Sculptor Torlief S. Knaphus's The Handcart Pioneer, at Western Historic Trails Center in Council Bluffs, depicts Mormons' arduous migration on foot from Iowa to Salt Lake City. Western Historic Trails Center explores the story of westward migration trails, including the Mormon Trail.

The Mormon Handcart Migration

by William G. Hartley
ne hundred and fifty years ago, the Mormon handcart migration began. Between 1856 and 1860, Mormons organized ten handcart brigades, involving 3,000 Latter-day Saints (LDS) travelers, mostly from Europe. Although three of the brigades left the last two years from Florence, Nebraska Territory, just west of the Missouri River, seven of the ten crossed Iowa.

Although handcarts have become the primary visual symbol of the entire Mormon migration westward to Utah, less than 5 percent traveled in handcart brigades. The far larger westward migration began in 1846, when members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) were compelled to leave their main settlements in and around Nauvoo, Illinois, and find homes in the West. Crossing the Mississippi and southern Iowa beginning in 1847, they headed to Utah. From then until the transcontinental railroad opened in 1869, Mormons from the United States and Europe flowed to outfitting places yearly to join LDS travelers, mostly from Europe. Although three of the brigades left the last two years from Florence, Nebraska Territory, just west of the Missouri River, seven of the ten crossed Iowa.

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pounds. Each traveler was limited to 17 pounds of baggage. Four or five persons were assigned to each cart, with 20 assigned to each large, round tent that the LDS agents provided. One wagon and team accompanied each 20 carts, hauling the heavy tents, food, and equipment, and carrying incapacitated travelers when necessary. Mule-team wagons kept up with the handcarts; wagons pulled by oxen had to travel longer days to keep up.

On August 2, 1856, the *New York Evening Post* published a non-Mormon's description of the Iowa City camp when it was near its fullest, busiest time. "The camp, as viewed from the brow of a neighboring hill ... presents a fine spectacle. Over one hundred tents, and perhaps as many covered wagons, with their spires and arches of dazzling white—contrast well with the green sward of prairie and the sparkling ripples of the river running close beside ... In all about three thousand have rendezvoused in this spot, of whom some eighteen hundred still remain. ... The tents are arranged in rows, with wide streets between them—the wagons generally in rings, with the entrance at one side, and sleeping tents on the outside. ... There are in all four hundred and forty-five oxen, twenty mules, and a few horses. ... There is seen, as you enter camp, a smithery, a work-shop and a store, all full of business and industry. ... I have made acquaintance of their leaders, and have found them courteous, cultivated, and in business transactions, uncommonly 'sharp.'"

The first two handcart companies, captained by Edmund Ellsworth and Daniel McArthur (both returning from missionary service in Great Britain), left the Iowa City outfitting grounds on June 9 and 11, 1856, and traveled close together all the way to Utah. Together, they contained 497 people, 100 handcarts, 5 wagons, 24 oxen, 4 mules, and 25 tents. Their wagons hauled provisions to last them until they reached Florence, Nebraska Territory, 275 miles to the west, where they were reprovisioned. Both companies arrived in Florence on July 8, the Ellsworth Company 27 days after starting, the McArthur Company, 25 days.

On some days the handcart travelers in Iowa walked and pulled 20 miles or more. On July 1, Mormon diarist Archer Walters noted that the Ellsworth Company had "traveled about 15 miles. Walked very fast,—nearly 4 miles an hour." Twenty-four-year-old Twiss Bermingham, a Dublin University graduate traveling with his wife and three children, wrote on July 3 that the McArthur Company started at 5 a.m. and traveled "a long and tedious journey of 25 miles" before camping at 7:15 p.m.

Iowa's summer humidity and heat took a toll. Bermingham recorded that "some of the Brethren fainted on the road and were carried into camp in the ox-team. I nearly fainted myself from exhaustion." They reached Florence City "generally very fatigued," in dust-stained clothes and with sunburned faces.

Returning missionary Edward Bunker led the third company, which contained mostly Welsh Saints—320 persons, 64 handcarts, and 5 wagons pulled by mule teams. They left Iowa City on June 28 and reached Florence July 19—a record-setting 22-day journey despite "heavy rain and wind storms which blew down our tents and washed away our handcarts." "People made fun of us as we walked, pulling our carts," Priscilla Evans noted, but she admitted that although "we were very tired at night, still we thought it was a glorious way to go to Zion."

John D. T. McAllister, one of the officials who disbursed equipment and supplies at the outfitting camp, wrote a "Handcart Song" that was sung by many handcart pioneers—and by Latter-day Saints ever since.

**Ye Saints who dwell on Europe's shore**
Prepare yourselves with many more
To leave behind your native land
For sure God's judgments are at hand.
Prepare to cross the stormy main
Before you do the Valley gain,
And with the faithful make a start
To cross the plains with your handcart.

**Chorus:**
Some must push and some must pull
As we go marching up the hill,
And merrily on the way we go
Until we reach the Valley, oh!

Of the five handcart companies that crossed Iowa in 1856 (six if counting Jesse Haven's division of the Martin Company), the Ellsworth, McArthur, and Bunker companies made the long, strenuous trek to Utah successfully. But the last two, the ill-fated James G. Willie and Edward Martin companies, left late because ships bearing the emigrants sailed late from England, and their large
numbers required extra time to prepare additional hand­carts and supplies. After problems and slowdowns in Nebraska, they were trapped by severe blizzards in Wyoming, and some 200 out of 1,076 lost their lives.

The last to use Iowa City for outfitting were the Israel Evans and Christian Christiansen companies in 1857. J. F. F. Dorius in the Christiansen Company described the camp, where tents pitched in a circle-like fashion accommodated 18 people each. “Each family obtained a handcart from the railroad station,” he said. Three days later they broke camp. “I felt glad in enjoying this free life outdoors,” he wrote that day. But so many became sick by mid-June that the four mule-pulled wagons were filled to capacity. An elderly woman died in the outfitting camp on June 21 and was buried “in the Woods.” (Such non-cemetery burials by Mormon wagon and handcart companies became the source of many Iowans’ local traditions about Mormon graves being on lands they now own.)

The 111-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 6 from Iowa City to Des Moines closely parallels the old river-to-river road along which the 1856 and 1857 handcart brigades traveled. They passed where South Amana now is and rolled along one mile south of Marengo. (A young traveler in the first handcart company, Job Welling, Jr., not quite two years old, died on June 17, 1856, near present-day Grinnell and was buried the next day.) The handcart route continued westward through Newton. Turning southward, the handcart brigades passed through Mitchellville and into Des Moines, where they crossed the Des Moines River. At Adel, the travelers forded the North Raccoon River and moved on to present-day Wiscotta and then west to the now vanished town of Dalmanutha (41 miles west of Des Moines). They walked for many miles beside Turkey Creek, closely following present-day State Route 83. At Lewis, the handcart route joined the 1846 Mormon Trail route and followed it into Council Bluffs. They moved north and crossed the Missouri River at Florence, Nebraska Territory. This ended their journey through Iowa.

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NOTE ON SOURCES
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