

Helping the Martin Handcart Company across the Sweetwater River

On July 28, 1856, a handcart company under the leadership of Edward Martin left Iowa City, Iowa, and started across the plains to the Salt Lake Valley.

By October, cold weather and snow caught them in the mountains in central Wyoming. Short on food and other supplies, members of the company experienced exposure to cold, hunger, and exhaustion, and some began to die. They would suffer more losses than any other pioneer handcart company.

Earlier in October, when Brigham Young learned that there were still many Saints out on the trail, he sent a rescue party with supplies to help bring the people to Salt Lake. The Martin company met up with rescue party members in late October and early November and received welcome but limited amounts of food and supplies. With the rescuers' help, they struggled on toward Salt Lake.

On November 4 they came to the Sweetwater River, near Devil's Gate. The river was about 100 feet wide and almost waist deep in places. To make it worse, big chunks of ice were floating in the water. For the weakened members of the Martin company, the crossing appeared almost impossible.

One of the handcart pioneers later remembered that some of the pioneers were able to ford the river, but others could not. At that point, several members of the rescue party—one account names C. Allen Huntington, Stephen W. Taylor, and teenagers David P. Kimball and George W. Grant—stepped forward to

help. These courageous men “waded the river, helping the handcarts through and carrying the women and children and some of the weaker of the men over” (John Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, Dec. 15, 1878, 1; see also Jan. 19, 1879, 1).

One of the women who was carried over the river later recalled: “Those poor brethren [were] in the water nearly all day. We wanted to thank them, but they would not listen to [us]. My dear mother felt in her heart to bless them for their kindness. She said, ‘God bless you for taking me over this water and in such an awful, rough way.’ [They said], ‘Oh, . . . I don’t want any of that. You are welcome. We have come to help you.’ ” This sister also reported that one of the rescuers “stayed so long in the water that he had to be taken out and packed to camp, and he was a long time before he recovered, as he was chilled through. And in after life he was always afflicted with rheumatism” (Patience Loader Rozsa Archer, in *Women’s Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900*, ed. Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr [1982], 236; spelling and punctuation standardized).

These rescuers and what they had done were brought to President Young’s attention. “When President Brigham Young heard of this heroic act,” one writer stated, “he wept like a child, and declared that this act alone would immortalize them” (Solomon F. Kimball, “Our Pioneer Boys,” *Improvement Era*, July 1908, 679).

Summary

The Martin handcart company, heading west in 1856, was caught in Wyoming by the early arrival of winter weather. Many would die before they reached the Salt Lake Valley. A rescue party sent by Brigham Young met the company and helped get them through. One especially difficult part of the journey was the crossing of the Sweetwater River.

Cold and hunger had left the pioneers weak, and the crossing seemed impossible. However, men from the rescue party, some only teenagers, bravely stepped forward and carried many members of the company across the icy water. This heroic act was an inspiring moment amid the tragic experiences of the Martin handcart company.

THE CHURCH OF
JESUS CHRIST
OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS