

Mary Fielding and Joseph F. Smith

Crossing the Plains

Mary Fielding Smith was left a widow when her husband, Hyrum, was killed with his brother the Prophet Joseph. She had to care for not only her own large family but also several other helpless or ill people. Hyrum and Mary's son, Joseph F. Smith, who would later become the sixth President of the Church, was only five years old at the time.

Mary and her family left Nauvoo in 1846. Joseph, then seven, drove "one of the ox teams from Montrose [across the river from Nauvoo] to Winter Quarters," which was about 200 miles (see Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Life of Joseph F. Smith* [1969], 131).

In the spring of 1848 most of the Saints were leaving Winter Quarters to travel to the Salt Lake Valley. Mary determined to go with them. She had no money, no oxen, and no provisions, but she relied on the Lord and managed to reach the starting point with seven "almost ready" wagons in her care. When the captain of the group to which Mary was assigned saw Mary's situation, he told her she was foolish to attempt the journey. He said she would be a burden to the company the whole way. Mary calmly replied that not only would she not ask for his help but "that she would beat him to the Valley" (Don Cecil Corbett, *Mary Fielding Smith: Daughter of Britain* [1966], 228).

And so the long journey began. Nine-year-old Joseph and his 15-year-old half brother John cared for the cattle and helped guide the huge oxen along the trail.

Despite hardships, it seemed Mary's group would make it to the valley. Then one hot day, one of Mary's

best oxen collapsed. The wagons behind Mary's were forced to stop. It looked as though the ox would die. The captain came and declared that the ox was dead. He said he would have to find a way to take that wagonload the rest of the way and that he had known all along Mary would be a burden.

But Mary's faith never faltered; she "went to her wagon and returned with a bottle of consecrated oil. She asked her brother Joseph and James Lawson to administer to her fallen ox" (Corbett, *Mary Fielding Smith*, 237). So Joseph Fielding "knelt, laid his hands on the head of the ox . . . , and prayed over it." When the prayer was finished, a moment passed; then, to the astonishment of the onlookers, the stiffened ox stirred, gathered his legs beneath him, stood, and "started off [pulling again] as if nothing had happened" (Corbett, *Mary Fielding Smith*, 237).

Not far from the end of the journey, some of Mary's cows were lost. While her stepson John went to find the cattle, the captain ordered the rest of the company to move on. Mary waited for John and prayed he would be able to find their cows. Then a sudden rainstorm came, and the company that had moved ahead was thrown into confusion. The cattle scattered, and it took all day to round them up. Meanwhile, John had returned with the lost cows. The Smith party moved forward, past the rest of the company, and on into the valley.

Mary had kept her word. Her courage and faith had led her family across the plains and finally into the Salt Lake Valley, 20 hours in advance of the captain who had tried to discourage her.

Summary

Mary Fielding Smith was left with a large family when her husband, Hyrum, was killed with his brother the Prophet Joseph Smith. She was determined to travel to the Salt Lake Valley with the Saints and managed to gather wagons, oxen, and supplies for the journey. Mary was told she would

be a burden to others, but she pressed forward. Her young son Joseph helped care for the oxen and cattle along the way. Mary relied on the Lord when her oxen became sick and when the cows became lost. With courage and faith, Mary led her family into the Salt Lake Valley.

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