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Article Summary: Almost three thousand Mormons traveled with handcarts from Omaha to Salt Lake City in the 1850s. Many of Brigham Young's followers had inadequate provisions or tried to travel after the snow began to fly. A significant number of the travelers perished on the trail to Zion.

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Cataloging Information:

Names: Brigham Young, Robert Stuart, Marcus Whitman, F D Richards, Joseph A Young

Place Names: Winter Quarters (later Florence), Kanesville, and Omaha, Nebraska; Fort Laramie, Wyoming; Zion (Salt Lake City), Utah

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Handcarts on the Overland Trail¹

By Jay Monaghan

NEBRASKA has the honor of being the threshold of the greatest overland trail to the Pacific. Emigrants are usually thought of as traveling west in covered wagons. A few went to Pike's Peak with wheelbarrows but the emigration to Utah in handcarts amounted to almost three thousand persons² and Nebraska can rightfully claim to have been the stage for this unusual parade. The Platte River, running from end to end of the state, became at an early day the great natural corridor to the Continental Divide. At first this famous river was not appreciated. People said, with good reason, that it flowed upside down. White men going west in boats found it unnavigable and they pushed past the mouth and continued up the Missouri into the future states of North and South Dakota. Lewis and Clark, when they came by in 1804, noticed Council Bluffs as the ideal site for a fort — central to many Indian tribes including the Mahars. In their journals they did not say whether Council Bluffs was on the east or west bank of the river but soldiers and fur men who came later called the Nebraska hills above Omaha by that name. The Mahar Indians described by Lewis and Clark were also later called Omahas, and this general area of Omaha and Council Bluffs was to be the outfitting point for the handcart brigades.

The realization that the mouth of the Platte was the natural threshold to the plains grew with the decades.

¹Read in part at the 70th annual meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society, held in Lincoln, 13 November 1948.

²LeRoy R. Hafen, "Hand Cart Migration Across the Plains," in James F. Willard and Colin B. Goodykoontz, eds., *The Trans-Mississippi West: Papers Read at a Conference Held at the University of Colorado June 18-June 21, 1929* (Boulder, 1930), p. 104.

The first man to go through this corridor—and he went through from west to east—was Robert Stuart, an associate of John Jacob Astor in the fur business. Discoverer of the later famous South Pass, in his own time he was better known as a factor in the Astor trading house at Mackinac Island, Michigan, and still later as secretary for the trustees of the great canal project in Illinois to connect the Mississippi with the Great Lakes. Robert Stuart came east from the Columbia River with six men in the winter of 1812-13. At Christmas time, a short distance below Scotts Bluff, the little party saw the Plains covered with deep snow. No camp-wood was in sight. They decided to turn back and wait until spring. On Horse Creek, twelve miles above, they built a cabin and waited for the snow to melt. With spring they drifted down the Platte and thus opened the overland trail so familiar to all Nebraskans.

The first jumping off places for the Oregon Trail, as you all know, were Independence and Westport on the Missouri Line, and carts with solid wooden wheels pulled by ponies hitched tandem were used at an early day. They were similar to the famous Red River carts made by the half-breed Indians in Canada. After the founding of Fort Leavenworth army wagons and ambulances sallied out on the plains. St. Joseph and Atchison became rivals as outfitters for westward wagon trains. The latter claimed that a bend in the Missouri put the town one full day's drive closer to the Pacific Ocean. All of these towns had a slight advantage over Omaha, for upriver travel was hazardous and travelers craved to get out of river boats and into prairie schooners. Omaha, it seems safe to say, did not become the great gateway to the West until it acquired the terminus of the Union Pacific Railroad, but the Mormons' selection of the area as the springboard to Utah is certainly one of the elements in its development. By 1902 Owen Wister could say of Omaha: "In front of you passed rainbows of men,—Chinese, Indian chiefs, Africans, General Miles, younger sons, Austrian nobility, wide females in pink. Our continent drained prismatically through Omaha once."³

³Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York, 1902), p. 148.

It is Omaha, then, or more properly the Omaha region including Winter Quarters (later Florence) and Kaneshville, which became the eastern end of the handcart route to Utah. Wheeled vehicles left this area as early as 1824 when William Ashley, a St. Louis fur man, unloaded his trade goods from a boat and started up the Platte with fifty pack horses and a team and wagon. His associate, William Sublette, hauled a wheeled cannon across the Continental Divide to a trading fort in 1827, and Captain Bonneville, an independent fur trader, took wagons over South Pass in 1832. Four years later Marcus Whitman swore that he would take both women and wheels to the Pacific—and he accomplished fifty per cent of his ambition. The women made the trip. Indian guides convinced Whitman that the wheels could not go beyond Idaho except on the backs of pack horses. Five years later an emigrant wagon train trundled all the way to Oregon and by 1843 wagons had become the accepted mode of travel. These trains, of course, did not go by way of Omaha, but all of them crossed Nebraska at one place or another. Both banks of the Platte were traveled as far west as the forks. A route up the South Platte, then across the bench to Ash Hollow, was popular, but the Mormons preferred a rougher way north of the North Platte to Fort Laramie in Wyoming.⁴

Brigham Young studied orderly pioneering seriously. He had spent the summer of 1846 moving his followers from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Winter Quarters in Iowa—and let's not forget that Nauvoo was the largest city in Illinois. The Mormons' summer experience had seasoned the men for overland travel. As veterans they moved on in the summer of 1847, but they had scarcely started their new holy city before gold-seekers bound for California clattered down the road into their Zion. Many of the Latter-Day Saints wanted to drop their tools and follow

⁴This route is described in detail in *William Clayton's Journal: A Daily Record of the Original Company of "Mormon" Pioneers from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake* (Salt Lake City, 1921).

the Argonauts. Brigham Young held his company together with great skill. He used the tactics which have since become familiar to all of us as the prerequisites of dictatorship, and they worked then as they have since. Like all dictators he made life sufficiently attractive for enough of his people to hold their unfaltering loyalty.

To build a city—a nation rather—in the midst of the desert was a marvelous achievement and no one today belittles the Mormon accomplishment. And the handcart brigades remain the most unusual part of the whole fantastic story. The church controlled the forests in Utah—and wood had great value. Brigham Young regulated all irrigation and collected toll on the roads. The press was his official mouthpiece and, true to the dictator pattern, he convinced his followers that they were the chosen people. His greatest asset, perhaps, consisted of thousands of European immigrants who joined the church annually—provided always, of course, that he would feed and clothe them. These strong, sturdy people were inured to hard work and a low standard of living. Many of them could not talk English. All were absolutely at the mercy of the church authorities in a foreign country. On this bedrock of cheap labor—what almost might be called slave or communist labor—Brigham Young laid the foundations of his empire. To move these workers into Utah was a difficult problem and handcarts seemed an easy solution.

Before the first decade of Brigham Young's Zion (dictators a century later would have called it their "ten-year plan") was concluded the church president found himself very short of money. His new city was built. Farms were laid out. He had taught his people to irrigate. He had employed them on vast public works but as yet his factories were not producing the colony's necessities. Hard cash must be sent back east for purchases, and for once Brigham Young was caught short. Soon reports came to the outside world that church authorities were preventing people from taking money out of the State of Deseret, as Utah Territory was called. Then the federal judges, appointees of the Washington administration, complained

that their decisions could not be enforced unless the United States Army was sent to Great Salt Lake. The church hierarchy trembled between internal collapse and external coercion. From the threat of this dual catastrophe the church saved itself for a time by a new religious furor known as the Reformation or the Doctrine of Blood Atonement.

Brigham Young's financial problems, his necessary economies like the handcart brigades, the sure knowledge that many of his people planned to move on to California and an easier way of life, made some dictatorial program imperative. The time had come, he said, for "judgment to be laid to the line and righteousness to the plummet." To spy on the people and check dissatisfaction, he organized—or people believed that he organized—a secret police known as Danites. Property owners who planned to leave the territory, apostates, and anyone who spoke against the church, disappeared suspiciously. The assassins were called Destroying Angels. In the pulpit, Brigham Young preached a new reform doctrine. Some sins, he said, could only be atoned by shedding blood. "Will you love that man or woman well enough to shed their blood?" he asked with questionable grammar, and at a time when the mysterious homicides had shocked the world. "That is what Jesus Christ meant . . . I have seen scores and hundreds of people for whom there would have been a chance (in the last resurrection there will be) if their lives had been taken, and their blood spilled on the ground as a smoking incense to the Almighty, but who are now angels to the devil."⁵

Some of the more devout believers confessed their sins and asked salvation in blood atonement. The extent of this fanaticism will never be known but it terrorized some and keyed others to a pitch of devotion more compelling than threats of poverty or hunger. The stories that have survived came out of Utah with people—mainly

⁵William Alexander Linn, *The Story of the Mormons* (New York, 1902), p. 456.

women—who escaped. Their accounts were probably colored by prejudice and fear but they cannot be discounted altogether. Religious men, according to the chroniclers, who broke “the Covenant” would confess to the bishop. Church members dug suitable graves. The condemned men’s families dressed them in clean clothes. At night the penitents were taken by the priesthood. After a prayer their throats were cut and their blood flowed on the ground as Brigham Young had suggested in his sermon.

