



BY MARLENE MEYER
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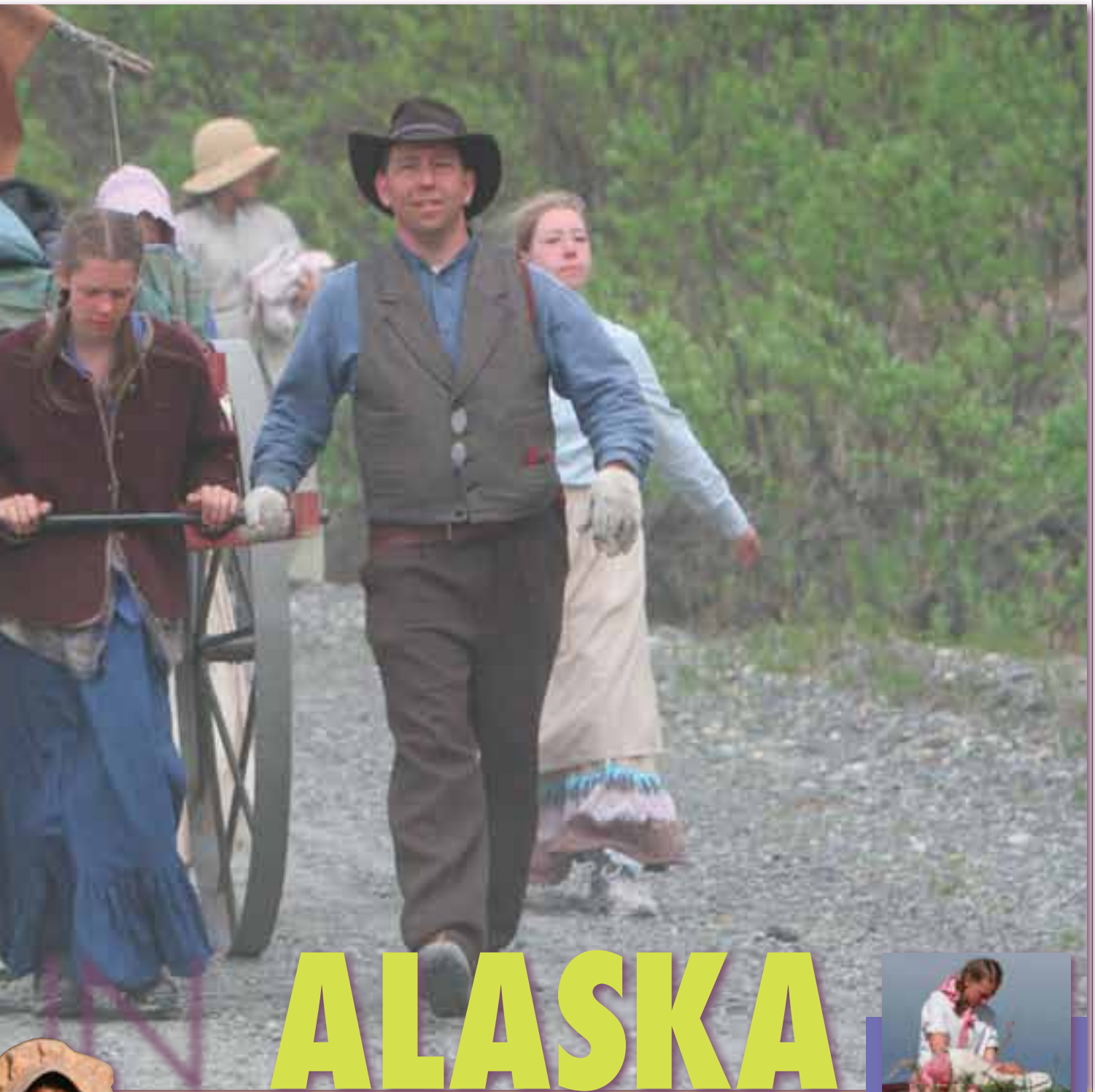
*Building hand-
carts, sewing
clothes, walk-
ing in mud
and rain—
maybe this
trek was too
realistic.*

HANDCARTS

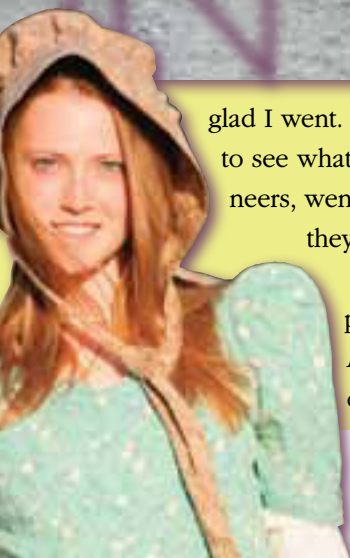
They came by boat, they came by ferry, and youth from Kodiak Island even came by plane. That's what you have to do for youth conference in the Soldotna Alaska Stake, located 150 miles south of Anchorage on the Kenai Peninsula. The stake takes in more than 10 cities and small communities, and the teens came

from near and far to pull handcarts in the shadow of the Ring of Fire volcanoes. But this reenactment was unique. It was a pioneer trek Alaska-style.

Traveling three hours by ferry, two hours by car, and another hour and a half by bus to get to the trailhead, one Laurel from Cordova, Aubrey Finch, said: "I am so



ALASKA



glad I went. It built me as a person to see what my ancestors, the pioneers, went through just for what they believed in.”

Like teens at most pioneer treks, these Alaskans pulled hand-carts, cooked their own

meals, and enjoyed devotionals. But this group faced its own challenges that gave this trek an Alaskan flavor—like keeping an eye out for bear warnings and dealing with nearly 24 hours of daily sunlight hours.

