

Ellen Pucell Unthank

pioneer spotlight

President Faust enriched his Thursday evening address with several inspiring pioneer stories, including the story of Ellen (“Nellie”) Pucell Unthank. Nellie was nine when she and her family sailed from Liverpool to America along with 852 other Saints aboard the ship *Horizon*. Traveling by train to Iowa City, the Pucells were assigned to the Martin Handcart Company. Unfortunate events caused this company of 576 Saints and 145 handcarts to begin their journey late in the summer of 1856. Their journey was again thwarted when they encountered heavy snow on the plains of Wyoming in October. Food and supplies ran short. Some sat to rest and never rose again. Nellie’s parents died within five days of each other and were buried in shallow graves.

Word reached the Saints in Salt Lake of the condition of these pioneers stranded on the Plains. At October conference, volunteers were called to rescue them. When the pioneers were found near the Platte River ridge, many had frozen hands, feet, and ears. The orphaned Nellie, now ten, and her sister, Maggie, fourteen, were included in the rescue and carried to Salt Lake by wagon.

“[Nellie’s] skin and pieces of her flesh came off when the shoes and socks were removed from her feet,” President Faust said. “Her toes came off, too. Nellie was strapped to a board and both lower legs were cut off with a butcher knife and saw, with no anesthetic for the pain.”

For the rest of her life, Nellie never knew freedom from pain. A pillar of noble strength, she went about her life walking on her knees. She married and raised a family in a home that was always neat and cozy with the fragrance of cleanliness. She took in washing, knitted stockings, and crocheted to bring in needed extra income. In 1944 William Palmer, a man who had known Nellie, recalled that throughout her pain and suffering “there was no trace of bitterness, [only] patience and serenity.” She stood tall on her knees and gave her family and friends all that she had. ▼

Wendell Ashton along with the Sons of Utah Pioneers commissioned this sculpture by Jerry Anderson. It resides on the campus of Southern Utah State University in Cedar City where Nellie lived with her husband and children.

