

“They had to watch the cattle, herding them day and night. . . . My father and uncle Robert Reeder had gone three and four nights out of seven in the pouring rain, wet through from head to foot and part time in water up to their knees, but willing to do anything to help get started on their journey westward.”

*—reminiscence by Sarah Hurren Seamons
of the 1856 Mormon experience in Iowa*

In Excellent Spirits

Mormon Diary Accounts of Crossing Iowa

by Loren N. Horton

The Mormon handcart migration to the valley of the Great Salt Lake was an experience almost unique in the history of migration on the U.S. frontier. Compared to the 1846 migration of Latter-day Saints (LDS)—which began in Nauvoo, Illinois, and then crossed the Mississippi and southern Iowa to the Missouri River—the 1856 and 1857 handcart migration had several advantages. Because the

state was more settled, the Mormons were able to travel on known roads and passed many more settled towns and areas. Therefore, supplies could be more readily obtained, and the travelers could stop and work for cash wages more often, even though many of the LDS European immigrants spoke little or no English. The populations through which they passed could be either an asset or liability. Although assistance was

sometimes offered, so was occasional harassment by people who objected to the religious views of the Saints. The handcart companies constantly faced the problem of people along the way trying to lure converts away from the LDS Church.

Mormons' journals in 1856 and later reminiscences describe the journey from Iowa City to the Missouri River, a little-known chapter in the handcart migration.

One of the crucial factors of the journey was the weather, as Archer Walters made clear in his journal. On May 12 he noted briefly: "It rained and it was cold." The next day was "very cold, still raining and very uncomfortable." On May 26 he described a powerful thunderstorm: "Lightened very bad; began about 8 o'clock until 11 o'clock. Never saw it so in my life and it rained hard and our beds began to swim. I was wet on my side as I laid until I found it out."

Daniel D. McArthur also described the weather that day: "The morning being so rainy nothing of importance could be attended to. In the evening a smart breeze set in attended with a good deal of rain, thunder, and lightning, so much so that a continual illumination was kept up for the space of two hours."

Dry weather caused problems, too. On June 12, the second day after leaving Iowa City, Twiss Birmingham recorded in his diary: "Very hot day and windy. The dust flew so thick that we could not see each other 1 yard distant." But on July 1 he complained: "Storm, thunder and lightning raged fearfully all night. Blew up part of our tent and wet all our clothes through. Lay all night in our wet clothes until morning with water running under us in streams."

"We were cold all the time," Sarah James recalled. "It was either rain or snow or wind. Even when you wrapped up in a blanket your teeth chattered."

In spite of such problems, morale apparently was high for the most part. Often this is stated directly. John D. T. McAllister noted that "the company was generally healthy and in excellent spirits." In another camp, Archer Walters wrote on June 1 that "the

band played several tunes after the meeting." Andrew Galloway was the official clerk of the Ellsworth Company. On June 9 he also commented that "the Saints were in excellent spirits" and a few weeks later that "a good spirit prevailed in camp."

Finding good drinking water and firewood along the route was sometimes a challenge, as Galloway noted in his diary. June 17: "At 2:20 P.M. tents were pitched for the night at a place where there was not wood, but plenty of water." June 30: "No water for twelve miles." July 3: "Very little water as we came along." July 4: "The first ten miles they had plenty of water, but the last ten there was none." July 7: "For about eight miles there was little or no water."

Contact with people who were not members of the LDS Church sometimes was pleasant, and sometimes unpleasant. During the same weeks when Galloway complained about lack of water, he mentioned visits by a "good many strangers." "Some were attentive, others could not bear the doctrine and walked off grumbling." While still in Iowa City, Priscilla Merriman Evans reported, "We were offered many inducements to stay and my husband was offered \$10.00 a day to work at his trade as an iron roller; but money was no inducement to us, for we were anxious to get to Zion." John Chislett recollected, "The people in Iowa were very good in giving to those who asked [for] food, expressing sympathy for us whenever they visited our camp—which they did in large numbers if we stopped near a settlement." On one occasion, as described by Twiss Birmingham, an eight-year-old boy got lost from his company.

The boy made his way to a farmer's house, where he was taken care of until his father found him four days later.

Descriptions of the 1857 handcart migrations across Iowa echo many of the 1856 accounts. Carl Christian Anton Christensen, a Danish convert, reminisced about the 1857 trip: "The hot season of the year, frequent rain-showers, almost bottomless roads, exertion and diet to which we were unaccustomed . . . brought about much sickness and many deaths among us."

Nevertheless, the religious conviction of the Latter-day Saints helped them overcome obstacles on the 1,300 miles between Iowa City and Utah, and more than 90 percent of those who began the effort actually reached their goal. In comparison with other travel during this period in history, we need to remember that a proportion of people undertaking any journey at the time faced difficulties. Of those who started to California during the Gold Rush years, for example, a similar percentage probably perished along the way. Monotonous diet, hard work, bad weather, poor roads, and dangers from people encountered along the way, all were factors faced by any traveler in the mid-19th century. Written accounts by the Mormon handcart travelers are useful in understanding that particular migration, and its similarities and differences to other accounts of travel on the frontier. ❖

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