

FAITH TO PUSH FORWARD

Armed with a testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ, members of the Willie handcart company pushed forward against hardship and hunger.





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The story I would like to share began in the rolling green countryside of rural England, where John Bennett Hawkins was born in Gloucester in 1825. He was baptized a member of the Church in 1849 and left that same year for America with a company of Latter-day Saints on the ship *Henry Ware*. He arrived in Utah in August 1852 and was one of the pioneer blacksmiths in the early days of the Utah settlement.

His future bride, Sarah Elizabeth Moulton, also came from rural England. Irchester is a small village near the River Nene, about 65 miles (105 km) north of London and about the same distance east of Birmingham. Sarah Elizabeth was born there in 1837 to Thomas Moulton and Esther Marsh. Sarah Elizabeth's mother died when she was just two years old, and in 1840 her father married Sarah Denton.

In June 1837, Elder Heber C. Kimball (1801–68) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and other Church leaders were in England doing missionary work. Among the many converts taught by these missionaries was a family who gave the Moultons a copy of the tract *A Voice of Warning*, by Elder Parley P. Pratt (1807–57) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Upon reading it, Thomas and Sarah were converted and baptized on December 29, 1841. At that time, their family consisted of just two children—Sarah Elizabeth, age four; and Mary Ann, seven months old.

The spirit of gathering was strong in the hearts of the converts in Europe. Their great desire was to immigrate to America, where they might be with the majority of the Saints. Like many others, the Moultons did not have enough money to fulfill this desire. But their resolution was strong, and they began to save money in a fruit jar.

Perpetual Emigration Fund

In 1849, President Brigham Young (1801–77) set up the Perpetual Emigration Fund to help Church members secure passage to America. The first to travel with the aid of this fund did so by wagon train, but this means of transportation was slow and expensive. Even with the help of the Perpetual Emigration Fund, few could afford to make the journey. Church leaders investigated the use of handcarts and learned that handcarts would make travel faster and less costly.

Left: Present-day Gloucester, England, countryside



Scotts Bluff National Monument in western Nebraska, USA

By then the Moulton family numbered seven children, but with their fruit jar savings, help from the Perpetual Emigration Fund, and the cheaper means of transportation, their dreams of immigration became a possibility. For a family of nine, it took careful planning to prepare for the trip. To save even more money for the purchases they would need to make, they lived chiefly on barley flour for nearly a year.

As the time of their departure approached, Thomas hesitated to make the journey because his wife was expecting a baby. But Sarah Denton Moulton was a woman of faith and could not be deterred. Before they left England, one of the missionaries gave Sarah a blessing in which he promised her that if she would go to Utah, she would make the journey safely without losing even one member of her family—quite a promised blessing to a soon-to-be family of 10!

The family, who set sail from Liverpool, England, in 1856 on the ship *Thornton*, welcomed a new baby boy just three days into the voyage. The *Thornton* had been chartered to carry 764 Danish, Swedish, and English Saints. They were under the direction of a missionary named James Grey Willie.

Six weeks later the *Thornton* sailed into New York Harbor. The Moulton family then boarded a train to make the long journey westward. They arrived in Iowa City, Iowa, in June 1856, which was the starting point for the handcart companies. Only three days before their arrival, Captain Edward Bunker's handcart company had pulled away from Iowa City, taking many of the available handcarts.

Handcart Headaches

About two weeks later, the Willie company was joined by another company of Saints, under the direction of Edward Martin. Church agents at Iowa City, who had worked hard to equip and send off the first three handcart companies, now had to struggle frantically to provide for an unexpectedly large body of late arrivals. They had to construct 250 handcarts before these Saints could continue their journey.

Every able-bodied man was put to work making handcarts, while the women made dozens of tents for the journey. Many of these amateur cart makers did not adhere to specifications but made carts of various sizes and strength, which would prove a handicap to them. Of necessity, the number of needed handcarts required that they be built out of green, unseasoned timber, and in some instances, using rawhide and tin for the wheels. Each cart carried food as well as the total earthly possessions of many of the Saints.

Often, 400 to 500 pounds (180 to 230 kg) of flour, bedding, cooking utensils, and clothing were loaded onto each handcart. Only 17 pounds (8 kg) of personal luggage on a cart was allowed each person.

