

Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel, 1847–1868

Source of Trail Excerpt:

Rogerson, Josiah, "Martin's Handcart Company, 1856 [No. 8]," *Salt Lake Herald*, 24 Nov. 1907.

Read Trail Excerpt:

Article No. 5 concluded with the entry in General R. T. Burton's relief party journal: Monday, Oct. 27, remained in the same place: feed tolerably good, etc., but before proceeding on our journey a few more entries from the same journal are necessary, as will be seen to make connection:

"Tuesday, Oct. 28—Remained in the same camp; weather fine; snow going away. At night, cloudy; snow began to fall fast. After prayers it ceased snowing. It must be remembered that the day before, Monday, Oct. 27, General Burton had not up to that date heard anything of our company, and the second express was sent east with orders to continue till they found us.

"Wednesday, Oct. 29—In same camp. Fine warm morning, and continued so through the day.

"Thursday, Oct. 30—Good weather; snow going away slowly. Remained in the same camp today. The express returned tonight at 7 o'clock. Reported the companies on the Platte river; had been camped there three to six days, not far apart."

Here Historian John Jaques makes an interlineation in red ink in General Burton's journal: "Three days is wrong. It was eight or ten days." No doubt it seemed that length of time to Brother Jaques, and longer, for his strength and nerve were nearly gone. The return of this express after finding us at the Red Buttes, and previously recorded in our last chapter, shows that from some time on Monday morning, till Thursday at 7 p. m., they had traveled through the snow and storms, day and night, nearly 150 miles regardless of exposure and their lives. Who shall ever write and record the meed of praise due these three brave men?

Deaths and Burials at Red Buttes.

I would readily pick up my cart and roll on from here without writing another line as to our fatalities and the dying of many of our martyrs here, but my narrative would be incomplete without some more mention of these losses. Brother Bleak's diary says: "After the express came into camp, as heretofore written, our losses by death since leaving Florence, Neb., were only fifty-six." Since writing this paragraph in my last chapter, I have given it further consideration.

Not by any means desiring to augment or increase the death roll of our company, yet we must now come to the fact, and the writer is certain that this number of fifty-six was misunderstood, and that at least it meant fifty-six that died here during the six days we were snowbound at the Red Buttes. If this latter conclusion be not correct, then we did not lose 150 during the whole journey, and the statement has been made by several of our most intelligent survivors, and

among the number Historian Bleak, that we lost 305, or nearly that number.

In support of this statement, from the day we left Fort Laramie till we reached the Buttes, there certainly wasn't a night when our deaths were less than three to six and eight, and one evening more, and on the Monday morning of Oct. 27, previous to Wednesday when we again started west, the writer remembers eighteen adults that were buried in three graves, side by side, for I assisted in the digging and the interments. How easily death can come to the exhausted will be seen by the following brief incident: One morning while at the Buttes the wife of Samuel Pucell, about 55 or 60 years of age, from the Ashton-Under-Lyne branch, Lancashire, England, came to out [our] tent and, pushing aside the cloth door, said, calling to my mother: "Mary, our Sam's (her husband) dead, and I'll not be long after him. When I'm dee-ad, do thee take care of my two lassies after thou gets to the valley, and be a good mother to 'em. I'll not reach there." No words of mother could cheer her up, or dispel her conclusion. The next morning afterward, not later than the second, she had gone to her Sam, and if possible, they were laid side by side at my mother's request. The two daughters, Margaret and Helen, went with my mother to Parowan, Iron county, Utah, the same winter, and have been residents of Cedar City, Utah, for the last forty-five years, and well known as Mrs. John Walker and Mrs. Unthanks. Their mother and father, just referred to, were among the first members of the Preston branch of the church. Lancashire, England, organized there in July, 1837, by President Heber C. Kimball and others, and I have it from my mother that Sister Pucell (I think her name was Margaret) at one time, hearing that some of the six or eight associate elders of President Kimball hadn't anything to eat one day, took one of her skirts and pawned it for enough to buy a loaf of bread, a few ounces of tea and sugar and half a pound of butter, which she took to the elders, begging them to accept the donation. The youngest daughter, Helen [Ellen], of the Pucell family, then about 12 years of age, arrived in Salt Lake with her feet so badly frozen that both were amputated soon afterward. Of such Saints and graduates in the primitive love of the gospel was Captain Edward Martin's handcart company composed.

I shall not depict further here our sufferings, deaths and the increasing and exceeding hunger that prevailed in the camp, but leave this task to surviving comrades to tell to their offspring, as the hour may suit the recital at their own firesides, and I shall set down the total of our death list up to this date at 125.

On the Devil's Gate.

