

Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel, 1847–1868

Source of Trail Excerpt:

Kingsford, Elizabeth Horrocks Jackson, Autobiographical sketch [n.d.], 2-6.

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The handcarts, or many of them, were built on wooden axles instead of iron; and with leather boxes. We expected to find these vehicles already at hand on our arrival at Iowa City. Thus work consumed between two and three weeks of time, in which we should have been wending our way to Salt Lake City. There were two companies which contained about five hundred and fifty-six persons. There were one hundred and forty-six handcarts, seven wagons and six mules and horses, fifty milk cows and beef animals. There was one wagon loaded with goods for the Church. To each of these two companies were apportioned a mule team, and two wagons hauled by oxen. These were to carry the commissary stores, tents, etc. On July 15th the company left Iowa City under the captaincy of Elder James G. Willie, for Florence, a distance of 277 miles. At Florence, the two hand-cart companies were consolidated. Edward Martin was appointed Captain and Daniel Tyler was his assistant.

On August 25th the camp broke, travelled about two miles and then camped.

On the 27th of August we made a final start from Cutlers' Fork, on our long tedious journey across the vast plains of a thousand miles to our future home. We continued our toil day after day, pulling our handcarts with our provisions or rations, our little children, etc., through deep sands, rocky roads, or fording streams. It was a dreary journey. Many miles each day were traveled ere, with tired limbs we reached camp, cooked supper, ate and retired for the night to rest, to pursue our monotonous course the following day.

On the 7th of September near Soup [Loup] Fork, we were overtaken and passed by Apostle F. D. Richards, C. H. Wheelock and other returning missionaries from Europe. About the middle of this month we learned that A. W. Babbitt had been killed by some hostile Indians.

After toilsome and fatiguing travel, we reached Laramie on the 8th day of October. Here we rested for a short time. Our provisions by this time had become very scant, and many of the company went to the Fort and sold their watches and other articles of jewelry. With the proceeds they purchased corn meal, flour, beans, bacon, etc., with which to replenish their stores of food which had become very scant. Hitherto, although a ration of a pound of flour had been served out daily to each person, it was found insufficient to satisfy the cravings of hunger; but the weary pilgrims were then about to experience more deprivations in this direction. We rested a couple of days and then resumed our toilsome march. Shortly after leaving Fort Laramie it became necessary to shorten our rations that they might hold out, and that the company be not reduced to starvation. The reduction was repeated several times. First, the pound of flour was reduced to three-fourths of a pound, then to a half of a pound, and afterward to still less per day. However we pushed ahead. The trip was full of adventures, hair breadth escapes, exposure to attacks from

Indians, wolves and other wild beasts. When we reached the Black Hills, we had a rough experience. The roads were rocky, broken and difficult to travel. Frequently carts were broken down and much delay was caused by the needed repairs.

During the time of leaving Laramie and reaching the Platte, my husband had been taken sick. He was afflicted with mountain fever. His appetite was good and he could eat more than his rations. But his ambition was gone. All attempts to arouse him to energy or much active exertion were futile. On the 19th of October the last crossing of the Platte River was reached; but when we went into camp that noon my husband was not there. Two of the company went back to look for him. They found him sitting by the roadside, resting. He was very weak. They assisted him into camp. When we resumed our journey he was put in to a wagon, and rode a few miles to the bank of the river, when it was discovered that the teams had become so weak they were unable to haul the freight across the stream, so my husband was compelled to alight.

“The River” says Elder John Jaques, “was wide, the current was strong, the water was exceedingly cold and up to the wagon bed in the deepest parts, and the bed of the river was covered with cobble stones.” Some of the men carried some of the woman on their backs or in their arms, but others of the women tied up their skirts and waded through, like the heroines that they were, and as they had gone through many other rivers and creeks. My husband [Aaron Jackson] attempted to ford the stream. He had only gone a short distance when he reached a sand bar in the river on which he sank down through weakness and exhaustion. My sister, Mary Horrocks Leavitt, waded through the water to his assistance. She raised him up to his feet. Shortly afterward, a man came along on a horseback and conveyed him to the other side of the river, placed him on the bank and left him there. My sister then helped me to pull my cart with my three children and other matters on it. We had scarcely crossed the river when we were visited with a tremendous storm of snow, hail, sand and fierce winds. It was a terrible storm from which both the people and teams suffered. After crossing the river, my husband was put on a handcart and hauled into camp; and indeed after that time he was unable to walk, and consequently provision had to be made for him to ride in a wagon. As soon as we reached camp, I prepared him some refreshment and placed him to rest for the night.