Thomas Moulton and his family of 10 were assigned to the fourth handcart company, again under the direction of Captain Willie. It comprised over 400 Saints, with more than the usual number of aged folks. A report made in September of that year listed “404 persons, 6 wagons, 87 handcarts, 6 yoke of oxen, 32 cows, and 5 mules.”¹

The Moulton family was allowed one covered and one



open handcart. Thomas and his wife pulled the covered cart. New baby Charles and sister Lizzie (Sophia Elizabeth) rode in this cart. Lottie (Charlotte) could ride whenever the cart was going downhill. Eight-year-old James Heber walked behind with a rope tied around his waist to keep him from straying. The other heavy cart was pulled by the two oldest girls—Sarah Elizabeth (19) and Mary Ann (15)—and by brothers William (12) and Joseph (10).

In July 1856 the Moultons bade farewell to Iowa City and began their 1,300-mile (2,090 km) journey westward. After traveling 26 days, they reached Winter Quarters (Florence), Nebraska. As was customary, they spent several days there, mending carts and taking on supplies since there were no major cities between Winter Quarters and Salt Lake City.

It was so late in the season before the Willie company was prepared to leave Winter Quarters that a council was held to decide whether they should go or remain until spring. Some who already had been over the route strongly cautioned them against the danger of traveling so late in the season. But Captain Willie and many company members felt that they should go on because they had no accommodations to spend the winter in Florence.

Dwindling Provisions

With inadequate provisions, members of the Willie company started their journey again on August 18, thinking they could replenish their supplies at Fort Laramie (north of present-day Laramie, Wyoming). In the face of the warning

they had received, they placed an extra 100-pound (45 kg) sack of flour in each cart and trusted that they would meet supply wagons sent out from Salt Lake City. However, the drivers of the supply wagons, thinking there were no more immigrants on the trail, headed back to Salt Lake City in late September, before the Willie company reached them.

In Florence, the Moultons found it advisable to leave behind a box of supplies because the load they had to pull for a family of 10 was just too heavy. By then, they had left baggage at the port in Liverpool, a box of clothing onboard ship, a trunk of clothing at New York City, and a trunk of supplies containing most of their personal belongings at Iowa City. Even on the trail, they looked for ways to ease their burden.

It is difficult for those who enjoy all the comforts of modern life to imagine the daily misery of the Moulton family and the other remarkable men and women of those handcart companies. Can we imagine the blistered hands and feet, sore muscles, dust and grit, sunburn, flies and mosquitoes, stampeding buffalo herds, and Indian encounters? Can we imagine the river crossings and the difficulties of sand and slippery rocks as they tried to get the handcarts across swift or deep-running water? Can we understand the weakness that comes from a lack of sufficient nourishment?

During their travels, the Moulton children went into the fields with their mother to glean wild wheat to add food to their rapidly diminishing supplies. At one point the family had only barley bread and one apple a day for every three members.



Sweetwater River near Martin's Cove, Wyoming, USA

Just before dusk on September 12, a party of missionaries returning from the British Mission arrived in camp. They were led by Elder Franklin D. Richards (1821–99) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, my wife's great-great-grandfather. When Elder Richards and the others saw the difficulties of the handcart company, they promised to hurry on to the Salt Lake Valley and send back help as soon as possible.

On September 30 the Willie company reached Fort Laramie, Wyoming, 400 miles (645 km) east of Salt Lake City.

With the beginning of October, winter set in, and the difficulties multiplied as the company attempted to press onward. Provisions were running so low that Captain Willie was compelled to cut rations to 15 ounces (425 g) of flour for men, 13 ounces for women, 9 ounces for children, and 5 ounces for infants. Soon they would face howling wind and drifting snow. By the morning of October 20 the snow was 4 inches (10 cm) deep, and tents and wagon covers had been smashed by its weight. Five members of the company and some of the draft animals had died of cold and starvation the night before the storm, and five more members died over the next three days. Feeding the women, children, and sick first, many of the reasonably strong men were forced to go without anything to eat.

Relief Parties Set Out

Two miles (3 km) below Rocky Ridge on the Sweetwater River, the company made camp and waited in starvation, cold, and misery for the storm to pass.

