



# I Will

By Cecilia Sorensen

*I started with a bad attitude, but this pioneer trek helped me appreciate the sacrifices others had made for me.*

**B**ut, Mom! I don't want to go!" There was no way she'd ever convince me. "Can you imagine what three days without showers or my cell phone will do to me? I'll die!"

"Oh, don't be like that." My mother dismissed my worries like they were nothing. "It'll be a good experience for you." That was the end of it; my fate had been decided. I moaned and groaned for an entire month, but that didn't change anything. I still had to go on pioneer trek with the youth in my ward.

We were scheduled for three days of wandering through what seemed a Wyoming wasteland, with only the "bare necessities" packed into a one-gallon paint bucket. I couldn't believe other people were excited to go on a trip like this. I tried every loophole I could find to get out of going. All I got was a lecture on the "importance of my ancestors and understanding how they lived." Personally, I appreciated the pioneers. I really did. But why did that mean going on trek? Couldn't I appreciate them from the comfort of my own home?

The last week in June found me awake at four in the morning to help load the cars and drive across endless miles of desert for six hours into the Wyoming wilderness to

reenact part of the early pioneers' migration westward. Grumbling, I took my gallon bucket and sat sullenly with my other muttering friends.

Our leaders cheerily greeted us with a smile and handed everyone pieces of paper. Looking down, I saw a mournful face in a very bad, very old photograph on a paper. Next to the small picture was the story of Bodil Mortinsen. She had traveled with the Willie Handcart Company in October of 1856. I had been assigned Bodil's name. I folded up Bodil's biography and stuck it in my pocket.

"The handcarts are here!" someone called out. "Everybody get your buckets!"

I lifted my bucket into a handcart and waited for more instructions. I lost count of the number of times we were lectured on leaving the snakes alone. The phrase "DON'T GO OFF THE TRAIL" was engraved into our brains over and over again.

"And . . .," the voice of our tour guide wavered in the hot afternoon sun, "please remember why you're here." What could he mean by that? I knew why I was here. I was here because my parents had told me to come here. I was here because the pioneers had traveled this exact same road and





apparently I had to too. I reached into my pocket and felt Bodil Mortinsen still there, limp from hours in the heat from my jeans.

“Off we go!” Brother Boulter called. He took hold of the first handcart, and moving with the methodical lethargy of a herd of cattle, the procession of teenage pioneers set off.

Nearly 48 hours later, I pushed my handcart from behind, completely exhausted. The sun hung high in the desert afternoon. It pulsed on my back, and I felt sweat trickling down my face. I felt the gritty texture of dirt mixed with the salty-sweet taste of sweat in my mouth but, surprisingly enough, didn’t complain. Suddenly, the caravan halted, and I wearily looked up. Brother Boulter had stopped at the opening of Martin’s Cove.

“We’re leaving the carts here,” he called out in a strained, hoarse voice. “Just bring your canteens and follow me.” We were led up a steep hill and came to several benches set up at the top of the mound. Gratefully, we dropped down and rested in the scorching midday sun.

“You are here,” Brother Boulter stated after a small pause, “to gain an understanding of what your ancestors went through. The Martin Handcart Company passed through this cove over 100 years ago. They suffered frost-bite and scurvy and even gave their lives so that you could live in a better place. We are so proud that you have come with such a great attitude.” My friends and I exchanged sheepish looks. “You all have around half an hour to walk through the cove and see where the Martin Company took refuge from the blizzard that killed 50 people.”

A quiet stillness overtook us as we meandered along the trail. I imagined the pioneers a century ago trying to

take shelter beneath their handcarts. I tried to imagine the feeling of freezing out here in the Wyoming wilderness, and my fingers became cold in the summer sun as I felt a nearness to my ancestors. Walking out of the cove, we took up our handcarts again. The story of Bodil Mortinsen was still in my pocket, growing steadily more limp.

We returned to Rocky Ridge. Here, the Willie Handcart Company had suffered a similar fate to that of the Martin Handcart Company until the rescue party from Salt Lake City found them. This time, the air hung heavy with rain, and we could smell the distant scent of wet sagebrush and sand.

Rocky Ridge was a small gully nestled between two grassy hills and cut in the middle by a quiet brook. A large boulder stood next to the trail with one word carved into it: “REMEMBER.”

“There,” Brother Boulter said, again at the front of our group and motioning to a point ahead of us, “is where the Willie Company buried their dead.”

Glancing up the trail, I saw two piles of rocks waiting at the crest of the hill. These graves were little more than two plots marked by jagged stones over their tops. The graves had been poorly dug, as it was wintertime when the Willie Company was here. The ground had been too frozen to make deep graves, and the pioneers had covered them with rocks to keep the dozen bodies from being destroyed by wild animals.

We stood there in silence. Suddenly, I realized that I had not read Bodil Mortinsen’s story. I carefully pulled out the wilted paper and looked again at the mournful black-and-white face. I read her story. I stood where she had stood and envisioned her grieving over a lost parent or brother or friend. At the bottom of the page, I read:

“Two of those buried at Rock Creek Hollow were heroic children of tender years: Bodil Mortinsen, age nine, from Denmark, and James Kirkwood, age eleven, from Scotland.

“Bodil apparently was assigned to care for some small children as they crossed Rocky Ridge. When they arrived at camp, she must have been sent to gather firewood. She

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was found frozen to death leaning against the wheel of their handcart, clutching sagebrush” (President James E. Faust [1920–2007], Second Counselor in the First Presidency, “A Priceless Heritage,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1992, 84–85).

I had imagined Bodil standing here, perhaps mourning the loss of a family member. Now I realized that she hadn’t stood here at all. She was buried here. Tears pricked at my eyes. A nine-year-old girl was buried here, and her family had been required to leave and move on. They walked and walked until they reached the Salt Lake Valley. After starving, freezing, and suffering, they had not been afraid to continue on. If they could keep walking, surely I could too.

These pioneers had been real people. Old men, young men, widows, mothers, young girls just like me. They had suffered and traveled away from everything they knew to live in a better place. I lived in that place. I had lived in a good place all of my life because of my pioneer ancestors. They were not just people who lived a long time ago, and I was not here just to see what they had done. They were *my* people, and I was here, standing in front of the graves at Rocky Ridge, to get to know them.

I went home after that adventure with a newfound respect and appreciation for my heritage. I can’t ever forget how it felt to stand at those graves. The boulder said “REMEMBER,” and I will forevermore. **NE**