From this time my worst experience commenced. The company had now become greatly reduced in strength, the teams as well as the people. The teams had become so weak that the luggage was reduced to ten pounds per head for adults, and five pounds for children under eight years. And although the weather was severe, a great deal of bedding and clothing had to be destroyed—burned—as it could not be carried along. This occurrence very much increased the suffering of the company, men, women and children alike.

On the 20th of October we traveled, or almost wallowed, for about ten miles through the snow. At night, weary and worn out, we camped near the Platte River, where we soon left it for the Sweetwater. We were visited with three days more snow. The animals and immigrants were almost completely exhausted. We remained in camp several days to gain strength. About the 25th of October, I think it was—I cannot remember the exact date—we reached camp about sundown. My husband had for several days previous been much worse. He was still sinking, and his condition now became more serious. As soon as possible after reaching camp I prepared a little of such scant articles of food as we then had. He tried to eat but failed. He had not the

strength to swallow. I put him to bed as quickly as I could. He seemed to rest easy and fell asleep. About nine o'clock I retired. Bedding had become very scarce, so I did not disrobe. I slept until, as it appeared to me, about midnight. I was extremely cold. The weather was bitter. I listened to hear if my husband breathed—he lay so still. I could not hear him. I became alarmed. I put my hand on his body, when to my horror I discovered that my worst fears were confirmed. My husband was dead. He was cold and stiff—rigid in the arms of death. It was a bitter freezing night and the elements had sealed up his mortal frame. I called for help to the other inmates of the tent. They could render me no aid; and there was no alternative but to remain alone by the side of the corpse until morning. The night was enveloped in almost Egyptian darkness. There was nothing with which to produce a light or kindle a fire. Of course I could not sleep. I could only watch, wait, and pray for the dawn. But oh, how those dreary hours drew their tedious length along. When daylight came, some of the male part of the company prepared the body for burial. And ho, such a burial and funeral service. They did not remove his clothing—he had but little. They wrapped him in [in] a blanket and placed him in a pile with thirteen others who had died, and then covered him up in the snow. The ground was frozen so hard that they could not dig a grave. He was left there to sleep in peace until the trump of the Lord shall sound, and the dead in Christ shall awake and come forth in the morning of the first resurrection. We shall then again unite our hearts and lives, and eternity will furnish us with life forever more.

I will not attempt to describe my feelings at finding myself thus left a widow with three children, under such excruciating circumstances. I cannot do it. But I believe the Recording Angel has inscribed in the archives above, and that my sufferings for the Gospel's sake will be sanctified unto me for my good. My sister Mary was the only relative I had to whom I could look for assistance in this trying ordeal, and she was sick. So severe was her affliction that she became deranged in her mind, and for several days she ate nothing but hard frozen snow. I could therefore appeal to the Lord alone; He who had promised to be a husband to the widow, and a father to the fatherless. I appealed to him and he came to my aid.

A few days after the death of my husband, the male members of the company had become reduced in number by death; and those who remained were weak and emaciated by sickness, that on reaching the camping place at night, there were not sufficient men with strength enough to raise the poles and pitch the tents. The result was that we camped and with nothing but the vault of Heaven for a roof, and the stars for companions. The snow lay several inches deep upon the ground. The night was bitterly cold. I sat down on a rock with one child in my lap and one on each side of me. In that condition I remained until morning. My sick sister, the first part of the night, climbed up hill to the place where some men had built a fire. She remained there until the people made down their beds and retired, to sleep, if they could. She then climbed or slid down the hill on the snow, to where there was another fire which was kept alive by some persons who were watching the body of a man who had died that night. There she remained until daylight.

It will be readily perceived that under such adverse circumstances I had become despondent. I was six or seven thousand miles from my native land, in a wild, rocky, mountain country, in a destitute condition, the ground covered with snow, the waters covered with ice, and I with three fatherless children with scarcely nothing to protect them from the merciless storms. When I retired to bed that night, being the 27th of October, I had a stunning revelation. In my dream, my husband stood by me and said—"Cheer up, Elizabeth, deliverance is at hand." The dream was

fulfilled.

