

'I am ready now!' — Ephraim Hanks, handcart rescuer

He set off alone to rescue suffering handcart travelers

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Note: This year, Latter-day have been observing 150 years since the first handcart pioneer companies embarked for the Salt Lake Valley. The following account was written by J. Phillip Hanks of Sandy, Utah, a descendant of Ephraim Hanks, one of the rescuers of the ill-fated Martin Handcart Company, in advance of a reunion of descendants to occur in Sandy on Pioneer Day, July 24.



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Ephraim Hanks, depicted in this rendition by Clark Kelley Price, had a spiritual experience in which he was called to rescue suffering handcart pioneers. That was two nights before the official call came from Brigham Young.

"... The sun was about an hour high in the west when I spied something in the distance that looked like a black streak in the snow. As I got near to it, I perceived it moved; then I was satisfied that this was the long-looked-for handcart company, led by Captain Edward Martin."

These were the words of Ephraim Knowlton Hanks, recalling the experience of November 11, 1856, as he was on the plains of Wyoming searching for the ill-fated Martin Handcart Company.

This year, 2006, is the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of this rescue, of which Ephraim Knowlton Hanks, then age 30, played a significant role. To honor Ephraim and his role in the rescue, his descendants will gather at Sandy, Utah, on the afternoon of July 24th.

Ephraim's story begins at October general conference time of 1856. On Oct. 4, President [Brigham Young](#) had received reports from Elder Franklin D. Richards and a group of missionaries who had just arrived in Salt Lake Valley from the East, to the effect that the

handcart companies were still on the trail in Wyoming. Until this time President Young had not known that the Willie and Martin Handcart companies were on their way — he had thought all of the handcart companies who were traveling had arrived in Salt Lake. Being very alarmed at this news, President Young stood at the pulpit the following morning at general conference and announced to the saints that supply wagons were needed immediately to go and rescue the handcart companies.

On Oct. 26, President Young called for more volunteers to go and help the beleaguered handcart travelers.

Two nights earlier, Ephraim Hanks, who had been fishing on Utah Lake, was on his way home to Salt Lake City, and was staying with friends in Draper. During the night he heard a voice calling him by name and saying, "The handcart people are in trouble and you are wanted; will you go and help them?" Ephraim wrote, "I turned instinctively in the direction from whence the voice came and beheld an ordinary-sized man in the room. Without any hesitation I answered, 'Yes, I will go if I am called.' " This message was repeated two more times.

"I now hastened to Salt Lake City," Ephraim continued, "and arrived there on the Saturday, preceding the Sunday on which the call was made for volunteers to go out and help the last handcart companies in. When some of the brethren responded by explaining that they could get ready to start in a few days, I spoke at once saying, 'I am ready now!' The next day I was wending my way eastward over the mountains with a light wagon all alone."

At South Pass in Wyoming, Ephraim encountered a terrific snowstorm. He said of it: "In all my travels in the Rocky Mountains both before and afterwards, I have seen no worse. When at length the snow ceased falling, it lay on the ground so deep that for many days it was impossible to move wagons through it."

Realizing the possible fate of the saints in the handcart company, he set out alone on horseback, leading a packhorse. His narrative continues: "In the meantime I continued my lonely journey. ... I camped in the snow in the mountains. As I was preparing to make a bed in the snow with the few articles that my pack animal carried for me, I thought how comfortable a buffalo robe would be on such an occasion, and also how I could relish a little buffalo meat for supper, and before lying down for the night I was instinctively led to ask the Lord to send me a buffalo. Now, I am a firm believer in the efficacy of prayer, for I have on many different occasions asked the Lord for blessings, which He in His mercy has bestowed on me. But when I, after praying as I did on that lonely night in the South Pass, looked around me and spied a buffalo bull within fifty yards of my camp, my surprise was complete; I had certainly not expected so immediate an answer to my prayer. However, I soon collected myself and was not at a loss to know what to do. Taking deliberate aim at the animal, my first shot brought him down; he made a few jumps only, and then rolled down into the very hollow where I was encamped. I was soon busily engaged skinning my game, finishing which, I spread the hide on the snow and placed my bed upon it After this I enjoyed a refreshing night's sleep."

The following day Ephraim killed another buffalo, "impressed to do this, although I did not know why until a few hours later, but the thought occurred to my mind that the hand of the Lord was in it, as it was a rare thing to find buffalo herds around that place at this late part of the season. I skinned and dressed the cow; then cut up part of its meat in long strips and loaded my horses with it."

It was that evening (Nov. 11) that he saw the Martin Handcart Company in the distance — "like a black streak in the snow. ... I reached the ill-fated train just as the emigrants were camping for the night. The sight that met my gaze as I entered their camp can never be erased from my memory. The sufferers, as they moved about slowly, shivering with cold, to prepare their scanty evening meal was enough to touch the stoutest heart. When they saw me coming, they hailed me with joy inexpressible, and when they further beheld the supply of fresh meat I brought into camp, their gratitude knew no bounds. Flocking around me, one would say, 'Oh, please, give me a small piece of meat;' another would exclaim, 'My poor children are starving, do give me a little,' and children with tears in their eyes would call out, 'Give me some, give me some.' At first I tried to wait on them and handed out the meat as they called for it, but finally I told them to help themselves. Five minutes later both my horses had been released of their extra burden — the meat was all gone, and the next few hours found the people in camp busily engaged in cooking and eating it, with thankful hearts."

When Ephraim found the helpless immigrants, their food supply was nearly exhausted. A half-dozen deaths were occurring daily due to the bitter cold and hunger. They had been without help for 36 days and even the strongest were beginning to lose hope. Ephraim treated frostbite on several of the company, amputating some of the toes, and giving several priesthood blessings to the suffering saints.

Later, other rescuers and relief parties reached the distressed pioneers. Ephraim remained with the handcart company until they arrived in Salt Lake City on Nov. 30, 1856.

Ephraim Knowlton Hanks will be remembered for his participation in the Mormon Battalion, as a scout for Brigham Young, as a Pony Express rider who made more than 50 trips across the plains, and as a participant in the Utah War. He was the first to find ore in what were to become the Park City mines. In his later years he settled in Bicknell, Wayne County, Utah, where he died at age 70.

In 1996, to commemorate the 100th year of Ephraim's death, a special ceremony was held at the Caineville Cemetery in Wayne County, where a plaque was dedicated in his honor by the U.S. Mormon Battalion Inc.