One chronicler, Thomas B. H. Stenhouse, who had apostated and fled the church, stated that a certain woman who violated her marital vow while her husband was on a mission, confessed when he returned and consented to be saved by blood atonement. She sat on her husband’s knee, gave him a last kiss and he drew a knife across her throat.⁶

This religious fanaticism had come after two years of bad crops and at a time, as has been said, when the economy of Salt Lake City tottered. Yet, during these years, immigration from abroad had increased constantly. Then in 1855 the number almost doubled, totaling 4,225.⁷ The expense of buying wagons and cattle for all of them was beyond the church’s means. Brigham Young, ever resourceful, decided on a cheaper form of transportation. To Elder F. D. Richards in Liverpool, he wrote on September 30, 1855: “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.”⁸

Brigham Young had crossed the plains three times himself and he knew the trials of travel. He said that fifteen miles a day would bring the emigrants through in seventy days. But once accustomed to walking, they would make twenty-five and even thirty miles a day. With hand-

⁶Thomas B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York, 1873), pp. 469-70.

⁷M. Hamlin Cannon, “Migration of English Mormons to America,” *American Historical Review*, LII (April, 1947), 441.

⁸Linn, *op. cit.*, p. 418.

carts, everyone could bring a few belongings, cooking utensils, tents, and bedding. Little children could ride. Several ox-teams would be provided to bring extra supplies.

Brigham was a carpenter by trade. To make hand-carts suitable for crossing the plains did not seem difficult to him. The vehicles he planned had but two large light wheels set to run in wagon ruts. The cart boxes were three or four feet long with sides eight inches high. A pair of shafts was attached to a crossbar, long enough for three or four people to walk abreast and push. In front a few traces were supplied for pulling. A handcart load weighed four to five hundred pounds. Each cart was to be pulled by five people. Accordingly, every twenty hand-carts were called "a hundred" and were to be allowed one wagon and three yoke of oxen. With characteristic Mormon study of human values, several songs were provided for the handcart emigrants. One chorus ran:

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.

Another one, sung to the tune of "A Little More Cider," included the following:

Oh, our faith goes with the handcars,
And they have our hearts best love;
Tis a novel mode of travelling,
Devised by the Gods above.
Who cares to go with the wagons?
Not we who are free and strong;
Our faith and arms, with a right good will,
Shall pull our carts along.

Most of the immigrants from Europe came to New Orleans, thence up the Mississippi River to the place of embarkation. About 1,300 people—more than half of them women and children—left Liverpool for the initial hand cart trip on March 23, 1856. The first two parties marched out of Iowa City, Iowa, on June 9 and 11 respec-

tively. They numbered 497 persons,⁹ with 100 handcarts, five ox-drawn wagons carrying groceries, and twenty-five tents. A band furnished music for marching. Almost 300 miles of partially settled prairies separated the immigrants from the Missouri River and the journey was, therefore, experimental. Once across the Big Muddy, loads would be heavier and the real trip would commence.

The town of Florence, Nebraska (a new name for Winter Quarters), was selected as the starting point for the handcart migration. The first company reached there on July 17, 1856. After a stay of a few days it set off. The travelers, accustomed to military discipline after their Iowa march, responded to bugle calls with alacrity. In a long line they swung off up the Platte road. Thunderstorms drenched them, flies and mosquitoes were annoying, shoes wore out and many went barefoot. There were breakdowns and opportunities for mechanics to display their skill in repairs. The monotony of the march was broken by Indian scares, buffalo stampedes, and the handcart songs. After supper, campfires became social gathering places, with preaching, prayers, and love-making—the majority of the immigrants were single women. A traveler coming back down the trail from Oregon met one of the handcart companies and wrote the following:

It was certainly the most novel and interesting sight I have seen for many a day. We met two trains, one of thirty and the other of fifty carts, averaging about six to the cart. The carts were generally drawn by one man and three women each, though some carts were drawn by women alone. There were about three women to one man, and two-thirds of the women were single. It was the most motley crew I ever beheld. Most of them were Danes, with a sprinkling of Welsh, Swedes, and English, and were generally from the lower classes of their countries. Most could not understand what we said to them. The road was lined for a mile behind the train with the lame, halt, sick, and needy. Many were quite aged, and would be going slowly along, supported by a son or daughter. Some were on crutches; now and then a mother with a child in her arms and two or three hanging hold of her, with a forlorn appearance, would pass slowly along; others, whose condition entitled them to a seat in a carriage, were wending their way through the sand. A few seemed in good spirits.¹⁰

⁹Hafen, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹⁰Linn, *op. cit.*, pp. 422-23.

