

Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel, 1847–1868

Source of Trail Excerpt:

Rogerson, Josiah, "Martin's Handcart Company, 1856 [No. 3]," *Salt Lake Herald*, 27 Oct. 1907.

Read Trail Excerpt:

Article No. 2 concluded with our arrival and making camp on Friday, August 22, near the old Mormon sawmill of Winter Quarters, and near Florence, Neb., where we remained in camp till the afternoon of Monday, the 25th.

During the three days' rest here of the members of Martin's handcart company, Hodgetts and Hunt's independent wagon companies, the former now consisting of 605 souls and the latter of 280 to 300, the question of our proceeding farther this season, on account of the lateness, was the main—and nearly the only one of daily discussion by President Franklin D. Richards and a score of returning missionaries from the British Isles, Scandinavia, India and other points, including members of the Mormon battalion, who had crossed the plains several times before.

Recorder Bleak has only one short entry in his journal of: "Sunday, Aug. 24th, two meetings and partook of the sacrament." His data is invaluable, and as a shorthand pupil of Ben Pitman, he will write up a digest of what one in particular, and both of those meetings were.

Meeting That Decided Our Journey.

The first meeting was in the morning or afternoon, when the sacrament was administered. It was not lengthy, nor reference made to any extent as to our onward journey, but spiritual and encouraging, with the announcement that at 6 or 7 p.m. another meeting would be held on the same ground, and that every member then in the camps of the handcart and wagon companies was requested to be present.

I was advised many years ago that President Richards had met with the returning elders and missionaries in private council, and that two meetings had been held on the evenings of the 21st and 23d of August, when the advisability of our not going on and undertaking more than a 1,021-mile journey at that date, was discussed at length, and resulted in an agreement that it be left to a vote of the members of the handcart company first, and then the wagon companies. There was a full attendance at the time called, and such men as James G. Bleak, John Jaques, John Toone, Jesse Haven, John T. D. McAllister, General George D. Grant, David C. Dunbar, the unselfish and generous-hearted Joseph A. Young, President Brigham Young's oldest son, Cyrus H. Wheelock, General James Ferguson (one of the most distinguished soldiers and orators of the Mormon battalion), Brother Webb, the father of Ann Eliza, the latter the author of "Tell It All" celebrity, and who it is said was the most opposed to our starting so late. These were all there, with Captain Edward Martin, and his captain of the guard, Daniel Tyler, both members of the Mormon battalion, with such Mormon stalwarts from England as Professor Thomas Durham, a resident since for fifty years of Parowan, Iron County, Utah; Francis Webster, a resident of Cedar

City, Utah, for the same jubilee of years, that had made the journey from London to Australia and return, and from London to California and returned by the Isthmus of Panama, before he pulled the cart from Iowa City, Ia., to Winter Quarters. John Parkinson, previously referred to in paragraph 1 of our Article No. 2; Captains Peter Mayo, Wm. Wignall, Robert Holt, Thomas Ord and John Bailey, of Nephi, for the last fifty years, and by no means ordinary men in any community, and last but not least, the Twelves and Sam and Albert Jones and Watkins, of Provo; the Rogersons, Dobsons, Jacksons and scores of others still living, were there at that very important meeting.

President Richards' Postion.

I can hear, even now, the voice of President Richards, as he stood there and reasoned with us in his fatherly and gentlemanly manner, as to the lateness of the season, as to the possibility of the storms coming on earlier than usual, that no doubt many of the infants and aged might fall by the way, and some others through disease and from the impurities of the water in the streams, fatigue and exhaustion; and that it was left for us now to decide, whether we would go on and take the risks and chances of these possible and probable fatalities; or remain there and around Florence, Council Bluffs and other villages in the vicinity till an earlier date for starting the next year; that if we chose and decided to stay, we could have what provisions and supplies were in the store or warehouse there and ready for loading into our wagons for the journey; that he would purchase for us what more he could with means still in his hands, and assist us in every other way for our remaining there till next spring, and about the only encouraging words we remember as to our not staying and going ahead were when he said that as it had been one of the largest season's emigrations that had ever been shipped from the British Isles, since he had presided at Liverpool, that it contained hundreds of the first converts to Mormonism from 1837 to 1850, and that the majority of the latter had never been able to emigrate themselves, after their eighteen years in the faith, and doubtless never would have been able, that they were thus far on their way to Zion, he would be gratified by the help and favor of god to see all reach there in safety that season.

I know that the survivors of these companies, and their children and grandchildren will not say that I have been too voluble in the above paragraph, for that meeting has never before been written of or put into print with accuracy or fulness until now.

Vote Is Taken.

