

HANDCARTS TO UTAH, 1856-1860

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THIS year, 1956, marks the centennial of what was perhaps the most remarkable travel experiment in the history of Western America. The past hundred years have witnessed an interesting evolution of overland transportation—pack-horse train, ox-drawn wagon, stagecoach, pony express, railroad train, motor car, airplane—each in turn. And interspersed with these more common conveyances have appeared unusual or freakish devices, ranging from wheelbarrow to camel caravan. But only at one period, 1856-60, was the handcart employed for mass migration.

The genesis of this unique travel plan is to be seen in the Mormon proselyting system and its marked success. Zion, as a gathering place for the faithful, was proclaimed early, and "gathering to Zion" became a cardinal principle of doctrine. Mormonism, a missionary religion from its inception in 1830, at first confined its proselyting to the United States; but in 1837 ardent missionaries went to England. Here the response was immediate, for the new gospel offered both spiritual and temporal salvation in America. Within eight months, two thousand British converts were baptized.

When the Mormons finally established themselves in the Great Basin, the need for more settlers to develop the new country stimulated the proselyting urge. Utah was now proclaimed the "gathering place," and missionaries in Britain preached the necessity for coming to the new Zion. Clamor for emigration became almost unbounded. A large proportion of the converts were from the underprivileged classes, whose means were insufficient to pay for an overseas voyage and a long journey to the far interior of a distant land. To assist these, Brigham Young insti-

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tuted in 1849 the Perpetual Emigration Fund.¹ Since this revolving fund proved unequal to the calls for help, President Young finally announced a plan that he had been considering for some years. In a letter of September 30, 1855, to Franklin D. Richards, president of the European Mission and director of Mormon emigration, he wrote:

I have been thinking how we should operate another year. We cannot afford to purchase wagons and teams as in times past, I am consequently thrown back upon my old plan—to make hand-carts, and let the emigration foot it, and draw upon them the necessary supplies, having a cow or two for every ten. They can come just as quick, if not quicker, and much cheaper . . .²

President Young's letter was published in the *Millennial Star*, Mormon organ at Liverpool. A long editorial in the same issue endorsed the project and amplified its advantages; observing, "The system of ox-teams is too slow and expensive, and must give way to the telegraph line of handcarts and wheel barrows." Official approval of the scheme was announced in the General Epistle of the Church authorities of October 29, 1855:

The P. E. Fund is designed to deliver the honest poor, the pauper, if you please, from the thraldom of ages, from localities where poverty is a crime and beggary an offence against the law, where every avenue to rise in the scale of being to any degree of respectable joyous existence is forever closed, and place them in a land where honest labor and industry meet a suitable reward, where the higher walks of life are open to the humblest and poorest, . . . let them come on foot, with

¹For a good treatment of the Perpetual Emigration Fund and emigration in general, see Gustive O. Larson, *Prelude to the Kingdom* (Francetown, New Hampshire, 1947).

A book manuscript by LeRoy and Ann Hafen on the handcart migration was recently completed, and is referred to for a detailed presentation of the subject. Therefore, this short summary will be given without extensive annotations.

²Published in the *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, XVII (December 22, 1855), 813-14.

hand-carts or wheel-barrows; let them gird up their loins and walk through, and nothing shall hinder or stay them.³

Plans developed rapidly. Sailing vessels were chartered; Church agents were sent to the frontier to procure handcarts and supplies for the on-coming emigrants. About nineteen hundred persons sailed from Liverpool in the spring of 1856, intending to cross the plains and mountains to Utah with handcarts. The emigrants were to land at Boston or New York, and travel by train to the railhead at Iowa City, Iowa.

The Saints who were to comprise the first three handcart companies sailed in good time, arrived at the outfitting place in due course, and were able to set out on their overland trek in June. They were organized into companies, with four or five persons to a handcart, twenty persons to a large round tent, and one wagon and ox team to twenty carts. Each individual was allowed seventeen pounds of baggage. Extra provisions were hauled in the wagons. The light wooden carts, constructed with little or no iron, carried clothing, utensils, and some food.

The first stretch of the journey, across Iowa, was through partially settled country, with farms and towns along the route. The weather was hot, the road dusty, and the ordeal exacting. A number found the journey too difficult to be endured, and dropped out by the way; but the great majority reached Florence (old Winter Quarters) on the Missouri River. The agent there announced arrival of the first two caravans on July 17 "in fine health and spirits." They were singing the chorus of the Handcart Song:

Some must push and some must pull
As we go marching up the hill,
As merrily on the way we go
Until we reach the Valley, oh!

"One would not think that they had come from Iowa City, a long and rough journey of from 275 to 300 miles, except by their dust-stained garments and sunburned faces."⁴

³ *Ibid.*, XVIII, 52, 54.

⁴ J. H. Latey, writing from Florence, August 14, 1856, published in *The Mormon* and reprinted in *ibid.*, (October 4, 1856), 637.

