

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mormon\\_handcart\\_pioneers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mormon_handcart_pioneers)

1856: Willie and Martin handcart companies

The last two handcart companies of 1856 departed late from England. The ship *Thornton*, carrying the emigrants who became the Willie Company, did not leave England until May 4. The leader of the Latter-day Saints on the *Thornton* was James G. Willie. Another three weeks passed before the *Horizon*, carrying the emigrants who formed the Martin Company, departed. The late departures may have been the result of difficulties in procuring ships in response to the unexpected demand, but the results would be tragic.<sup>[18]</sup>

With slow communications in the era before the transatlantic telegraph, the Church agents in Iowa City were not expecting the additional emigrants and had to make frantic preparations for their arrival. Critical weeks were spent hastily assembling the carts and outfitting the companies. When the companies reached Florence, additional time was lost making repairs to the poorly built carts.<sup>[19]</sup> Emigrant John Chislett describes the problems with the carts:<sup>[20]</sup>

"The axles and boxes being of wood, and being ground out by the dust that found its way there in spite of our efforts to keep it out, together with the extra weight put on the carts, had the effect of breaking the axles at the shoulder. All kinds of expedients were resorted to as remedies for the growing evil, but with variable success. Some wrapped their axles with leather obtained from bootlegs; others with tin, obtained by sacrificing tin-plates, kettles, or buckets from their mess outfit. Besides these inconveniences, there was felt a great lack of a proper lubricator. Of anything suitable for this purpose we had none at all."

Prior to the Willie Company departing Florence, the company met to debate the wisdom of such a late departure. Because the emigrants were unfamiliar with the trail and the climate, they deferred to the returning missionaries and Church agents. One of the returning missionaries, Levi Savage, urged them to spend the winter in Nebraska. He argued that such a late departure with a company consisting of the elderly, women and young children would lead to suffering, sickness and even death. All of the other Church elders argued that the trip should go forward, expressing optimism that the company would be protected by divine intervention. Some members of the company, perhaps as many as 100, decided to spend the winter in Florence or in Iowa, but the majority, about 404 in number (including Savage) continued the journey west. The Willie Company left Florence on August 17 and the Martin Company on August 27. Two ox-wagon trains, led by captains W.B. Hodgett and John A. Hunt, followed the Martin Company.<sup>[21]</sup>

Near Wood River, Nebraska, a herd of bison caused the Willie Company's cattle to stampede, and nearly 30 cattle were lost. Left without enough cattle to pull all of the wagons, each handcart was required to take on an additional 100 pounds (45 kg) of flour.<sup>[22]</sup>

In early September, Franklin D. Richards, returning from Europe where he had served as the Church's mission president, passed the emigrant companies. Richards and the 12 returning missionaries who accompanied him, traveling in carriages and light wagons pulled by horses and mules, pressed on to Utah to obtain assistance for the emigrants.<sup>[23]</sup>

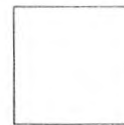
Disaster and rescue

[ edit ]

In early October the two companies reached Fort Laramie, Wyoming, where they expected to be restocked with provisions, but no provisions were there for them. The companies had to cut back food rations, hoping that their supplies would last until help could be sent from Utah. To lighten their loads, the Martin Company cut the luggage allowance to 10 pounds (4.5 kg) per person, discarding clothing and blankets that soon would be desperately needed.<sup>[24]</sup>

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Dramatization of man pulling handcart through snow

On October 4 the Richards party reached Salt Lake City and conferred with president Brigham Young and other Church leaders. The next morning the Church was meeting in a general conference, where Young and the other speakers called on the Church members to provide wagons, mules, supplies, and teamsters for a rescue mission. On the morning of October 7 the first rescue party left Salt Lake City with 16 wagonloads of food and supplies, pulled by four-mule teams with 27 young men serving as teamsters and rescuers. The party elected George D. Grant as their captain. Throughout October more wagon trains were assembled, and by the end of the month 250 relief wagons were on the road.<sup>[25]</sup>