When the Franklin D. Richards party reached Salt Lake City, they immediately reported to President Young the precarious condition of the immigrants. The Saints in the valley had not expected more immigrants until the following year, and news of their plight spread like wildfire.

Two days later, October 6, 1856, general conference was held in the Old Tabernacle. From the pulpit, President Young made the call for men, food, and supplies in mule- or horse-drawn wagons to leave the following day to render assistance.²

John Bennett Hawkins was in the Old Tabernacle on that day and answered the call to help. He was one of the hundreds of individuals in relief parties that set out from Salt Lake City. On the evening of October 21, the rescuer wagons finally reached the Willie camp. They were greeted with joy and gratitude by the frozen and starving survivors. This was the first meeting of John Bennett Hawkins and Sarah Elizabeth Moulton, who would become my great-grandparents.

On October 22, some of the rescuers pushed on to help the other handcart companies, while William H. Kimball, with the remaining wagons, started back to Salt Lake City in charge of the Willie company.

Those too weak to pull their handcarts placed their possessions in the wagons and walked beside them. Those unable to walk rode in the wagons. When they arrived at Rocky Ridge, another terrible snowstorm fell upon them. As they struggled up the side of the ridge, they had to wrap themselves in blankets and quilts to keep from freezing to death. About 40 of the company had already perished.³



The weather was so cold that many of the Saints suffered frostbite on their hands, feet, and faces while crossing the ridge. One woman was blinded by the frost.

We can imagine the Moultons, with their brood of eight children, pulling and pushing their two carts as they struggled through the deep snow. One cart was drawn by Thomas and his wife with its precious cargo—Lottie, Lizzie, and baby Charles—with little James Heber stumbling and being dragged along by the rope around his waist. The other cart was drawn and pushed by Sarah Elizabeth and the other three children. A kind, elderly woman, seeing little James Heber's struggle, grasped his hand as he trailed behind the handcart. This kindly act saved his right hand, but his left hand, exposed to the subzero weather, froze. When they reached Salt Lake City, several of his fingers on that hand were amputated.

Early in the afternoon of November 9, the wagons of suffering humanity halted in front of the tithing office building, where the Joseph Smith Memorial Building now stands in Salt Lake City. Many arrived with frozen feet and limbs. Sixty-nine had died on the journey. But the promise to the Moulton family in that blessing in England had been fulfilled. Thomas and Sarah Denton Moulton had not lost a child.

From Rescue to Romance

The company was greeted by hundreds of Salt Lake citizens anxiously awaiting their coming and ready to help with their care. Gratitude and appreciation toward one of the young heroes who had helped save the Moultons from

the grasp of death soon blossomed into romance and love for Sarah Elizabeth.

On December 5, 1856, amidst the happy wishes of her loved ones, Sarah Elizabeth married John Bennett Hawkins, her rescuer. They were sealed for time and eternity the following July in the Endowment House. They made their home in Salt Lake City and were blessed with three sons and seven daughters. One of those daughters, Esther Emily, married my grandfather Charles Rasband in 1891.

On July 24 we celebrate Pioneer Day, and we express gratitude for the many pioneers who gave everything to build up the Salt Lake Valley and many other communities in the western United States. We also express gratitude for Latter-day Saint pioneers throughout the world who have blazed—and are blazing—a gospel path for others to follow.

What moved them on? What pushed them forward? The answer is a testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ. As a great-grandson of pioneers, I add my witness and testimony that their struggles were not in vain. What they felt, I feel. What they knew, I know and bear record of. ■

From a Pioneer Day sunrise service message delivered at the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City on July 24, 2007.

NOTES

1. Report by F. D. Richards and Daniel Spencer, in Marilyn Austin Smith, *Faithful Stewards—the Life of James Gray Willie and Elizabeth Ann Pettit* (1985), 103; excerpt available at history.lds.org.
2. See Brigham Young, "Remarks," *Deseret News*, Oct. 15, 1856, 252; see also LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion* (1981), 120–21.
3. Of these, 19 had died prior to the company reaching Fort Laramie, including 7 who died on the ocean voyage and 4 who died at Iowa City. Another 19 died between Fort Laramie and the onset of winter, most in the days leading up to the rescuers' arrival.