By mid-September, the emigrants crossed South Pass and rolled down to the valley of Green River. Here they met a party of Mormon missionaries coming out from the horrors of the Reformation. The brethren shook hands. "How is it that you have sent in no word that you were coming?" the missionaries asked. "We have out-traveled every other company," the leader of the handcarters replied, "not one has passed us, no, not even a solitary horseman, so we have to carry our own report, and we should have been here sooner if the teams which carry the heavy luggage could have traveled faster."¹¹

Proud of their physical achievement, the men and women, ragged, sunburned and exultant, stepped into place around their high-wheeled vehicles. The bugle sounded and away they all went, booting it south and west until they entered the deep defiles of the Wasatch. On September 26, 1856, the first handcarts rolled down Emigration Canyon to the edge of Salt Lake City. Brigham Young, accompanied by his church officials, a military escort of honor, and hundreds of citizens, met them with a brass band. The joyous company marched to the public square and pitched their tents, as they had learned to do on the plains. People forgot the Blood Atonement to flock around the newcomers and hear their experiences. Handcarts had become a successful form of transportation. In a sermon Brigham Young said:

I count the hand-cart operation a successful one If you come naked and barefooted, (I would not care if you had naught but a deer skin around you when you arrive here) and bring your God and your religion, you are a thousand times better than if you come with waggon loads of silver and gold and left your God behind. If I want to take a wife from among the sisters who came in with the hand-cart trains, I would rather take one that had nothing, and say to her, I will throw a buckskin around you for the present, come into my house, I have plenty, or, if I have not, I can get plenty.¹¹

Enthusiastic about the new and cheap transportation for converts Brigham Young wrote to his missionaries

¹²M. R. Werner, *Brigham Young* (New York, 1925), pp. 274-75.

¹¹Hafen, *op. cit.* p. 110.

in England: "It is worthy of notice, that almost all the sisters who have this season crossed the Plains in the hand-carts, have got husbands; they are esteemed for their perseverance."¹³

The third handcart company set out from Iowa City on June 23, 1856. It was composed almost entirely of Welshmen. At Florence they repaired their carts and set off again on July 30. At Scott's Bluff, one of the missionaries with the party wrote:

It is one month today since we left Florence, and we are almost 500 miles from it. I have travelled the same road three times with horse and ox teams, but never made the trip in so short a time before. We have averaged 20 miles a day for the past week . . . I will give it as my opinion that the Saints will cross the plains with handcarts for years to come, because of the utility of the plan. . . .

There are 20 persons and 4 handcarts to each tent. Each adult person has 17 and each child 10 pounds of luggage, which consists of bedding and wearing apparel; extra of this they haul their cooking utensils. The provisions are hauled in a wagon and rationed out to the company every other day, as follows—to each adult or child per day, one pound of flour, with tea or coffee, sugar and rice. We have for the use of the company 18 cows that give milk (and have killed some buffalo and beeves). There are some old brethren and sisters that walk every day. One sister, that has walked all the way from Iowa City is 73 years old. There are in the company those still more advanced in years who ride in the wagons.¹⁴

This party reached Salt Lake City on October 2, 1856. Thus far the handcart experiment was indeed a success, but disaster lay ahead. Two more companies had set sail from Liverpool. They were late in arriving at Iowa City. Sufficient carts were not ready for them. A delay was caused by the scarcity of material and help for construction. The fourth handcart party did not set off from Iowa City until July 15 and the fifth remained until July 26. Each company contained about 500 persons. On the march across Iowa, the heat and dust were suffocating. The toil after long inaction on shipboard brought great fatigue. The companies reached Florence on August 11 and 22—

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 274.

¹⁴Hafen, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-12.

eleven days apart. Here another delay of a week was necessary to repair carts. Summer was well advanced now. Plainsmen predicted disaster for an expedition leaving for the mountains so late in the season. The Mormon elders held a formal meeting to decide their next action. They came to the conclusion that the Lord would protect these humble folk who were doing so much to follow his religious teachings.

