which was to prove the most disastrous. Two women were left at Fort Laramie, where one of them was later married. Eight miles west of Fort Laramie, Willie found a note left on a rock, this being the typical pioneer method of communication, saying that relief wagons would meet the pioneers at South Pass. Willie took a survey of the rations and found that no matter how he cut them, nothing would make them last until South Pass.

When the journey commenced in Iowa City, each adult had been allotted ten ounces of flour and supplemental groceries; after reaching Florence the ration had been raised to sixteen ounces a day with eight ounces for children. Eight miles west of Laramie, Willie cut rations to fourteen ounces for men, twelve ounces for women, eight ounces for children, and four ounces for infants. Captain Willie found it necessary to cut the ration again on 12 October. With rations now to the bare minimum of ten and a half ounces of flour for men, nine ounces for women, six ounces for children and three ounces for infants, and with the company still over three hundred miles from relief, the stage was set for the impending disaster. By the 19th, the rations were

57 Wells, p. 136.
gone and the Saints turned to consuming anything they could make edible. 58

The first snowfall was encountered on 19 October with the company still days from South Pass. Captain Willie and Joseph Elder set off in advance of the main party in hopes of finding the relief wagons and speeding them on their way. Prior to leaving, Willie put John Chislett in charge of the company and ordered that all the stock be killed and rationed among the pioneers.

The snow storm had caught the Saints in an exposed area sixteen miles from their evenings destination. If they were to have firewood and water, the pioneers would be forced to continue on their way. While resting at noon, the Saints were visited by Joseph A. Young and Stephen Taylor, the advance party for the relief wagons, who encouraged the Saints with the news of relief only a couple of days behind. 59 After the visit by Young the Saints found new vigor and continued to their campsite on the banks of the Sweetwater River.

On the morning of 20 October, it was discovered that five persons had died during the night and they were buried in a common grave. 60

Having used the last of the flour on the 19th, the Saints found it necessary to kill two rather thin cows on the 20th, and the meat was

58 Carter, Treasures of Pioneer History V, p. 254. Carter also reports of Emma James boiling her sandals until the leather was tender enough to eat and the broth was good enough to drink, her only regret seemed to be the guilt feelings she suffered for not sharing it with other members of her family.

59 Young and Taylor had apparently missed Willie and Elder because of the low visibility caused by the snow storm.

60 Stenhouse, An English Woman in Utah, p. 139.
fairly distributed. A soup was made from the bones, and after scorching the hide it was roasted and cut into small strips and this too was rationed. Along with this beef, the Saints had a few pounds of sugar and dried apples and about a quarter sack of rice. Being so low on rations and with a foot of snow on the ground, John Chislett decided to keep the company in camp and wait for the relief wagons. Spirits lagged, as Willie had been gone for three days and dysentry ran rampant throughout the camp.

On the evening of 21 October as the sun was setting marking the third day of his absence, Willie appeared with the relief party close behind. The relief party consisted of fourteen wagons with flour, onions, clothing, bedding, and shoes. After the arrival and distribution of goods, by Chislett, the songs of Zion once again passed through the lips of the Saints. The men of the relief crew collected wood, built fires and cooked the first nourishing meal the pioneers had had since 19 October. However, the relief was too late for many of the Saints as nine pioneers gave up the struggles and died on the evening of 21 October.

The 22nd day of October saw the Saints once again on the road to Zion. Those who could no longer pull their carts were allowed to load their belongings on the ox-carts and those who could not walk were

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loaded on the relief wagons. The first day of travel was slow, be­cause of the condition of the Saints and the roads. Brother William H. Kimball, who was selected to help the Willie company, while the rest of the relief party continued east to help the trailing Martin company, was careful not to push the tired Saints beyond their meager endurance. 64

The elements once again rose up to smite the Saints. The weather turned bitter cold and the cold was followed by another snow storm as the Saints reached Rocky Ridge. The night of the 25th was unusually cold and a number of the Saints froze. On the morning of October 26, there were so many dead or dying that Kimball and Willie decided it would be best to lay over a day and give the exhausted pioneers a chance to rest. The day was to be the most tragic of the trip as the morning found thirteen frozen bodies and two more lives were claimed before a grave could be completed. The exertion of digging in the frozen ground eliminated the possibility of separate graves and once again a common grave was used. 65 The clothes of the dead were removed and passed out among the living.

