Babylon to Zion on Forty-Two Dollars: The Disaster of the Willie Company and an Evaluation of the Handcart System

Larry R. Moses, Utah State University

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C. Blythe Allstrom

Abstract
In 1847, the Mormon Church began a migration to the Great Salt Lake Basin, their Zion in the mountains. This pilgrimage was to continue for over half a century, and out of it was to come one of the truly epic stories of the western settlement. Before leaving Nauvoo, these self-styled, Saints of the modern era pledged themselves to set up a system to transport all of their members to Utah, regardless of their financial status. The vow was renewed at the October 1849 Conference held in Salt Lake City. President Heber C. Kimball, first councilor to Brigham Young, suggested that a fund be set up to help the poor to reach Utah, his proposal was accepted by a unanimous vote, and the First Presidency issued a call for contributions. During the first year, the Salt Lake Valley Saints collected $5,000. The Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company came into existence in 1851, with the power to raise funds, own property, and issue securities. The funds for the company were to be acquired entirely by donations; tobacco smokers and tea drinkers were encouraged to give up these habits and to use the money to build the Perpetual Emigrating Fund. The fund reached a total of $150,000 between 1852 and 1855, and during this period a shift in the purpose of the fund took place.

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The first three Handcart Companies made the thirteen hundred mile journey faster and with less problems than had been experienced with wagon trains. The last two companies, the Willie Company and Martin Company were an entirely different story. Due to a host of unforeseen delays, the Willie Company left Iowa City, Iowa, on July 15th, and the Martin Company on July 28th, 1856. The Willie Company had five hundred emigrants with one hundred and twenty handcarts, five wagons, twenty-four oxen, and forty-five head of cattle. The Martin Company had five hundred and seventy-six people with one hundred and twenty handcarts, five wagons, twenty-four oxen, and forty-five head of cattle. The first part of the exhibit depicts expectation and hope as Latter-day Saint converts board a ship and leave England. Their early excitement is tempered after they arrive in America and experience the difficult outfitting process in Iowa City, Iowa. After they cross Iowa, concern mounts as they hear the counsel of Levi Savage, who encouraged them to wait a year to travel westward rather than start late in the season. Through his research, he learned that these girls pulled one of two family handcarts all the way across the plains until their rescue near Devil’s Gate. Artist Glen Hawkins painted his ancestor Ann Jewell Rowley, a widow, pulling a handcart through the snow with the help of her seven children who traveled with her in the Willie Company. The authors are eminently qualified to write on the subject of the handcart migration. A lifetime of research in western history has provided them with the general background for this account, and, as descendants of Utah pioneers and of one who crossed the plains in a handcart company, the ability to write history and edit historical documents is enhanced by personal interest.