On August 18, 1856, the fourth company set off ill-prepared. There were not sufficient wagons for the supplies. Hundred-pound sacks of flour had to be carried in each cart. It was soon discovered that no axle grease had been provided. Precious bacon grease and soap were used. At Wood River some buffalo stampeded the work cattle, left the wagons stranded. Men followed their tracks but thirty were never recovered. This left but one yoke of oxen to each wagon—not enough to pull the loads. Milk cows were put in the yokes and another hundred pounds of flour was added to each handcart.

One day Elder F. D. Richards and a party of missionaries including Brigham's son, Joseph A. Young, came up in four-horse carriages. They were on their way back from Europe. Richards rebuked the leading elder for starting out so late, then prophesied that the Lord would keep the way open. With this encouragement the carriages drove on toward the mountains.

The handcart company arrived at Fort Laramie early in September, 1856. A supply of provisions was to have been left there by the church but someone had blundered. An inventory of flour on hand showed only enough to supply the immigrants to within 350 miles of Salt Lake City. The ration of one pound per person was reduced to three-quarters of a pound and the elders resolved to travel a longer distance each day. Surely Brother Richards would get food back to them by the time theirs was gone!

The cart procession pushed off toward the upper Platte crossing. It was no consolation to know that the fifth and last party was just now leaving Florence. At Independence Rock the fourth company found a letter

from Brother Richards stating that groceries would be sent to them at South Pass. Food supplies on hand were inventoried again. There were not enough to last to the Pass. Another cut in rations was necessary. The very old and very young were put on half-rations. Food supplies issued to those able to work were cut also but not so drastically. The company had now reached the high country of Wyoming and cold weather settled down on the sage flats. The seventeen pounds of bedding and extra clothing allowed each person proved inadequate. With improper rest and insufficient food, a lassitude overcame everyone. The road crossed the Sweetwater every few miles and the hungry emigrants waded through the cold water with their carts several times a day. With lowered vitality many suffered with legs numbed by the cold. At nightfall they lay down exhausted and every morning one or two failed to get up. They were dead. Then to make the traveling worse it began to snow.

White flakes blotted out the mountains, festooned the sagebrush close at hand. The immigrants were city people, unused to open country. The snow soaked their clothes, weighed down their hats, covered the handcarts, increased the loads, made pulling harder. Bare feet were wrapped in rags. The large, wobbling wheels and staggering foot-prints etched strange arabesques in the snow.

Suddenly, through the curtain of fluttering flakes, a light wagon appeared on the road ahead. Joseph A. Young—Brigham's son—had come back with provisions. He said that other wagons were on the way and should be along in a day or two. The emigrants joyfully swung their carts out of the road, to camp and eat. In a clump of willows where wood was handy they unloaded. Heavy wet tents were set up and the fires began to roar—but one good meal used up practically all of the food.

Morning came. A foot of snow covered everything. Five of the Saints had died during the night. No flour was left. The entire list of supplies amounted to only a few dried apples, a little rice and sugar, and some twenty-five pounds of hardtack. The Mormon leaders announced that

everyone would remain in camp until relief arrived. Then they ordered some of the work cattle butchered.

The English and Welsh immigrants were not accustomed to a beef diet without vegetables. Some of them complained of dysentery. Others clamored for more suitable food. Like hungry dogs, the short, stockily-built foreigners followed the commissary officer, surrounded his tent, stood hour after hour demanding food. At dark they crept away but with daylight were back again—those still able to walk. Then, against the setting sun of the third day the starving people saw wagons coming—relief at last. A shout of joy turned the camp into a madhouse of confusion. Men and little children wept and danced, kicking the snow with worn-out boots and rag-wrapped feet.

At dusk the teams pulled in and stopped at the willow encampment. Children screamed with happiness. Women fell upon the drivers and smothered them with kisses. The abashed teamsters could have come sooner. They had not realized the desperate straits of the emigrants and had encamped comfortably when the storm swept across the plains.