The day of rest was beneficial for a large number of emigrants. However, the storm at Rocky Ridge continued to take its toll with the death of two or three members of the party each day. Bancroft relates in his History of Utah that some of the Saints alleviated their prob­lems by slipping into the world of unreality, but cases of this nature

64Wells, p. 199.

65Stenhouse, An English Woman in Utah, p. 144.
were unusual enough to envoke comment. It was the married men who suffered the greatest casualty rate, for not only had they exerted themselves, but also they had shared their rations with their families.

Chislett relates the great example of heroism of Captain Willie in that he refused to ride a mule while the rest of the Saints walked. The Captain was completely impartial and did his best to keep his rag-tag group moving toward safety to the south and west. Chislett refers to Willie as "Father Willie" and "our Faithful Captain." 66

One of the greatest stories of the trip was that of Eliza Chapman. Her husband had been converted to Mormonism in England. Mrs. Chapman refused to accept the Church doctrine, but loyally came to America with her husband. When her husband died in the snow storm, she, being snowblind herself, had her daughters lead her to Zion while she pulled the cart. She was baptized upon arrival in the Valley. 67

On 2 November, the party reached Fort Bridger. They received a great amount of help from this point on, and most were able to ride into the Valley on 9 November. The total deaths from Liverpool, England, to Salt Lake City, numbered seventy-seven, sixty-eight of which occurred between Florence, Nebraska, and Salt Lake City. There were three marriages and three births.

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THE RESCUE

There is another facet of the plight of the Willie handcart company that should be explored before evaluating the program. Franklin Richards reached Salt Lake City on October 4, and sounded the alarm.68 On the 5th, a Sunday, Brigham Young called for assistance; and again on Monday, which marked the opening of the conference, Young called for donations of teams, food, and clothing. The response of the Church members was as rapid as it was generous.69

The evening before the twenty-seven young men of the relief party were to leave, they were called together for prayers and final instructions. On October 7, the relief party left in hopes of meeting the Willie company at Fort Bridger. By traveling without rest and with no snow to slow their pace they reached Fort Bridger on 12 October. Fifty-eight miles east of the Fort, Brother G. D. Grant sent Joseph A. Young, Stephen Taylor and Cyress Wheelock ahead to find the Saints

68 Kimball, p. 108.

69 Wakefield lists the following items as being donated.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>teams</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flour</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>onions</td>
<td>31 bushels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>53</td>
</tr>
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<td>cloaks</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pants</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>chemises</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3 yards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linsey</td>
<td>3 yards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wakefield, p. 20.
and encourage them onward. On the 20th, the relief party was forced to take cover by the same storm that had halted the Saints. They had no more than made camp than Willie and Elder arrived and explained the condition of the handcart emigrants. The relief party immediately set out to reach the pioneers. The snow was estimated at six to ten inches.

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70 Kimball, p. 111.
CONCLUSION

The handcart tragedy has been compared with the Donner Party disaster, though in casualties the number of deaths in trying to reach Zion far excelled that of the Donner tragedy, in terms of human degradation the two cannot be compared. The Donner Party fearing death above all else turned to cannibalism. To the Saint, death was not a disaster in itself, for to die on a holy journey must surely be a death of distinction.

The tragedy of the handcart migration has been stressed out of proportion. The writer of this paper has joined the many who have centered their interest in the disasters of this program, but even with this emphasis, one must realize the complete story of handcart travel is to be told only when all companies are considered.

Ten companies traveled with handcarts from 1856 to 1860, making a total of 3,000 emigrants arriving by this method. Blisters, fatigue, and hunger were suffered, but not to a much greater extent than was experienced by those employing the ox-cart method of travel. In 1856, the Perpetual Emigrating Fund emigrants totaled 1970. Three hundred and thirty-three were ordered out by friends and relatives. The handcarts only accounted for three percent of the emigrants who arrived between 1856-1860. The deaths caused in 1856 were not due to an unworkable system, but rather by a series of errors committed by the individuals who encouraged and operated this system.

The causes of the disaster are numerous: a late start, hastily
constructed handcarts, high altitudes, roughness of the mountain roads, an over-optimism on the part of Brigham Young, the over-anxious emigrants, lack of communications between Europe and Iowa City, delays encountered along the way, and the unusually early winter of 1856.