And now we must go on again, as we have yet between 360 to 380 miles to make before the valley is reached. Brother Bleak says:

"Wednesday. Oct. 29—Traveled ten miles. Going in the direction of Strawberry valley and Greasewood creek.

"Thursday. Oct. 30—Traveled nine miles. The roads yesterday and today were very muddy and slushy, and the carts pulled hard.

"Friday. Oct. 31—Traveled eleven miles, and were met by General G. D. Grant and his relief company during the day, from whom we received additional supplies of flour, and our rations

were raised to one pound for adults and a half pound for children, and we will not further forget to state here that when the relief express found us at the Red Buttes we have only six days' rations left in camp, at one pound of flour per head for adults, and one-half pound per head for children.

"Saturday. Nov. 1—Traveled ten miles today, with considerable snow this afternoon, and camped near Independence rock, a few miles east of the fatal Devil's Gate.

"Sunday. Nov. 2—Traveled six miles today, passing Independence rock and through the Devil's Gate.

"Monday. Nov. 3—In camp: weather very bad. Here we left all the uncovered handcarts."

Possibly this is true as Brother Bleak has it recorded, but the writer remembers that he and his brother pulled a cart most of the way to Willow Springs, beyond the three crossings of Sweetwater.

Snowbound at Devil's Gate.

Our camp at the fort at Devil's Gate, which as I remember, and corroborated by Elder Samuel S. Jones of Provo, Utah, was inclosed by two sides, or wings of a stockade fence, inside of which were eight or ten log cabins constructed of dry balsam. We reached there between 4 and 5 p. m., Sunday, Nov. 2, possibly earlier, and the relief boys from Utah soon were pulling up and chopping down the stockade posts for fires. As the night came on it was getting bitterly cold, and the wind had a full sweep at all of us that couldn't get shelter in the cabins.

It has been cloudy all the time during our traveling today, and I remember well that we had only once seen the disc of the sun, as we were passing through Devil's Gate. The next day and the three succeeding days not a glimpse of the sun, and the weather increased in cold and severity, as will be seen from General Burton's and Brother Bleak's journals, and during this period the two wagon companies had come up to our camp here and, with General Burton's relief teams, formed quite a camp. Brother Bleak says:

"Tuesday, Nov. 4—In camp.

"Wednesday. Nov. 5—No travel; weather very severe. Sister Mary Harper died, aged 64. Ration of flour was reduced to four ounces for adults and two ounces for the children, and making a pound of flour a day for the six of us (Brother Bleak's family), yet we were as contented as when we had one pound per head.

"Thursday. Nov. 6—No traveling; weather bound.

"Friday>, Nov. 7—The same as yesterday; weather bound.

"Saturday. Nov. 8—No traveling, but the weather somewhat more favorable."

General Burton's Journal Again.

I shall now insert eight days' record from General Burton's Journal, which our readers will find invaluable and interesting:

"Friday. Oct. 31—Fine and clear. Started this morning to meet the (our) handcart company. Met them on Greasewood creek. Camped with them tonight, and dealt out to them flour, clothing, etc.

"Saturday. Nov. 1—Started back to the valley (Utah). Brothers Grant and R.T. Burton went back to meet Brother Hodgett's company, four or five miles back. About noon it commenced snowing; snowed until late at night. Camped near Independence rock.

"Sunday. Nov. 2—Camped tonight at the Devil's Gate. Snow deep and very cold. I ask our surviving comrades to now note closely the length of time we stopped here.

"Monday. Nov. 3—Remained at same place; so cold that the companies could not move. Sent on an express to Salt Lake City today, Joseph A. Young and Abe Garr, to report our situation and get counsel and help.

"Tuesday. Nov. 4—Cold continued very severe. People could not move. Stowed away the goods of the train (of the wagon companies) in the log houses."

And now comes the record of our diverging from the old Pioneer road, three to four miles, west and across the Sweetwater into "Martin's cove." First Lieutenant of the Guard Brother Sam S. Jones of Provo, and of whom I shall have several paragraphs to record before I finish my narrative, calls it "Martin's ravine." and well may he remember it as it came within a hair's—breadth of being his mountain grave through hunger, exhaustion and cold. Note the next sentence from General Burton's journal, of which there is no record in Captain Hunt's or Brother Bleak's journal:

"Captain Martin's company moved (across the Sweetwater, west, to a cove in the mountains) three miles today and camped."

This cove or ravine, was indeed our Valley Forge or graveyard, and though some have censured Captain Martin for taking us there, yet if we had stayed at the Devil's Gate fort it would have been more fatal, on account of the full sweep the bitter cold winds had on us there, and one day or night with the thermometer 11 degrees below zero. Here we had plenty of good cedar wood and shelter on three sides.