While this little drama was being enacted the fifth and last handcart party reached Fort Laramie on October 8, 1856. Here the church elders purchased a hundred buffalo robes—not much protection for over five hundred people but better than nothing. On October 19 the party reached the crossing of the North Platte. The river, a torrent to be ferried in the spring, was easily forded at this time of year. Mush ice floated along, rustling like satin on the frozen sand bars. The men pushed the carts into the water. The women tied up their skirts and followed. Cold and hungry, they encamped on the north shore. Next day the snowstorm that caught the lead party on the Sweetwater hit them. At the Platte Crossing the storm lasted three days and the people began to give up. A burying squad had to be appointed to prepare graves each night for those who had died during the day. An English woman, Mrs. Jackson, wrote:

On the 20th of October we travelled, or almost wallowed for about ten miles through snow. At night, weary and worn

out, we camped near the Platte River, where we soon left for the Sweetwater. We were visited with three days more snow. The animals and immigrants were almost completely exhausted. We remained in camp several days to gain strength. About the 25th of October I think it was, we reached camp about sundown. My husband had for several days previous been much worse. He was still sinking and his condition now became more serious. He tried to eat but failed. He had not the strength to swallow. I put him to bed as quickly as I could. He seemed to rest easy and fell asleep. About nine o'clock I retired. Bedding had become very scarce so I did not disrobe. I slept until, as it appeared to me, about midnight. I was extremely cold. The weather was bitter. I listened to hear if my husband breathed, he lay so still. I could not hear him. I became alarmed. I put one hand on his body, when to my horror I discovered that my worst fears were confirmed. My husband was dead. I called for help to the other inmates of the tent. They could render me no aid; and there was no alternative but to remain alone by the side of the corpse till morning. Oh, how the dreary hours drew their tedious length along. When the daylight came, some of the male part of the company prepared the body for burial. And oh, such a burial and funeral service. They did not remove his clothing—he had but little. They wrapped him in a blanket and placed him in a pile with 13 others who had died, and then covered him up with snow. The ground was frozen so hard that they could not dig a grave.¹⁵

Mrs. Jackson continued on the march with her three children. A few days later she remembered floundering into camp and finding all the men so discouraged that none had the energy to pitch a tent. They bivouacked in the snow under the glittering stars. Mrs. Jackson said later that she took her baby in her lap and each of her other children she snuggled beside her and so sat out the night.

Near Devil's Gate the handcarts were abandoned. A few people went on with the wagons and teams. Most of the company scattered along the foot of the sloping rocks on the hills north of Sweetwater. Some old cabins furnished a little shelter. At noon the sun warmed the rocks and gave hope to the starving wretches. On October 28 express riders, with a little food, brought word that relief was coming. Three days later wagons came in sight.

Both the wrecked handcart companies hobbled on to Salt Lake City with the supply wagons. Deaths continued

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 116-17.

to occur daily but the weather moderated. Sharp, clear October weather revived the travelers' spirits. The fourth company reached Zion on November 9, 1856, the fifth on November 30. Of the 500 in the fourth company who left Florence, 67 died. Of the fifth company of 576 persons, probably 150 perished—accounts do not agree. This was a greater loss than that suffered by the more famous Donner party of California-bound emigrants in 1846 but the per cent of the total was not so large. Of the 87 bound for California 47 survived.¹⁶ Moreover, the handcart tragedy was over in a few days while the Donner catastrophe lasted all winter. But the handcart disaster of 1856 remains one of the appalling tragedies of overland transportation—a terrible climax to the blood atonement being preached in Salt Lake Valley.

Brigham Young never took any blame for the mishap. The king could do no wrong. He did publicly censure Elder Richards for letting the fourth and fifth companies start so late in the season.

Young's finances were still strained in spite of his handcart economies and when seventy of his missionaries went east in the spring of 1857 they also pushed handcarts. Not an ox or a horse accompanied the men. They arrived at Florence in forty-eight days and claimed to have rested seven and a half of them. Averaging thirty-two and a half miles per day, they all boasted about their physical well-being, said that they were ready for a foot race or wrestling match.

In 1857 the United States Army marched into Utah to enforce federal laws. Brigham Young led his people out of the city, down to the desert of central Utah. He had no time to finance any immigrants but two parties crossed the plains, at their own expense, with handcarts. They numbered all together about 480.

Next year no handcart travelers came. In 1859 the Pike's Peak gold rush commenced. Supplies reached high

¹⁶Jay Monaghan, *The Overland Trail* (Indianapolis, 1947), p. 262.

prices along the Missouri. This made it hard for the Mormons. They resorted to handcarts again and one party footed it to Zion. During the following year, 1860, two handcart parties crossed—a total of 359 persons. These, the ninth and tenth companies, were the last of the Mormons' handcart experiment. Times were changing. In 1860 the first pony express raced to Salt Lake City and on to the Pacific. Perhaps the contrast between the extravagant race-horse transportation and the economical handcart methods of crossing the plains was too much even for frugal Brigham Young.