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2006-06-01

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Original Publication Citation

William G. Hartley and Fred E. Woods, "Charles Good's Act of Kindness and the Handcart Children," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 87, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 88-91. <http://www.iowahistory.org/publications/iowa-heritage-illustrated/>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Woods, Fred E. and Hartley, William G., "Charles Good's Act of Kindness and the Handcart Children" (2006). *Faculty Publications*. 993.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/993>

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Charles Good's Act of Kindness and the Handcart Children

by William G. Hartley and Fred E. Woods

On a hot July afternoon in 1856, businessman Charles Good paid an unannounced visit to a crowded campground west of Fort Des Moines. There he found nearly 500 tired travelers—Mormon emigrants who had pulled their handcarts earlier that day through the small business district of Fort Des Moines where Good lived. This was the fourth handcart company to pull through the city in two months. Good's visit would be noted in the company's official journal, but subsequent histories have overlooked his charitable gesture—a simple act of kindness—while at the camp.

The handcart brigade that Good visited was led by James G. Willie, age 41. The Willie Company consisted of about 500 men, women, and children, 5 mules, 12 yoke of cattle, 100 handcarts, and 5 wagons with teams. The company had departed the outfitting campground in Iowa City on July 15, following existing roads, often dusty or muddy and filled with holes and bumps. Thirteen days later the Mormons passed through

Newton. According to the Willie Company journal, "It appeared as if the residents of the entire city and the country round about were lining the streets as they walked along" and gazed upon the Mormons with a look of surprise. No one troubled the travelers, the journal notes, "but snide remarks such as gee and haw were directed toward the company. These words, commonly used to direct oxen to the right or to the left, were uttered to make them appear as beasts of burden."

On June 30, the company camped overnight somewhere between Rising Sun and Fort Des Moines, the town of 2,500 that still bore the name of the earlier military fort. The travelers broke camp at 6:30 a.m. The long train of handcarts "crossed [the Des Moines River] on the Flat Boat Bridge and passed about a mile through the town [Fort Des Moines], where we stopped til 2 o'clock to give the cattle water and grass." Then they resumed travel. "We pursued our journey again about 4 miles, where we encamped for the night," apparently by Walnut Creek. Peter Madsen, a Danish diarist in the company, described



T. B. H. STENHOUSE, ROCKY MOUNTAIN SAINTS (NEW YORK, 1873)

As the handcart companies crossed Iowa, they were watched by residents; some were curious, some helpful, some hostile.

Des Moines as "a large city which had many nice houses and the inhabitants were also a nice people."

Not all descriptions of Des Moines citizens were so positive. "Some of the people here raged with the spirit of Cain against us," according to John Oakley in a handcart brigade a month earlier. At the end of the day when the Willie Company reached Des Moines, Levi Savage described how "a large number of ruffians came determined to disturb our camp." The camp posted a strong guard to keep out the trouble-makers, who finally left about midnight. "Some strangers tried to disturb us," Madsen observed, but "did nothing more than make a little noise."

Only hours before the "ruffians" arrived on July 31, Charles Good had left a different impression. He visited the crowded Willie camp at either their early afternoon stop or the later one. The company journal noted his visit: "Mr. Charles Good, a respectable gentleman from the City, who seemed very favorable to the Gospel, from no impure motive, brought a present of 15 pairs of childrens boots."

No one in the camp knew who this "respectable gentleman" was. Beyond this simple story, what is known about the man? Research in Des Moines newspapers, histories, city directories, and genealogy records reveals details that answer this question and might explain his concern for the handcart children.