The first four causes are self-explanatory, but the last five can stand explanation. Brigham Young made a number of statements that would minimize the dangers involved in this type of travel:

Since with wagons all but invalids and very young or old walked ... gold seekers walked71 ... 15 miles a day will bring them through in 70 days and after they get accustomed to it they will travel 20, 25 and even 30 with ease and no danger of giving out, but will continue to get stronger and stronger72 ... the first 200 miles of the journey from Iowa City will be through a settled, grain-growing country, where it is expected that supplies of provisions can be obtained without the labor of hauling them any considerable distance. By traveling this distance with the carts lightly loaded, the Saints will have an excellent opportunity of becoming accustomed to camp life, and walking and thereby be better prepared for starting out on the plains.73

While the statement is true that with wagons the Saints walked, they did not have the extra burden of the cart to tax their energy. The ox-train allowed the pioneers to carry a greater amount of supplies and clothing to protect themselves against the weather of the Rocky Mountains. To compare the Saints to the gold seeker is a gross error. The gold seeker was usually a single man who could live off the land and was not slowed by the responsibility of a wife and children. It

71 Taylor, p. 135.
72 Millennial Star (Liverpool), December 8, 1855.
73 Wells, p. 17.
is highly optimistic to believe the Saints were in anywhere near the physical shape most of the gold seekers were.

The final statement, suggesting Iowa would be a place to condition the Saints, while logical, was entirely false. It was in Iowa that the people were first introduced to a great deal of walking and a new experience of pushing the handcart. The badly blistered feet and hands began to take their toll. The men who could not walk were loaded on to the handcarts, making them heavier for those who could. The Saints who arrived at Florence that 26th day of June, 1856, were not vigorous specimens of mankind, but rather a limping, tired group of people who faced 1300 more gruelling miles. The five-day lay over was needed not only to repair carts, but also to allow the Saints to rest for the long journey ahead.

The pioneers themselves were not entirely blameless, for from the start their over-zealousness caused problems to arise. The Church officials were planning on sending only three handcart companies to America in 1856, but so many Saints had answered the call to gather that the ships Thornton and Horizon had to be chartered. In their haste the Saints had sold their businesses or given up their jobs and to remain in England meant to go to the poor house. With a choice between a late migration and an English poor house, the former was by far the superior.

The last three causes of the tragedy are directly related. A lack of communications made it impossible to inform the Iowa City officials of the arrival of the fourth handcart company; therefore,

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74 Kimball, p. 5.
preparations were not made. Possibly, the most important problem of all was that of delay. Had the operation gone smoothly, the Saints would have arrived a month earlier and missed the storms that caused the damages. The three days lost at Chicago, twenty-one days at Iowa City, five days at Florence, and two days searching for the oxen at Wood River totaled thirty-one days. Two or maybe three days saved anywhere would have put the Saints at South Pass to meet the relief wagons. This might have saved at least the fifteen who died the day relief arrived. The final and most direct cause was one no one could have foreseen or controlled, the weather. The snow fell in South Pass a month earlier than it had before in the nine-year experience of the Mormons. The snows of 1856-1857 were excessive, reaching eight to ten feet in Salt Lake Valley.

When the results of the migration became apparent, the first reaction was to minimize the extent of the damage done. Brigham Young states:

> After all the hardships of the journey, mainly consequent to so late a start, the mortality rate has been far less in Brother Willie's company, than many wagon companies that have started seasonally and with the usual convenience . . . some of those who have died in the handcart companies this season, I am told would be singing and before the tune was done, would drop over and breath their last . . . I should be pleased when this time comes, if we could all depart from this life as easily as did those our brethren and sisters . . . with regard to those who have died and been laid away by the roadside of the plains, since the cold weather commenced, let me tell you that they have not suffered one hundredth

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75Wells, p. 34.

76Wakefield, p. 21.
part so much as did our brothers and sisters who have
died of cholera . . . when you call to mind this fact,
the relations of sufferings of our companies this season
will not be so harrowing to your feelings.77

The tragedy occurred at a rather opportune time for the people
supporting the Church's reformation, which was at its height. The
deaths were surely a result of an unworthiness to inherit the kingdom
of the Lord. "Another instance of God's warning of his people . . .
through the vicissitudes of the elements . . . many Mormons envied his
brothers and sisters who had died on the plains." (Surely those who
died had reached heaven, there was no such assurance for those in the
Valley.)78

The rationalization was not altogether untrue, but enough of the
Saints in the Valley had been personally affected so that it seemed
only logical that eventually someone would begin to look for a person
to blame.