The first obstacle was finding a place for the trek. “We had no idea how hard it would be to find land that we would be



P rayer and scripture study were constant comfort.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROB MEYER



allowed to cross,” said Marlene Meyer, the stake Young Women president. “In some ways it reminded us of the feeling the pioneers had when they were driven out of every place they tried to call home.”

For months the leaders scoured the state looking for a suitable site that could handle 150 people pulling handcarts and camping along the way. Because much of Alaska is covered in wetland, they knew they needed to find an abandoned road with dry campsites every 12 miles. Fourteen days before the event was scheduled to begin, the leaders were contacted about the possibility of passing through some land in a small area called Anchor Point. Miraculously, it had oil pad sites, areas covered in gravel and suitable for camping, positioned every 12 miles along an old road. With only days to spare, stake leaders got the permits and the trek went forward.

Before the trek began, youth and adults spent hundreds of hours building handcarts, welding wagon wheels, sewing clothing, preparing food, and planning. The youth, wanting to make the trek their own, put much of their own effort into the preparations.

Kaylene Forbes, a Laurel of the Soldotna Ward, said, “I did a lot of sewing to prepare for the trek. The skirts and the aprons weren’t very difficult, but the bonnet was hard. After I was finished, though, especially on the trek, I was glad that I did everything myself.”

Each handcart “family” was led by a young man and young woman, called a Pa and Ma, and were also accompanied by adult leaders. The Mas and Pas even arrived early for special training.

“We worked hard,” Brother Forbes, Soldotna’s Young Men president, said. “Hundreds and hundreds of hours, but it was worth 100 times the effort that went into it. It was better than we could have ever dreamed.”

Throughout the trek, efforts to bring to life 19th-century pioneers included a mock Mormon Battalion march and a women’s pull, but no one could plan for one disheartening element they had in common with the pioneers—the weather. One of the original handcart pioneers, John Southwell, who traveled in the Haven handcart company crossing Iowa in 1856, records that they experienced hail, rain, wind, and ankle-deep mud.



150 years later, when the Alaska participants reached the trailhead on the first day of their trek, rain gushed down. The long, muddy trail wandered up tall hills, and the handcart wheels sunk in deep sand.

On the third day, the group awoke to a terrible storm with winds blowing more than 50 miles per hour. Pegs pulled loose, tents collapsed, the rain pounded down, and dark clouds covered the entire sky. Fearing that the weather would stop the trek, the leaders knelt in prayer. President Randy Eberline of the stake presidency asked the Lord to calm the storm. Throughout the camp, trek families also knelt and prayed for relief from the weather. Suddenly, the clouds parted and a bowl of warm sunlight shone down. Kelly Maxwell, a priest from Sterling, described the answer to their combined prayers: "President Eberline

prayed for there to be sunlight, and I was also hoping and praying that it



Left: Just like the pioneers, these youth were never too tired when it was time to dance. Above: Welding wheels, building the carts, and sewing appropriate clothing were part of the preparations.



Hauling all their equipment was hard on the hands and the bodies, but most came to appreciate the difficulties faced by the original pioneers. Above: A call was made to the young men to form the Mormon Battalion.



would work. Minutes later we saw a break in the sky, and we started to see blue and then the sun just came out of the clouds.”

Kaylene described it this way: “The wind stopped, and you could see the clouds parting and the sun coming out. It was like seeing Moses parting the Red Sea, except this time God parted the clouds for us.”

Brother and Sister Matt and Jodi Clark



arrived that evening to speak at a fireside. They reported that on the 100-mile drive from Anchorage it had been pouring rain. As they crested the last hill before reaching the camp, they saw the most incredible sight. Sunlight flooded the camp while the rest of the sky, as far as they could see in all directions, was full of dark clouds.

James Barrett, a priest from the Kenai Ward, said, “It was wonderful to feel the sun again, the warmth and the light that





brought encouragement and hope. It was a miracle. It was as if the Lord had stretched out his hand and protected us from the harsh weather by surrounding our camp with sunlight.”

The next day included special devotionals, a memorial fireside, and a testimony meeting, solidifying the spirit of the experience. It started with a devotional in the wilderness for each handcart “family.” At the devotional the youth received a letter written by their parents. Some of the youth later said that during this quiet time they received their first witness of the truthfulness of the gospel. Cyril Zufelt, 17, of Soldotna said, “When I got my letter, I was touched. That was a huge turning point in my life. I’m never going to forget it.”

Then, after walking for several miles, the group was halted by the trail boss who instructed each person to pick up a rock. In a valley between two large hills, they held a special memorial service dedicated to all of the pioneers left behind on the trail, especially those of the Martin and Willie handcart companies, who had lost so many to the early winter weather and starvation. Each

person placed their rock on a small memorial of the earlier pioneers. Sister Meyer remarked, “I couldn’t believe how hard it was to walk past that little memorial and think of the families that left loved ones behind. I don’t know how they had the strength to do it.”

As they packed up their tents, put away their bonnets and suspenders, and returned to inside plumbing, the youth took away more than blisters and soggy hiking shoes—they took with them an appreciation for the Saints who traveled 150 years ago and 3,600 miles away. Most of all, they took with them a stronger testimony of the gospel.

Lyssa DaVaney, a Laurel in the Homer Ward, said, “When I left for the trek, I knew that I would be coming back. The pioneers knew they would never go back to their homes again. The trek was such an awakening experience for me. I learned so much about the pioneers, Heavenly Father, and myself. I wouldn’t trade my experience for anything.” **NE**

For a history of handcart pioneers, read Linda Dekker, “Some Must Push and Some Must Pull,” *Ensign*, July 2006, p. 38.