

# Sand AND Stone

*The Hole-in-the-Rock trail in southern Utah challenged youth and leaders from three stakes both physically and spiritually. The experience changed more than a few lives.*

**By R. Val Johnson**

Church Magazines

**P**ushing or pulling, taking a handcart over jagged stone is tough. The rocks slow you down, jar your bones, sap your strength.

But sand is worse. When faced with a hill of it, all you can do is take a deep breath and run. With enough speed, and a little help from others, you make it to the top, where you can rest, drink half a lake of water, and move on.

But what nearly does you in are those long stretches of sand that claw at your feet and handcart wheels. Your only option is to keep pulling and pushing, pulling and pushing, until you have to stop before you collapse. Getting started again takes nearly all your energy. Still, foot after foot, you gather your strength and move ahead. Finally, suddenly, you discover you've left the sand behind.

Your destination is still a long way off, but somehow, having made it through the sand, you know you can finish. You know you can make it to camp or to home—to that place where you will rest and heal and prepare to face with greater confidence the next hard thing you need to do.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VAL JOHNSON





PHOTOGRAPH BY OLIVER HARRIS

### EXPERIENCING TRIAL AND TRIUMPH TOGETHER

The original pioneers assigned to the San Juan Mission consisted of 250 people, most in families. The average age of the adults was 26. The average age of those who followed in their footsteps in 2010 was much younger. Most travelers were teens, organized with their leaders into “families.”

Of his trek “family,” one young man from the Kanab Utah Kaibab Stake said, “Although I didn’t know the people in my family very well at the beginning, they all became my friends. We worked together, pulled hand-carts together, camped together. We’ll be friends forever. The trek was life changing.”

One stake leader noted that the most important decisions the leaders made in preparing the youth for the trek was calling dedicated “Ma’s” and “Pa’s” for each of the families and determining which of the youth should be with them.

For more information about the Hole-in-the-Rock pioneers and trekking to San Juan Hill, go to [hirf.org](http://hirf.org). Because the trail to San Juan Hill is on public land, groups planning to hike the trail need government permission. The Hole-in-the-Rock Foundation provides guidance and help. You’ll also find more photos at [ensign.lds.org](http://ensign.lds.org).

## Down the Hole-in-the-Rock

Sand and stone confronted nearly 750 youth and their leaders in June 2010 as they drove, walked, climbed, and pulled handcarts over portions of the Hole-in-the-Rock trail between Escalante and Bluff, Utah, USA.

The trail was built in the winter of 1879–80 by Mormon pioneers who had been called by President John Taylor to settle the San Juan region of Utah. When southern and northern routes to the area proved to be too dangerous or not

passable year-round, the 250 pioneers decided to build a new, more direct trail. Part of the route they chose was through a wilderness so barren and hard to get through that those familiar with the area considered the task impossible. The pioneers gave themselves six weeks to get to their destination. It took them six months.

Over the course of those six months, they used picks, shovels, and black powder to build a nearly impossible road

*(continued on page 45)*





A



D

PHOTO BY LEM REDD



B



C



#### GETTING THERE—WITH THE LORD’S HELP

The pioneers who settled the San Juan traveled in 83 wagons. In 2010, trekkers used handcars. The Kanab stake had a covered wagon (C) for a measure of historical authenticity. “Pulling that handcart taught me I can do hard things,” said Spencer Bradford of the Blanding Utah Stake. “We had to pull through some sandy spots, and I wanted to quit. But I thought of the pioneers. They did hard things for months on end. I just needed to trust in the Lord.”

#### DOWN THE HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK

In 1879, an exploratory party located a crack in what had seemed an impenetrable canyon wall between southwestern Utah and the San Juan country to the southeast. The crack, later called Hole-in-the-Rock, was not passable for wagons, but with ingenuity and plenty of black powder, the pioneers built a road down the incline. (Beginning on page 48 Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles relates the story of the last wagon down.)

Today, fallen boulders encumber the Hole-in-the-Rock. Though it is navigable on foot (A), the climb is difficult. Natasia Bleak summed up what she learned in hiking the Hole: “No way can our [physical] trials compare with those of the pioneers, but we know God’s love. He will see us through our trials, just as He did the pioneers.”

#### HOME ON THE RANGE

Whether climbing the Hole or pulling a handcart, doing it with friends made it enjoyable. By many accounts, relationships forged on the treks will last a long time. Those relationships were built not only on the trail, but also while preparing for the treks and camping with one another (B,D). Camping gave the trekkers a greater understanding of the meaning of home.

PHOTO BY KAY SHUMWAY

### DANCING THE WEARINESS AWAY

Like the pioneers themselves, their modern-day counterparts relaxed after a day of hard work by doing something nearly as rigorous—dancing. The Blanding stake and Kanab stake did their dancing at Bluff Fort. The Blanding West stake spent an afternoon after their trek at Dance Hall Rock (right), where the original pioneers spent many nights dancing. Joining the stake were youth and leaders from the Cedar City Utah Stake (D).

One Blanding stake leader observed that many of the youth couldn't get enough of the square dancing, even after a long, hot day working on projects at Bluff Fort. "They danced up a cloud of dust," he said. "And when we tried to end the dancing, they kept asking for more."