The earliest criticism seemed to be aimed at the Prophet him-
self, but this criticism came mainly from the gentile population.
Whether it was Church discipline or personal loyalty, the criticism
of Young in Church circles never materialized. The non-Mormon writers
were able to point to the disaster as proof that the Prophet was fal-
lible. Other writers are willing to give Young's plan the benefit of
the doubt and hold him responsible for nothing worse than taking a
chance and losing. Seeing the blame shifted his way, Young decided
it was time to account for this disaster and did so by placing the

77Milennial Star, October 26, 1856, p. 298.
78West, p. 248.
responsibility on the frontier agent, Franklin D. Richards, and his aide, Daniel Spencer.

If only there had been a little bird who might have whispered to Brother Franklin and Brother Daniels that it was too late in the year to send men, women and children on to the plains and into the mountains.79

Had the results of the mistake not been so tragic surely a "little bird" named Levi Savage would have smiled a little, and Brother Richards' mind must surely have drifted to a September night and his condemnation of Levi Savage's lack of faith.

Edward Tullidge was upset by the blame being placed on Richards and attacked Young as being the perpetrator of the plan. Tullidge felt Young was making a scapegoat of Richards, for the real cause of problems was the delay in Iowa City; and this area was under the control of Brother Taylor. Tullidge printed his feelings in the Utah Magazine. When Young was informed of this, the Church leader had the issue destroyed.80 Once the blame was firmly placed, it became necessary to begin to figure out a solution to the problem.

Brigham Young decreed that there would be no handcart companies in 1857, and in this manner he hoped to have some time to re-evaluate the program. The Prophet used the excuse that the Perpetual Emigrating Fund was bankrupt. This was quite true, but it was bankrupt in 1856. After the decree against immediate future migration, Young warned that while no penalty would be effected because of that year's mistakes,

79 Ibid., p. 147.

80 Ibid., p. 296. It should be noted that Tullidge had apostatized by the time of this writing.
another such incident would result in grave action by the Church.

Hereafter, I am going to lay an enjunction and place a penalty to be suffered by any elder or elders who will start the immigration across the plains after a given time; and the penalty shall be that they shall be severed from the Church, for I will not have such late starts. 81

To insure that no late starts would originate from England as had the last one, the Millennial Star of April 18, 1857, printed this notice:

To avoid expense, hardship loss of life, resulting from late emigration to Utah, the Saints of Great Britain are counselled to forward their four pound deposits to this office between this and the first day of the journey... one pound each as deposit towards crossing the Atlantic, and three pounds each as a deposit to produce handcarts and to make the necessary preparations for an outfit across the plains... embark from Liverpool in February, so as to be able to leave the Missouri River for the plains by the middle of May or the first of June and arrive in Utah in August. 82

The final answer to the problem had to be more concrete, so Brigham Young sent seventy missionaries, by handcart, east in the spring of 1857. The rather exclusive company was able to cover the distance from Salt Lake City to Florence in forty-eight days, including seven Sundays of rest. The missionaries, on the road from Laramie to the Missouri River, averaged twenty-seven miles a day. 83

The selectiveness of the company took the real test out of the example. The trip was to prove unnecessary as the next four years

81 Deseret News, October 22, 1856.

82 Millennial Star, April 18, 1857.

were to see five more successful trips across the plains by handcart companies. Even with the fifth handcart company still on the way to Salt Lake, Young avowed the value of the method of travel. Young based his judgement on the success of the first three trips of the year.

To evaluate the handcart immigration, one must realize what it accomplished. Thousands of emigrants who had neither the funds nor knowledge needed to cross an ocean and a foreign continent were able to reach Zion. (See Chart 1, page 36) The experiment was surely successful and would have lasted much longer had not the transcontinental Railroad been completed. Judgements on the handcart company are usually wrapped in the emotionalism of the ardent anti- or pro-Mormon. But with an unemotional evaluation of the system, not denying the hardships, the only conclusion that one can draw is that this was not only a practical method of travel, but also a successful one.84

84 For accounts of the Willie company by individuals involved the reader will find the John Chislett account in a number of sources but the original is in Stenhouse's Rocky Mountain Saints. Mary Barton's account is found in Mrs. Stenhouse's An English Woman in Utah. The Millennial Star of 1856 carried a current account of the company's progress. Willie's report is included in both the Journal History and Brigham Young History MS, located at the Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City. The 1856 Deseret News carried numerous accounts of the Willie company.
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<th>Company No.</th>
<th>Captain</th>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Handcarts</th>
<th>Wagons</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Left Iowa City</th>
<th>Left Florence</th>
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<td>Ellsworth</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1856</td>
<td>June 9</td>
<td>July 20</td>
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<td>221</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>1856</td>
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<td>July 24</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>Sept. 4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>250</td>
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