“They had to watch the cattle, herding them day and night. . . . My father and uncle Robert Reeder had gone three and four nights out of seven in the pouring rain, wet through from head to foot and part time in water up to their knees, but willing to do anything to help get started on their journey westward.”

—reminiscence by Sarah Hurren Seamons of the 1856 Mormon experience in Iowa

In Excellent Spirits
Mormon Diary Accounts of Crossing Iowa

by Loren N. Horton

The Mormon handcart migration to the valley of the Great Salt Lake was an experience almost unique in the history of migration on the U.S. frontier. Compared to the 1846 migration of Latter-day Saints (LDS)—which began in Nauvoo, Illinois, and then crossed the Mississippi and southern Iowa to the Missouri River—the 1856 and 1857 handcart migration had several advantages. Because the state was more settled, the Mormons were able to travel on known roads and passed many more settled towns and areas. Therefore, supplies could be more readily obtained, and the travelers could stop and work for cash wages more often, even though many of the LDS European immigrants spoke little or no English. The populations through which they passed could be either an asset or liability. Although assistance was sometimes offered, so was occasional harassment by people who objected to the religious views of the Saints. The handcart companies constantly faced the problem of people along the way trying to lure converts away from the LDS Church.

Mormons’ journals in 1856 and later reminiscences describe the journey from Iowa City to the Missouri River, a little-known chapter in the handcart migration.
The boy made his way to a farmer's house, where he was taken care of until his father found him four days later.

Descriptions of the 1857 handcart migrations across Iowa echo many of the 1856 accounts. Carl Christian Anton Christensen, a Danish convert, reminisced about the 1857 trip: “The hot season of the year, frequent rain-showers, almost bottomless roads, exertion and diet to which we were unaccustomed...brought about much sickness and many deaths among us.”

Nevertheless, the religious conviction of the Latter-day Saints helped them overcome obstacles on the 1,300 miles between Iowa City and Utah, and more than 90 percent of those who began the effort actually reached their goal. In comparison with other travel during this period in history, we need to remember that a proportion of people undertaking any journey at the time faced difficulties. Of those who started to California during the Gold Rush years, for example, a similar percentage probably perished along the way. Monotonous diet, hard work, bad weather, poor roads, and dangers from people encountered along the way, all were factors faced by any traveler in the mid-19th century. Written accounts by the Mormon handcart travelers are useful in understanding that particular migration, and its similarities and differences to other accounts of travel on the frontier.

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