Again I resume General Burton's journal at Devil's Gate:

"Wednesday. Nov. 5—Weather continued cold: neither of the companies moved. Captain Hunt's wagon company arrived here at 8 p.m.

"Thursday. Nov. 6—Colder than ever. Thermometer 11 degrees below zero. Stowed away the goods of Captain Hunt's train. None of the companies moved: so very cold the people could not

travel.

"Friday. Nov. 7—Remained here today: so very cold could not travel. Stowed away goods, trying to save the people, stock, etc.

"Saturday. Nov. 8—Wind did not blow so hard. Some warmer this morning. Hunting up the horses and cattle to move on tomorrow. Camped here today.

"Sunday. Nov. 9—Fine warm morning. The handcart (Martin's) and Captain Hodgett's company moved on at 11 o'clock a.m. Captain Hunt's company not yet done "caching" goods (at the Devil's Gate."

This evening we had a meeting of the officers of the companies to appoint brethren to remain with the goods left here by Captain Hodgett's and Hunt's companies. Dan Jones was left in charge, or president; F.M. Alexander and Benjamin Hampton, his counselors, with seventeen other brethren from the two companies. The brethren were instructed in their duties.

During our stay here we had meetings every evening to counsel together and ask the Lord to turn away the cold and storm so that the people might live.

"Monday. Nov. 10—Very fine morning. Captain Hunt's company fixing to start: getting up cattle, etc. The last wagon moved on about 2 o'clock p.m. Captain George D. Grant, Cyrus H. Wheelock, Steve Taylor and R. T. Burton moved on at 3 o'clock p.m. Camped tonight with Captain Hodgett.

"Tuesday. Nov. 11—Started early this morning. Overtook the handcart company at 10 o'clock a.m. Brother Ephraim Hanks was with them from the valley and brought good news. Camped tonight on Bitter Cottonwood."

And now the writer must return to his handcart company in Martin's ravine, after having detailed General Burton's stopping at the Devil's Gate since Sunday evening, Nov. 2—ten nights and eight days—but as I have had in my mind for the last fifty years the veteran mail carrier, Charles Decker, was here with General Burton all the time, and he said that during all his twenty-five to thirty trips across the plains, since coming to Utah in 1847, he had never seen the snow so deep here before, nor the cold so intense. In fact, I also remember it being said here, for the first four or five days the snow was so drifted and deep that they could not locate the road ahead.

Crossing the Sweetwater.

Tuesday, Nov. 4—Martin's hand company left the camp at Devil's Gate some time in the forenoon, making straight west to the Sweetwater. The creek here was at least two rods wide, and from two to three feet deep, with plenty of ice and snow, so as to carve the recollection forever in the minds of all that waded that stream. Our few wagons helped to carry all the children they could, the aged and wornout, and many a child was pulled across in the father's covered cart, but we had one hero on this occasion, whose name deserves to be chiseled on the pedestal of the throne in heaven, and that was Daniel H. Grant, the son of General D. Grant of

Farmington, Utah, about 18 or 21 years of age, who jumped into that cold, icy stream, and for nearly two hours carried across on his back, with their arms clasped around his neck, fully 150 children, young ladies and the aged of both sexes. When we were all across, he walked in his suit of ice some two and a half miles to the camp at the Gate, where his father did all possible for him that night, but he told me ten or twelve years afterward in Utah that his services that day in the Sweetwater had made him an invalid for life and a permanent rheumatic, and so far as health and strength, a ruined man.

Snowbound in Martin's Ravine.

We reached the cove or ravine in time to get our tents pitched before dark, and found plenty of good, dry cedar and pine, close by on the rocks and ledges. The night was as cold as nearly any we had at the Devil's Gate, and the snow so frozen to the ground that many were not able to clear it out of the tents, so they threw down their buffalo robes and blankets and lay down exhausted. We remained here the evening of Tuesday, Nov. 4 and Nov. 5, 6, 7 and 8—five nights and four days, and, while Historian Bleak has only the record of Sister Mary Harper's death, as above written, yet our losses daily and nightly in this ravine were as great as at the Red Buttes, because of the intensely cold weather and our rations of four ounces of flour for adults and two ounces for children. Here nearly all the balance of our oxen died, and several were found each morning dead between the tents, and some with their heads close to the ashes of our campfires. Others were knocked in the head before they did die, cut up and eaten, together with many a pound of rawhide, after roasting off the hair.

One or two incidents must be recorded and then we leave the ravine.

Wheelock's Prayer.