Elder John T. D. McAllister, the author of the handcart song, spoke afterward at that meeting for going on, and Cyrus H. Wheelock, General George D. Grant and others; but Brother Webb urged that we should not start, but stay there for the winter. His remarks were Webb's alone. Some others spoke and then President Franklin D. Richards, arising at last, advised all to vote with their free agency and responsibility. The vote was called, and with uncovered heads and uplifted hands to heaven and an almost unanimous vote, it was decided to go on. If Webb or any others voted to the contrary I do not remember it, nor the number.

Now who was responsible or to blame for the fatalities and the results of the journey—President Franklin D. Richards or the members of the companies and the missionaries? This has been in

question for fifty-one years.

Leaving the above paragraph for another touch or two later in our narrative, and mindful that this shall be as accurate a history of data and names as possible, I wish to correct in Paragraph 2 of the second column, of our Article No. 2, to read: "Crossing the Iowa river, Iowa, between 2 and 3 p.m., on the 26th day of July, 1856 as written), with four Schuttler wagons, etc:" and near the close of the same paragraph, read "and till the guarding and the snow had buried many of his nightly platoons," instead of mighty platoons.

After describing the size and makeup of the open and covered handcarts, provisions, wagons, etc., for the journey, we shall commence again with the diary and journal, leaving the Florence camp ground Monday, Aug. 25.

How Handcart Was Made.

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 lead 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 and on this wooden cart of a thimbleless axle, with about a two and one-half-inch shoulder and one-inch point, were loaded, on many a cart, 400 or 500 pounds of flour, bedding, extra clothing, cooking utensils, etc., and a tent. How the flimsy Yankee hickory structure held up the load for hundreds of miles has been a wonder to us since then, but my brother Bill and I and Tom Dobson, and Willard and hundreds of others, pulled similar loads from Florence to Ash Allow [Hollow], Wyoming, and miles farther west. We felt it a generous release of our burdens when Captain Wignall would come and say to the commissary, Jonathan Clegg: "Take a sack from this cart today, and a sack from another cart tomorrow, to be distributed, one pound to every adult, to each member of his company that evening.

The Family Cart.

The covered or family cart was similar in size and construction, with the exception that it was made stronger, with an iron axle, about an inch in thickness at the shoulder, and three-quarters of an inch at the point; a small (wagon) box, three to four feet long, with side and end boards about eight inches high. This cart, as will be seen, was made more for the carrying of children than the open cart.

Two persons were assigned to the pulling of each open cart, and where a father and son of age and strength were found in one family, with smaller children, they were allotted a covered cart, but in many instances the father had to pull the covered cart alone.

Our six provisions wagons, loaded to the bows, with two and three yoke of oxen to the wagon; one four-mule team, which was utilized for carrying the tents and poles, picking up the feeble,

aged and children as they became tired on the way; one light spring wagon, with two mules, and one riding pony, formed the advance part of our train. The 605 members of the company now were divided into six companies of 100 each, with Wm. Wignall captain of the first 100, and Peter Mayo, Thomas Ord, John Toone, Robert Holt (for many years previous president of the Manchester conference), and I think a man named Robinson completed the list of the six captains.

I find from other records that in addition to the number of provision wagons as just above recorded, we had another wagon loaded mostly with church goods, and a loose herd of fifty head of cows and beef cattle. The latter were in charge of and driven by a man named Rothwell, who reached Utah with us the last of November and settled in Nephi, Utah, minus the cows and the (few) beef cattle, which were slaughtered at the foot of Devil's Gate to save them perishing in that severe winter.

Now again to our diary and journey.

Monday, Aug. 25, a woman (name not in the journal) was cut off the church at a meeting of the whole camp for adultery. Our handcarts were packed and loaded to the bows, as the wagons, with 200 pounds of flour, and every cart where there were two able-bodied men, father and son, or two brothers, and 100 pounds of flour on every other cart, except where the children were numerous in the family. Then the bedding, extra luggage—consisting of clothing, etc., cooking utensils, water casks or can, and on the cart where the two able-bodied were harnessed the tent for ten persons, with the wooden tent pins attached. It was a load for the cart, and a load, indeed, for the drawers, which the writer remembers well, as brother Bill and me pulled that tonnage up the steep hill leading westward from our camp at Florence, Neb., that day.

Details of Diary

We traveled three miles today, and passed a cluster of Martin's graves—the pioneers from Nauvoo in 1846."

Wednesday, Aug. 27. Traveled seven- today."

Wednesday, Aug. 27; traveled four miles.

Thursday, Aug. 28. Traveled seventeen miles to the Elkhorn river. Saw a few Indians. Mr. Bleak further records: "My sons Richard and Thomas, only 4½ and 6 years old, have walked all the way from Florence, Neb. The writer remembers fording the Elkhorn river, which was not more than knee deep, three or four rods wide, and the town consisted of three or four log cabins and rooms, a few Indians and half a dozen frontiersmen.