### SERVING, LEARNING, GROWING

Each stake engaged in service projects (C) and activities similar to those the original pioneers participated in. Some members even chiseled holes in rock (B), as the pioneers did in creating roads. One young woman from the Kanab stake said, "The service project we did at [Bluff] Fort was my favorite part of the trek. I was amazed at how hard some of the youth in our stake worked. I didn't know that about them. And it helped me realize how hard the pioneers had to work even after all they went through to get to the San Juan."

For many youth, the activities that had the most impact were the devotionals, such as the ones held at the top of San Juan Hill (A), the last major obstacle for the original pioneers and the one that nearly sapped their last ounce of strength. "I think the reason the Lord wanted me on the trek was to hear Brother Black's talk on the hill," said Lizz Hurst of the Blanding Utah Stake. "As Brother Black was talking, the Spirit was talking to me. I had a lot of questions answered."

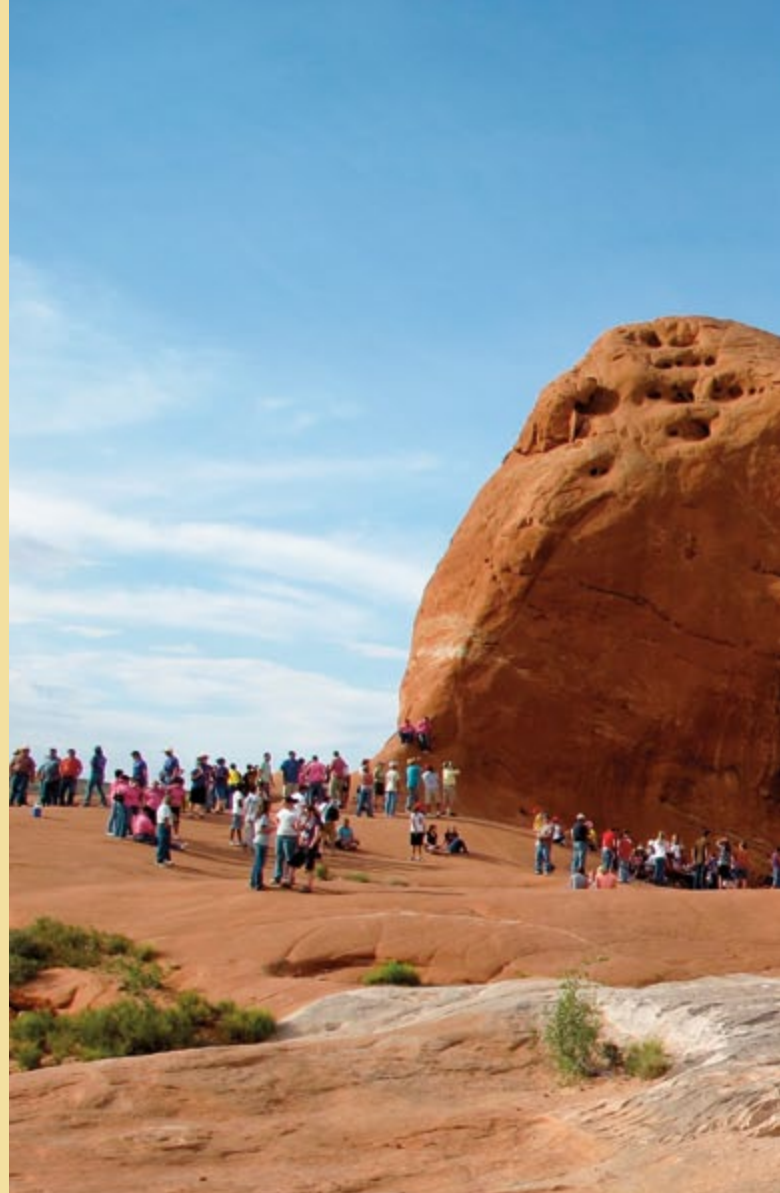


PHOTO BY KAY SHUMWAY

A

B

C

D



down a crack in the edge of the Colorado River gorge they called Hole-in-the-Rock. Some 1,200 precipitous feet (366 m) down the hole, they were confronted by the muddy Colorado River. After floating their wagons across the river on a raft, they still had to blast and cut and pray their way through another 120 miles (193 km) of sandstone ravines, cliffs, box canyons, and sheer drop-offs.

When the exhausted group finally arrived at their destination, a farmable area near the San Juan River, on April 6, 1880, they built cottonwood log homes and named the place Bluff after the spectacular sandstone bluffs surrounding the settlement.

### **Enduring Where They Endured**

Re-creating the experience of the Hole-in-the-Rock pioneers, members of the Blanding Utah Stake, the Blanding Utah West Stake, and the Kanab Utah Kaibab Stake pioneered paths of their own. One stake went down, then

up, the Hole-in-the-Rock itself. The other two stakes trekked from Bluff to the last major obstacle the pioneers faced—San Juan Hill.

The goal for each of these stake activities was to help the youth appreciate the faithful sacrifice, undaunted perseverance, and inspired ingenuity of the original pioneers. Perhaps more important, stake leaders wanted the youth to find in themselves the same inner strength and faith in God that the original pioneers exhibited in settling the San Juan country.

Many, both youth and adults, found what they sought. Lyle Bales, one of the “Pa’s” called to lead a temporary “family” on his stake’s trek, said, “I have been so blessed to be a part of this experience. I needed to rub shoulders with youth and leaders of this quality. I admire the character and determination they possess. They have been great examples to me, and I am a better person for being there.” ■