

Descendants honor faithful 'Wee Granny'

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SCOTTSBLUFF, Neb. — "Tell John I died with my face toward Zion."

These were the last words of a faithful pioneer known as "Wee Granny," 73, a slight Scottish woman whose long walk toward Zion with the ill-fated Martin Handcart Company ended near Chimney Rock, Neb.



"Tell John I Died With My Face Toward Zion," by Clark Kelley Price.

Her final nine words, a single sentence, beautiful and poetic, have come ringing down through the ages to her descendants, watchwords for all her posterity. That one sentence gives them an example to follow, sets a goal, and teaches them dedication and commitment.

Mary Murray Murdoch, known as "Wee Granny" to her posterity, had eight children, six of whom lived to maturity, and 72 grandchildren. A widow whose husband was killed in a mining accident, she joined the Church at age 67 in 1851.

She was called Wee Granny because of her small size — 4-feet-7 inches tall and weighing more than 90 pounds. Her descendants know her story, a story that was repeated recently as more than 450 of her posterity gathered in Scottsbluff, Neb., for a memorial service and dedication of a headstone monument in her honor.

The granite monument, with Chimney Rock in the background, is inscribed with her last words and includes the names of her children. Robert Lee from Rexburg arranged for the cemetery plot, ordered the monument and gave the dedicatory prayer. Family members came from as far as Hawaii, Washington, Oregon, California, North and South Dakota, Colorado and other states. Songwriter and descendant

Joanne Doxey, former second counselor in the Relief Society general presidency, composed two songs for the occasion, "Wee Granny, Our Granny" and "Face Toward Zion."

"While Wee Granny may have only been 4-foot-7 or so, she was a giant in faith, courage and vision," said Jan Stock, an official of Mormon Trails Association.



Descendants gather for memorial service at old pioneer cemetery at Chimney Rock visitors center.

The service was conducted at a small cemetery near Chimney Rock by descendant Dallas Murdoch, past president of the family organization.

"Since Wee Granny died just before she got to Chimney Rock, and was buried in a shallow grave along the trail, we felt it was best to put the gravestone marker where many people could see it," he said.

"I am sure that the Lord wants us to be bonded to our ancestors in order to withstand the temptations of an ever darkening world. That may be one reason it is so important we honor and revere their memory."

"This was probably the largest gathering ever of various descendants of Mary Murray Murdoch," observed Brother Murdoch.

Thelton Skipper, president of the Cheyenne Wyoming Stake, said that Wee Granny was one of eight hundred people who died on this trail. "These people did what the Lord asked of them."

Wee Granny's son, John Murdoch, and his wife, Anne Steele Murdoch, had joined the Church earlier and were the first to cross the plains. They had been introduced to the gospel by Anne's brother, James Steele.

One of James Steele's descendants, LDS artist Clark Kelley Price, portrayed the event in a painting, titled "Tell John I Died With My Face Toward Zion." (This week's *Church News* cover.)

John and Ann Murdoch left Scotland and came to Utah in 1852, enduring a difficult journey in which their two small children died. As soon as they were settled, they saved money and sent it for Wee Granny to come to Utah.

On May 25, 1856, Wee Granny, in company with the James Steele family, sailed on the *Horizon* from Liverpool, England, to New York. They rode a train to the Midwest, where they joined the Martin Handcart Company at Iowa City on July 28 to begin the arduous cross-country trek. This group of 576 people, with 146 carts, seven wagons and 30 oxen, was poor and most of their passages were paid by the Perpetual Emigration Fund.



Descendant Janett McBride sits at monument placed in honor of Mary Murdoch, "Wee Granny" who died about 10 miles east of Chimney Rock in 1856.

The pioneers averaged 13 miles a day between Iowa City and Florence (now Omaha), Neb. Beset with usual hills and gullies, sand patches and stream beds, the pioneers had an added hardship as the handcarts began breaking down. Constructed with uncured wood, the carts did not sustain the load. A shortage of water led to the immigrants drinking water in puddles. Food rationing began early. Wee Granny walked the entire distance.

The company rested at Florence, where, a few days earlier the fated Willie Handcart Company had debated whether they should cross the plains so late in the season. In Florence, the Martin company gathered additional food and repaired handcarts, which were now heavier than before. Because of the lateness in the season, they picked up their pace as they left Florence.

"As Mary Murdoch and her compatriots in the Martin company moved during mid- to late September across central Nebraska and into the increasingly barren, windy, and unforgiving environment of the west, the journey began to take an ever increasing toll on them," wrote Kenneth W. Merrell. (*The Long Road to Zion*, the final journey of Mary Murray Murdoch.)

"The daily tedium of their labor turned into a significant struggle. . . . As she reached the last several days of her life, Wee Granny's exhaustion, weakness, and pain must have been overwhelming," he observed.

Her frail body gave out on Oct. 2, about 10 miles east of Chimney Rock. She was attended at the time of her death by James Steele and his family.

Her death was oddly merciful, noted her biographer, because "it is virtually impossible that she would have survived the awful circumstances that beset the Willie and Martin Handcart companies in the next few weeks."

The ordeal was also too much for James Steele, faithful friend to the Murdoch family, who died a few weeks later on Nov. 10. Upon reaching the Valley, Steele's wife and children stayed with John and Ann Murdoch for a time. The descendants of both pioneers united at the monument to pay honor to Wee Granny.

The dedication of the monument, said descendants, "was a sacred and tender time for the Murdoch family to honor and pay respect to this wonderful little Scottish lady."