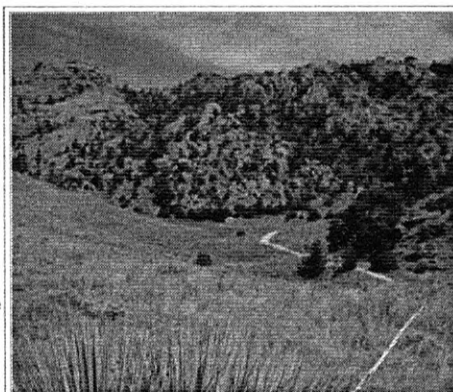
Meanwhile, the Willie and Martin companies were running out of food and encountering bitterly cold temperatures. On October 19 a blizzard struck the region, halting the two companies and the relief party. The Willie Company was along the Sweetwater River approaching the Continental Divide. A scouting party sent ahead by the main rescue party found and greeted the emigrants, gave them a small amount of flour, encouraged them that rescue was near, and then rushed onward to try to locate the Martin Company.<sup>[26]</sup> The members of the Willie Company had just reached the end of their flour supplies. They began slaughtering the handful of broken-down cattle that still remained while their death toll mounted. On October 20 Captain Willie and Joseph Elder went ahead by mule through the snow to locate the supply train and inform them of the company's desperate situation. They arrived at the rescue party's campsite near South Pass that evening, and by the next evening the rescue party reached the Willie Company and provided them with food and assistance. Half of the rescue party remained to assist the Willie Company while the other half pressed forward to assist the Martin Company. The difficulties of the Willie Company were not yet over. On October 23, the second day after the main rescue party had arrived, the Willie Company faced the most difficult section of the trail—the ascent up Rocky Ridge. The climb took place during a howling snowstorm through knee-deep snow. That night 13 emigrants died.<sup>[27]</sup>

On October 19, the Martin Company was about 110 miles (177 km) further east, making its last crossing of the North Platte River near present-day Casper, Wyoming.<sup>[28]</sup> Shortly after completing the crossing, the blizzard struck. Many members of the company suffered from hypothermia or frostbite after wading through the frigid river. They set up camp at Red Bluffs, unable to continue forward through the snow. Meanwhile the original scouting party continued eastward until it reached a small vacant fort at Devil's Gate, where they had been instructed to wait for the rest of the rescue party if they had not found the Martin Company. When the main rescue party rejoined them, another scouting party consisting of Joseph Young, Abel Garr, and Daniel Webster Jones was sent forward. The Martin company remained in their camp at Red Bluffs for nine days until the three scouts finally arrived on October 28. By the time the scouts arrived, 56 members of the company had died. The scouts urged the emigrants to begin moving again. Three days later the main rescue party met the Martin Company and the Hodgett and Hunt wagon companies and helped them on to Devil's Gate.<sup>[29]</sup>

George D. Grant, who headed the rescue party, reported to President Young:<sup>[30]</sup>

"It is not of much use for me to attempt to give a description of the situation of these people, for this you will learn from [others]; but you can imagine between five and six hundred men, women and children, worn down by drawing hand carts through snow and mud; fainting by the wayside; falling, chilled by the cold; children crying, their limbs stiffened by cold, their feet bleeding and some of them bare to snow and frost. The sight is almost too much for the stoutest of us; but we go on doing all we can, not doubting nor despairing."

At Devil's Gate the rescue party unloaded the baggage carried in the wagons of the Hodgett and Hunt wagon companies that had been following the Martin Company so the wagons could be used to transport the weakest emigrants. A small group remained at Devil's Gate over the winter to protect the property. On November 4 the company had to cross the Sweetwater River, which was about 2 feet (0.6 m) deep and 90 to 120 feet (27 to 37 m) wide. The stream was clogged with floating ice. Some of the men of the rescue party spent hours pulling the carts and carrying many of the emigrants across the river.<sup>[31]</sup> However, many members of the company crossed the river themselves, some even pulling their own handcarts across.<sup>[32]</sup> The severe weather forced the Martin Company to halt for another five days at Martin's Cove, a few miles west of Devil's Gate.<sup>[33]</sup>




Martin's Cove, Wyoming

The rescue parties escorted the emigrants from both companies to Utah through more snow and severe weather while their members continued to suffer death from disease and exposure. The Willie Company arrived in Salt Lake City on November 9; 68 members of the company had lost their lives.<sup>[34]</sup>

Meanwhile, a backup relief party of 77 teams and wagons was making its way east to provide additional assistance to the Martin Company. After passing Fort Bridger the leaders of the backup party concluded that the Martin Company must have wintered east of the Rockies, so they turned back. When word of the returning backup relief party was communicated to Young, he ordered the courier to return and tell them to turn back east and continue until they found the handcart company, but several days had been lost. On November 18 the backup party met the Martin Company with the greatly needed supplies. At last all the members of the handcart party were now able to ride in wagons. The 104 wagons carrying the Martin Company arrived in Salt Lake City on November 30; at least 145 members of the company had lost their lives. Many of the survivors had to have fingers, toes, or limbs amputated due to severe frostbite.<sup>[35]</sup>

After the companies arrived in Utah, the residents generously opened their homes to the arriving emigrants, feeding and caring for them over the winter. The emigrants would eventually go on to Latter-day Saint settlements throughout Utah and the West.<sup>[36]</sup>

 angiesullivan70 added this on 23 May 2012