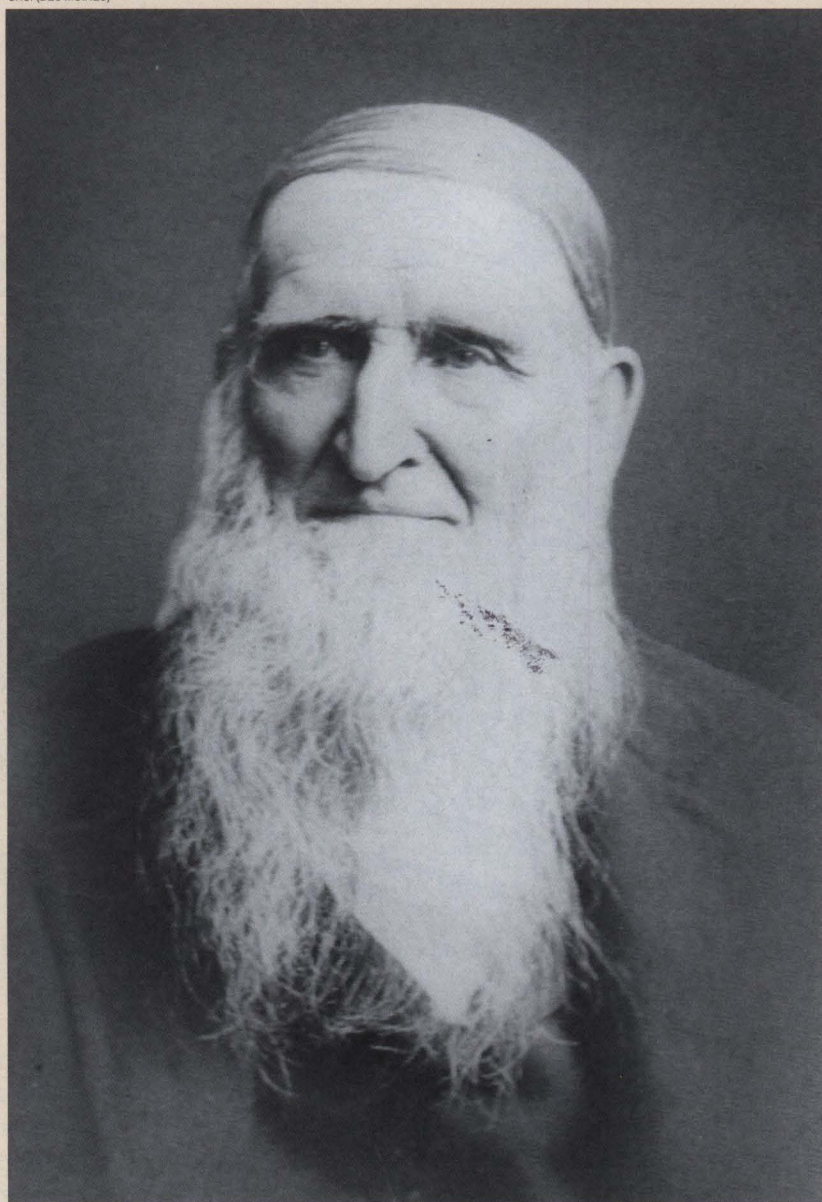
Charles Henry Good was born November 18, 1808, on a farm in Roseville, Coshocton County, Ohio, to parents stricken by poverty. According to one biographical sketch in an Iowa county history, as a boy Good was determined to work hard so that he would never be poor again. When he was 16 he learned the trade of a blacksmith, working the anvil and forge. For the next 15 years he pounded red-hot iron into horseshoes and nails and other useful objects. He also learned carpentry and brick laying. In Logan, Ohio, he built the town's first brick building.

On the lower floor he opened a general store and used the top floor for a school. In 1833, at age 30, he married Sarah (Sallie) Geil. Three of their four children would reach adulthood.

Seeking better opportunities, Good visited Iowa in 1847. While he was gone, Sallie died and was buried before he returned. In 1849 he married Barbara Beery and they moved to Des Moines the next year. Their first two children, born in 1851 and 1854, both died in infancy.

In Des Moines, Good's business career began in their log home on Second Street and Elm, where he opened a grocery and drug business. Later he started a bakery, "where he established quite a large trade with the Indians," according to his obituary. An 1857 city map lists him as a druggist on Walnut Street. For his day he seemed to have a good knowledge of drugs and medicines, and he sold his own formulae, including a liniment and a cholera medicine. At some point, he built a two-story building on Second Street between Vine and Market. On the ground floor he "dispensed drugs of all kinds including whisky which was generally sold on the prescription plan," a town historian later wrote. "The upper story was used for religious meetings and if a preacher was not handy, Good attended to it himself, as he could take a text and follow it to a logical conclusion quite as well as many backwood orators of the old style."