“The 28th of October,” says John Ja[c]ques in his history of this journey, “was [a] red letter day to the handcart expedition. On that memorable day, Joseph A. Young, Daniel Jones and Abel Garr galloped unexpectedly into camp amid tears and cheers and smiles and laughter of the emigrants. Those three men being the express from the most advanced relief company from Salt Lake, brought the glad word that assistance, provisions and clothing were near, that ten wagons were waiting at the Devil’s Gate.” Thus you see, my dream and my husband’s prediction were fulfilled.

The next day we left the Platte and started for the Sweetwater country, On the 31st of October another grand surprise met us. On reaching Greasewood Creek, we met George D. Grand [Grant], R.F. Burton, Charles Decker, Chauncey G. Webb and some others, with six wagons of flour, etc. sent from Salt Lake.

On the First of November we arrived at the Sweetwater bridge, some five miles from Devil’s Gate. We arrived there about dusk in the evening. We camped in about a foot and half of snow. It was a busy evening before bed time in clearing away the snow. For this purpose many used cooking utensils, plates and other things. The ground was hard and almost impenetrable; and it was with the greatest difficulty that the tents could be erected. It became a question that night, whether we should camp there for the winter or go forward to Salt Lake Valley. It was decided to go on. At Devil’s Gate the freight was left, as the teams were too weak to haul it. It was left in charge of Daniel W. Jones, Thomas M. Alexander and Ben Hampton, with seventeen emigrants to guard it through the winter.

It was several days after that—I do not remember the exact date—that we made the last crossing of the Sweetwater. In speaking of that memorable event, Elder John Jaques says: “It was a severe operation to many of the company. It was the last ford the company waded over. The water was not less than two feet deep, perhaps a little more in the deepest parts, but it was intensely cold. The ice was three or four inches thick and the bottom of the river muddy and sandy. The stream seemed to be about forty yards wide. Before the crossing was completed, the shades of evening were closing around, and this, as every-one knows, is the coldest hour of the twenty-four, especially at a frosty time. When the handcarts arrived at the bank of the river one poor fellow who was greatly worn down with travel exclaimed: “Have we got to cross here?” Being answered “Yes” he again exclaimed: “Oh dear, I can’t go through that!” His heart sank within him and he burst into tears. But his heroic wife came to his aid, and in a sympathetic tone said, “Don’t cry, Jimmie, I’ll pull the handcart for you.” In crossing the river the shins and limbs of the waders came in contact with sharp cakes of ice which inflicted wounds on them which did not heal until long after they arrived in this valley. And some of them are alive, some of them bear the marks of them to this day.”

After this crossing we camped for several days in a deep gulch called “Martin’s Ravine”. It was a fearful time and place. It was so cold that some of the company came near freezing to death. The sufferings of the people were fearful, and nothing but the power of a merciful God kept them from perishing. The storms continued unabated for some days. Said E.K. Hank[s] in speaking of it [it]:—“The storms during the three days were simply awful. In all my travels in the Rocky

Mountains, just before and afterwards, I have seen nothing like it—nothing worse.” When the snow at length ceased falling, it lay thick on the ground, and so deep that for many days it was impossible to move the wagons through. I and my children with hundreds of others were locked up in those fearful weather-bound mountains.

Elder Hanks gives the following graphic pen pictures of his first meeting with Martin’s company which he with others had been sent to relieve, and which some of them had given up for lost, believing that they had perished in the storms. “I think” he said, “The sun was about an hour high when I spied somethin[g] 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 handcar[t] company led by Captain Martin. I reached the ill-fated train just as they had camped for the night. The sight that met my gaze as I entered their camp can never be erased from my memory! The starved forms and haggard countenances of the poor sufferers, as they moved slowly, shivering with the cold to prepare the evening meal, was enough to touch the stoutest heart. When they saw me coming they hailed me with joy inexpressible.”

Children, I was there, Martha Ann was there, Mary Elizabeth was there, they, my daughters, and Aaron, my son.

Elder Hanks had killed some Buffalo meat which he distributed among us. We eagerly devoured it.

I will not continue this narrative much longer, but will hasten to convey us to our destination. We came by easy stages the remainder of the journey, and finally reached Salt Lake City at mid-day on Sunday, November Thirtieth, 1856. Thus ended the ever memorable overland voyage from the Missouri River to the Capital of Utah, in the eventful year of 1856.