In reading the excellent diaries or reminiscient accounts, one is impressed with the difficult labor, the fatigue, discouragements, and sometimes despair that dogged the journey. But after the trip was completed and the ordeal was over, then the achievement could be viewed in a more favorable light. It was in this happier vein that the Church leaders looked upon their cherished experiment.

When the first two handcart companies trailed down Emigration Canyon in late September, 1856, they were welcomed by Church officials, a brass band, lancers on horseback, and most of the inhabitants of Salt Lake City. Wilford Woodruff jubilantly expressed the satisfaction of the Mormon leaders:

One of the most interesting scenes that was ever witnessed in our Territory, was the arrival of two of the handcart companies, on the 26th inst. . . . I must say my feelings were inexpressible to behold a company of men, women, and children, many of them aged and infirm, enter the City of the Great Salt Lake, drawing 100 handcarts, (led by Brother Ellsworth, who assisted in drawing the first hand-cart), with which they had travelled some 1,400 miles in nine weeks, and to see them dance with joy as they travelled through the streets, complaining of nothing, only that they had been detained by the ox teams that carried some of their provisions, . . . Yes, our hearts swelled until we were speechless with joy, and not with sorrow. As I gazed upon the scene, meditating upon the future results, it looked to me like the first hoisting of the floodgates of deliverance to the oppressed millions. We can now say to the poor and honest in heart, come home to Zion, for the way is prepared.⁵

The Third Handcart Company, made up of over three hundred Welsh converts, began the pedestrian tour on June 23, 1856, and pulled their creaking carts into Salt Lake City on October 2. Thus far, results of the experiment had been gratifying; the companies had come through as well and as fast as ox trains.

⁵ Letter written September 30, 1856, and published in *ibid.*, 794-96.

But tragedy lay ahead. Emigrants that were to comprise the last two companies of 1856 were unduly late in sailing from England. Some left Liverpool aboard the *Thornton* on May 3; others, on the *Horizon*, not until May 25. A number of causes were responsible for the delays—an unprecedented clamor for passage to Zion, the difficulty in procuring ships, and various disappointments and miscalculations. As matters eventuated, the failure to meet the planned schedules and the subsequent delays that would occur at Iowa City and at Florence were to be nothing short of tragic. Furthermore, the earliest winter in years was to complete the disaster.

It was June 26 when the first group reached Iowa City; and the second came in twelve days later. Upon arrival, they found that the handcarts were not yet ready. Whether this failure was due to lack of timely advice from England as to the number needed; to inability to get the required help or materials for construction; or to a belief that the Saints could better afford to help make the carts than to pay for their manufacture, can hardly be determined.

The Fourth Handcart Company (Captain Willie's), comprising five hundred emigrants, was not able to leave Iowa City until July 15, being detained nineteen days. The Fifth Company (Captain Martin's), with 576 members, departed on the twenty-eighth, after a wait of twenty days—precious time that could have seen them far along their perilous journey.

Across Iowa, the trip was accomplished without unusual difficulties. Upon arrival at Florence further time was consumed in the repair of their flimsy vehicles. Now the question was raised whether the emigrants could safely continue their journey so late in the season. A large meeting of Willie's Company was held and the matter debated. A few missionaries in the company and some Mormon leaders at Florence were the only ones who had ever been over the route. The majority of these were confident that the humble and faithful Saints who were enduring so much for the Gospel's sake would merit special divine favor. Levi Savage, the one elder who spoke out vigorously against continuing the journey, was out-voted. So Willie's Company set out from Florence on August 17.

Martin's party did not leave the Missouri until the twenty-

seventh of August. Franklin D. Richards and other Mormon leaders who had directed the emigration from Britain had reached Florence just in time to help Martin's Company pull out from that point. Joined there by other emigration officials, Richard's party, with light wagons and good teams, hurried on to Utah, to report the late companies and request that teams and supplies be sent east to help them.

This express party reached Salt Lake City just as the General Conference of the Mormon Church was about to convene. President Brigham Young was shocked to learn that a thousand handcart emigrants were still enroute to Zion, presuming that the officials would "consider their late arrival in America and not start them across the Plains until another year."⁶ The practical president saw the likelihood of grave suffering and with characteristic vigor met the situation. He immediately interrupted regular Conference activity to recruit and organize relief parties, to assemble and forward food and clothing.

In the meantime the two belated handcart companies made their way up the valley of the Platte River. As they reached the higher altitudes beyond Fort Laramie, their supplies ran low and individuals began to weaken and die. Then the companies were caught in the claws of early and severe winter blizzards. Struggling caravans were brought to a complete standstill in the midst of the white desolation. Their pitiful sufferings and numerous deaths from hunger and cold cannot be related or described here.