Every morning and evening prayer meetings were called, at which addresses were made by the members of the rescuing and relief party, at one of which, a night or two before we left, Elder Cyrus H. Wheelock, who had just returned from a three-year mission to the British Isles, during which period he had become greatly attached to scores in our camp and company, offered a very remarkable prayer.

His heart and soul was filled with sorrow at our condition, as we had several in our camp yet that had to a certain extent lost their minds—since crossing the North Platte river, at least, they became like children and impersonal.

Raising his hands to heaven in a very impressive and appealing manner, his voice nearly stifled with emotion and grief, he prayed to the Father that if for any fault or weakness that he might have done or committed in his life and ministry, the progress of the members of our company that he loved dearer than his own life was impeded; that if through anything he had done or left undone he had caused or helped to cause, or bring about our present plight, that He would instantly remove him out of the way by death, and let the company go on without further loss, to the valleys of the mountains. It was touching and deep in its humility, and this brief digest will no doubt refresh the memories and reproduce the scene in that snowbound camp for many of our

surviving comrades.

One of the young ladies whose mind became affected by the fatal crossing had left her own campfire immediately after the last relief wagon had rolled out from here in the snow on the morning of Sunday, Nov. 9, apparently in search of some scraps of food or meat, and had got to a fire round a point in the rocks, near to where my brother and I were roasting some pieces of meat and rawhide for lunch. As we arose to go and catch the wagons (divest now of our carts), we caught sight of the young woman sitting at the fire and staring at us with dazed eyes. We tried to rouse her from her lethargy, but she was all childish indifference. Sending my brother ahead to stop the last wagon, he returned, and making a chair of our arms, we carried her a rod or two at a time for a couple of hundred yards, as she was not able to walk, and the teamster coming to our relief, she soon was placed in his wagon. In the early part of our journey she ranked as one of the most beautiful in face, tall and well formed, in the company, and had we not discovered her when we did, the chances are that in less than an hour she would have met her death—as Father Stone did—a feast for the mountain wolves. She was then about 20 years of age. Succeeding in reaching Utah with us, she recovered her mind by kind nursing that winter, and in the spring or summer following married one of the most prominent and well-to-do first settlers of Ogden city.

On to the South Pass

Brother Bleak says: "Sunday, Nov. 9, traveled five miles," and he further records that, though his feet at this time were very sore and frozen, he walked the distance today, not wishing to burden the teams. "Nearly all the hand carts have now been abandoned.

"Monday. Nov. 12—Traveled eight miles today; our rations were increased to eight ounces for adults and four ounces for children.

Tuesday. Nov. 11—Traveled seven miles. General Burton says—in his journal that he overtook us this morning at 10 o'clock, and that the brave Ephraim Hanks had reached us with good news from the valley, and we all camped together tonight on Bitter Cottonwood."

Very few men—or members of the rescuing party, if any, surpassed Ephraim Hanks in the services and assistance that he rendered our company, day and night, until the last one of us reached Salt Lake, and from that day till this we have been crowning him with thanks and blessings.

"Wednesday, Nov. 12—Traveled six miles today," and the writer well remembers pulling a cart today and wading the Sweetwater three times. Here Brother Bleak records the death of Alfred Bloomfield Bridge, a fine young man that he emigrated from his Whitechapel Branch in London; a baker, tall and well formed for life, about 25 years of age; but he succumbed here through starvation and exhaustion. So callous had our feelings become to death, that while eating our bite of supper around the camp fire—and it was not yet sun down, mother requested us to look at Brother Bridge, and see if he was alive. He was only a few feet from our fire, lying on the ground in his robe and some blankets, which we parted, and on looking at his face, saw that his eyes were glazing in death, of which we apprised mother and resumed our supper.

Here old John Ollorton died and was buried with Brother Bridge and thirteen others the next morning, so Brother Bleak informed us at the last October conference in this city. Brother Ollorton was one of the first converts of President Heber C. Kimball, in 1837, at the town of Longton, Lancashire, England, and where he was also successful in baptizing and emptying the Methodist church of all its members save the minister.

His widow Alice, weathered the journey to the Big Sandy, some 100 miles further west, where she died on Thursday evening, Nov. 20, 1856, and was buried the next morning, where the writer's mother and family had kept their campfire burning all night.

"Thursday. Oct 3—Traveled twelve miles. We passed Ice Springs today."

I will not close this chapter with two more paragraphs from General Burton's journal:

"Wednesday. Nov. 12—Fine Morning, warm for the season. Sent on an express to the South Pass. It returned at 5 o'clock this morning (?), and four teams with some flour. Camped tonight above the three crossings of Sweetwater.

Thursday, Nov. 13—Very pleasant morning. Companies all moving along finely. Camped again tonight on the Sweetwater at the lower end of the 16-mile drive.