"Friday, Aug. 29. Traveled four miles after crossing the Elkhorn. On this date we find the two wagon companies heretofore mentioned and the rear guard of this season's emigration still at Florence, Neb. Joseph A. Hunt says in his journal: "We are taking in provisions for the journey today. Flour is \$4.50 and cornmeal \$2.50 per 100 pounds: sugar, 12 and 15 cents per pound, and

very little bacon to be obtained."

On Sunday, Aug. 31, Hunt's company broke camp and by evening had moved out three miles.

On Wednesday, Sept. 3, they crossed the Elkhorn and camped in Rawhide creek.

(The reason for inserting the above record as to Hunt's wagon company will be seen and connection made hereafter.)

Saturday, Aug. 30. Traveled twelve miles through a level country.

Sunday, Aug. 31. Traveled thirteen miles today. This morning Captain Martin said we were 992 miles from Salt Lake City.

Monday, Sept. 1. Traveled nineteen miles today, and slept without raising the tents, as it was late when we reached camp. We had a fine view of the prairies on fire in two places.

Tuesday, Sept. 2. Traveled three miles before breakfast; then nine and a half miles to Loop Fork fair, which we crossed; then traveled one mile to camp.

I remember when we got to the ferry that the rope was broken, the southern side of the rope being in the water. I was detailed with three other swimmers to cross the fork, get the broken end, which was soon connected with the ferry side of the rope, and then we were ferried across.

Wednesday, Sept. 3. Remained in camp all day.

Thursday, Sept. 4. Traveled fifteen miles.

Friday, Sept. 5. Traveled but six miles in consequence of a violent thunderstorm this morning.

Saturday, Sept. 6. Traveled eight miles. This morning we saw a tribe of Pawnee Indians going eastward.

Sunday, Sept. 7. Traveled sixteen miles. Just after we camped President Franklin D. Richards and several other brethren overtook us. We had a meeting. (The "brethren," with President Richards, comprised about fifteen or twenty of the most prominent returning missionaries that season.)

Murmuring Begins.

Monday, Sept. 8. Traveled eighteen miles over a very heavy road. No watering place on the road. Considerable murmuring in the camp. (We were now getting into the sand dunes or sand hill country.)

Tuesday, Sept. 9. At the usual meeting this morning President Martin and Elder Tyler gave the murmurers a good chastising. Traveled six miles to some sand pits, where we obtained some

water. Then we traveled nine miles this evening and had a thunderstorm on the road.

Wednesday, Sept. 10. Traveled eighteen miles over a level country.

Thursday, Sept. 11. Traveled fifteen miles over a level country.

Friday, Sept. 12. Traveled but six miles in consequence of it being discovered that a cripple had been left behind.

Saturday, Sept. 13. Traveled twenty miles.

Sunday, Sept. 14. Traveled thirteen miles. Today our historian (Bleak) was taken quite ill, occasioned mainly by bad water and exposure.

Monday, Sept. 15. Traveled twenty-two miles, and seventeen miles of this distance his friend—Mr. Francis Webster, mentioned heretofore in our annals—pulled Mr. Bleak in the latter's cart that day on account of his illness. This evening we passed our 258th mile post—the buffalo head by the side of the road.

About 10:30 this morning we passed Fort Kearney, and as one of the most singular deaths occurred on our journey at this time and allow I will close the present article with a brief and truthful narration of the incident.

Two bachelors, named Luke Carter, from the Clitheroe branch, Yorkshire, England, and William Edward, from Manchester, England, each about 50 to 55 years of age, had pulled a covered cart together from Iowa City, Ia., to here: slept in the same tent, cooked and bunked together, but for several days previous unpleasant and cross words had passed between them.

Died by Roadside.

Edwards was a tall, loosely built and tender man physically, and Carter more stocky and sturdy: he had favored Edwards by letting the latter pull what he could in the shafts for some time past. This morning he grumbled and complained, still traveling, about being tired, give out, and that he couldn't go any farther. Carter retorted: "Come on. Come on. You'll be all right again when we get a bit of dinner at noon," but Edwards kept on begging for him to stop the cart and let him lie down and dee (die). Carter replying, "Well, get out and die then." The cart was instantly stopped. Carter raised the shafts of the cart. Edwards walked from under and to the south of the road a couple of rods, laid his body down on the level prairie, and in ten minutes he was a corpse.

We waited (a few carts of us) a few minutes longer till the captain came up and closed his eyes. A light-loaded open cart was unloaded, Edwards' body put thereon, covered with a quilt, and the writer pulled him to the noon camp, some five or six miles, where we dug his grave and buried him a short distance west of Fort Kearney, Neb.

There must have been a dozen or more deaths up to this date in our company since leaving

Florence, Neb., but there is no record of any in Brother Bleak's journal, nor have we been able as yet to find their names, but we know that there were more than the one just above written.