To save these thousand souls stalled in the snow, more than three hundred miles from any settlement, was staged the most heroic mass rescue the frontier ever witnessed. The volunteer relief trains from Utah picked up the freezing handcart pilgrims east of South Pass. Without this timely assistance, it is doubtful if there would have been any survivors. Carried in the rescue wagons, the Fourth Handcart emigrants reached Salt Lake City on November 9; the Fifth, on November 30. Willie's group is reported to have suffered 67 deaths; Martin's Company, 135—together, the most appalling migration tragedy in the history of the West.

The ill-fortune of the belated companies could not but affect the general attitude toward travel by handcart. Though the

⁶ Young's letter of October 30, 1856, in *ibid.*, XIX, 99.

success of the first three companies was overshadowed by the sufferings of the fourth and the fifth, the Mormon authorities still endorsed and advocated the plan. "Hereafter," commanded President Brigham Young, "there must be no late starts from Missouri."

A dramatic and successful demonstration of the efficiency of travel by handcart was needed. Accordingly, in the spring of 1857 a company of seventy missionaries set out from Salt Lake City with handcarts, unaccompanied by wagons. They made the trip to Florence in forty-eight days, resting seven and one-half days of that number. They averaged twenty-seven miles per day on the road from Fort Laramie to the Missouri.

Compared with travel of the preceding year, the westbound emigration to Utah in 1857 was small. This was largely a result of the depletion of the Perpetual Emigration Fund. Two companies, however, without financial assistance, were organized by Church officials and supplied with carts to cross the plains. Numbering together about 480 persons, they made the journey successfully and reached Salt Lake City in mid-September.

The coming of Johnston's Army and the difficulties associated with the "Utah Expedition" interrupted Mormon emigration in 1858. But the next year saw a resumption of handcart travel. Because of the great "Pike's Peak or Bust" gold rush to the Colorado region in 1859, there was an exceptional demand for equipment and supplies, which brought a consequent rise in prices for the Mormon westbound emigrants. The heavy traffic along the road made the journey more difficult for the handcart company of this year. However, the 235 Saints with their 60 carts and 6 wagons, reached their destination in safety, despite their suffering from shortage of food.

The year 1860 saw the last of handcart travel to Utah. That year saw also the inauguration of the famous Pony Express. Quite in contrast were these two contemporary institutions, the patrician and the plebian of western transportation in the days before the railroad. Ten days were required by the Ponies to race their eighteen hundred mile course from St. Joseph to Sacramento. Eighty days were occupied by the emigrants in the last of the handcart companies, as they walked the one thousand mile stretch from the Missouri to Salt Lake City.

In the last two companies—350 persons with 65 carts—there were fewer deaths than on any previous journey. Robinson's Company (the ninth) had but one death enroute; Stoddard's (the tenth) had none. Consequently, they can be rated as the most successful travel journeys by handcart.

My own mother, as a little Swiss girl, was in the last company. She recalled: "There were six to our cart. Father and mother pulled it; Rosie (two years old) and Christian (six months old) rode; John (nine) and I (six) walked. Sometimes, when it was down hill, they let me ride too."⁷

Why was the handcart plan, once so highly lauded, so soon abandoned? Brigham Young himself engineered the change. By 1860 the Mormons had a surplus of livestock in Utah. In that year, an experimental ox train made a trip from Salt Lake to Missouri and back, proving that the round trip could be made in a single season. Thereafter, companies were formed in Utah in the early spring, and as they traveled eastward they deposited supplies at convenient points enroute. At the Missouri River they picked up the waiting emigrants with their freight, and transported them to Utah before the snows fell. Experienced drivers insured dependable transit, and supply depots provided food. Until the coming of the railroad, the Utah teams continued to convey the hopeful emigrants to Zion. The handcart was thus displaced.

To recapitulate: From 1856 to 1860 ten handcart companies crossed the plains to Utah. Nearly three thousand persons traveled with 662 carts, bringing their earthly possessions and their hopes to the new Zion. Most critics, in looking at the handcart experiment, remember only the tragic misfortune of those belated companies of 1856, a pitiable episode indeed. But taken in its normal operation, with adequate preparation and proper scheduling, the handcart plan was an economical, effective, and rather beneficent institution. It enabled hundreds, who otherwise could never have come to America, to emigrate and become productive United States citizens.

True, the majority of the men who traveled by handcart were uneducated peasant farmers, coal miners, factory workers,

⁷ Mary Ann Hafen, *Recollections of a Handcart Pioneer of 1860* (Denver, 1938), 22.

whose economic opportunities were greatly enhanced by migrating to the New World. Since hard work and simple fare were not unknown to them, they did not hesitate to undertake a type of travel demanding strenuous labor and subject to unpredictable fates. At best, handcart travel was an exacting ordeal for both the body and the spirit. Concern for material welfare alone would never have produced the handcart migrations. It took unflinching religious faith to sustain these western pilgrims on their footsore journeys.

The womb of the handcart has produced a numerous progeny. From less than three thousand emigrants who pulled or trailed a cart some hundred years ago, have come a half million Americans, who well may cherish their unique heritage.