Good was said to be "a man of very devout character" who was "zealous" in his Brethren in Christ faith. "While he read many other books," one sketch says, "he read the Bible whenever opportunity offered, and committed much of it to memory." He gave his children "several well marked and worn Bibles" in which he had written his own thoughts and references. At times he preached, sometimes in Des Moines and beyond, and he held religious services in his Second Street home. Later, he bought an old German Methodist church and turned it into a mission, which became known as the Good Mission, where a Sunday School and other activities were held.



Des Moines businessman and benefactor Charles Good, late in life.

Never able to forget his own boyhood days in poverty, he provided food, clothes, and gifts to needy children at the mission. "A large portion of his life was given up to religious work," an obituary notes. He was "passionately fond" of children and "could not see them in want."

Perhaps Good had watched the Willie Company pass near his business on that day in July 1856. Certainly he had seen or heard about the previous three handcart companies that had traveled through the city since May. Twice as large as the others, the Willie Company included at least 84 children between the ages of 3 and 12. Those small feet would need protec-

tion sooner or later, as the handcart brigade walked 1,300 miles across the plains, through the mountains, and into the Salt Lake Valley. Good gathered up 15 pairs of children's boots and took them to the camp.

In October and November, a fierce Wyoming blizzard caught the Willie Company, along with the Martin Handcart Company and two Mormon wagon trains. Deep snow and freezing temperatures took a heavy toll on the exposed handcart people. About 70 died in the Willie Company, and others suffered frostbite and sickness. If Good heard news about the tragedy, no doubt he hoped that his boots had lessened the suffering of at least a few children.

Eight years after the Willie Company passed through Des Moines, 60-year-old Charles Good was again a widower, with five-year-old daughter Sarah to raise. He retired two years later, and sold his businesses. Five years later he erected the Good Block of business buildings at the corner of Fifth and Walnut. He purchased the properties for \$250; by the time of his death they were worth more than \$200,000.

Various sources from the 1870s and later list him as a gardener, a "vine grower," and a farmer of 31 acres. The 1880 census describes him as a "real estate operator," sharing his home with Sarah and her husband, Dr. Christian Nysewander, a 16-year-old granddaughter, and a 21-year-old male servant.

Good died on March 27, 1898. By then he had earned respect and a fine reputation. His obituary eulogized him as a pioneer resident of Des Moines, a citizen of wealth, a prominent philanthropist, and a religious worker. "He was nearly always a generous contributor to relief shipments to Russia, India and other places where extreme distress existed." One biography called him a capitalist, whose early investments in town lots, timber, and farmland paid off well once Des Moines had developed. He was opposed to war and, because of religious principles, took no part in the Civil War. He was guided by "the strictest moral principles," principles that occasionally made him appear severe to those who did not know him well—although acquaintances considered him companionable and genial, and often referred to him as "Uncle Charley." "Sometimes, if hired hands had little to do, he would have them move a pile of lumber or stone from a spot they had placed it the day before to another place, just to keep them at work and not lose their time and pay." Such generosity made some think he was eccentric.

One of Good's obituaries highlighted his act of kindness towards the Mormon handcart children, although it errs when it says he saw the children suffering in winter cold. In fact it was midsummer. A 1908 county history repeats the mistake: "When the Mormons were going through Des Moines, hauling their household goods in push-carts, accompanied with their hungry children, whose bare feet were bleeding from contact with the frozen ground, he gave them shoes and provisions from his store, remembering vividly his boyhood days when he had but a crust for a day, and the Sheriff carried away household goods and kitchen utensils his mother so much needed." Still, the point of both articles is the same. "He never spoke of his charitable gifts," the obituary reads, "and he gave thousands of dollars which the public never heard of." And as the county history states, "His love for children was remarkable. He could not endure to see them suffer." ♦

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NOTE ON SOURCES

LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856-1860* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1960) is the standard history of the handcart saga. For a brief article about Charles Good, see William G. Hartley, "A Good Charles Good," *Pioneer* (Spring 2001). Pertinent material in the Latter-day Saints Church Archives, Salt Lake City, includes reminiscences, diaries, and family records. Some of these appear on www.lds.org/churchhistory. Iowa sources include Des Moines newspaper obituaries, city directories and maps, 1870 and 1880 censuses, and Des Moines and Polk County histories. Complete annotations are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* productions files (SHSI-Iowa City).