

Martin Handcart Company—Bitter Creek, Wyoming, 1856

The Martin handcart company was the fifth handcart company to travel west to the Salt Lake Valley. This company of English emigrants left Iowa City, Iowa, on July 28, 1856. There were “576 [people], with 146 carts, 7 wagons, 30 oxen, and 50 cows and beef cattle” (LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion* [1960], 93).

At Florence, Nebraska, they stopped for handcart repairs. It was late in the season, and they wondered if they should continue. A few members dropped out, but most wanted to go on. They left Florence on August 25.

They reached Fort Laramie, Wyoming, October 8. After they left Fort Laramie, their food rations had to be cut. Because of their growing weakness, they had to lighten the loads they were pulling, so they discarded blankets and clothing. On October 19 they crossed the North Platte River. As soon as they crossed, it started to snow. Several people died that night.

As the storms and cold continued, the pioneers desperately needed the supplies they had left behind. The men became so weak and sick they couldn't pitch the tents. Twelve miles beyond the river they were stopped by the deep snow. Fifty-six had died since they had crossed the river.

Early in October, President Brigham Young heard there were still pioneers on the trail. He knew they would have problems, so he called for volunteers to go to their aid. Horsemen, wagons, and supplies were

sent. On October 28 three men rode into the camp of the Martin company. The deep snow had halted the rescue wagons, so the men told the emigrants their only hope was to keep moving to reach the rescue wagons. They struggled on, and on November 3 they reached the first of the supply wagons. The rescuers decided the company had to move on to find better shelter from the snow and cold.

The company pushed on until they came to the Sweetwater River. For many, crossing the river seemed more than they could manage, but men from the rescue party bravely carried several of the pioneers across. The company found shelter in a mountain cove where they stayed for several days.

When they moved on, they left most of the handcarts behind. The rescuers loaded the sickest and weakest into wagons, but the rest had to walk. The storms had forced some rescuers back, while others waited to try again. One of these, Ephraim Hanks, left his wagon and went on with two horses. One day he killed a buffalo and loaded his horses with the meat. That evening he reached the Martin handcart company. The meat was welcomed by the starving pioneers. On November 11, Ephraim Hanks and members of the handcart company camped on Bitter Creek (present-day Cottonwood Creek).

Gradually other wagons reached the pioneers, and all were able to ride the rest of the way into the valley. They reached Salt Lake on November 30. Between 135 and 150 people had died on the way.

Summary

Due to a late start, the 1856 Martin handcart company was caught in early snow in Wyoming. Weak and cold and low on supplies, they were in a desperate situation. Some began to die. Volunteer rescuers with supplies left Salt Lake, but deep snow slowed the rescue wagons. Gradually the Martin company

got help, and they struggled on. More continued to die along the way at places like Bitter Creek. But through the heroic efforts of the rescuers and the courage and faith of the handcart pioneers, the surviving company members eventually arrived in the Salt Lake Valley on November 30.

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