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Suffering and Death on the Plains of Iowa

Susan W. Easton

If the suffering the Saints endured on the plains of Iowa is measured strictly in terms of deaths, it would appear the Saints suffered little. While many deaths were recorded at Winter Quarters and beyond, the journals of the first group to cross Iowa list only nine deaths, five of which were children's. Even if some died unrecorded, it is unlikely that many more than nine people died in the first group.

Regardless of the small number of deaths, however, the exiles endured great suffering. They were forced to leave their homes with less than two weeks of provisions and flee into the middle of a winter which froze the mile-wide Mississippi River. Immediately, several accidents occurred because of the poor preparation and the inclement weather. In addition to the accidents, the freezing rain and snow increased the spread of disease while it impeded recovery. Furthermore, the patched tents and wagon covers afforded little comfort to those who were ill. Mothers even gave birth under these adverse conditions. Yet in spite of their tremendous afflictions, the Saints generally remained objective and even retained a cautious optimism. Though they suffered, they lived; hence they had reason to thank their Creator and Sustainer of Life.

This tale of courage amid suffering began on 4 February 1846 when the first wagon, belonging to Charles Shumway, left Nauvoo and thus started the fabled exodus of the Mormon pioneers.¹ Almost immediately misfortune struck. On 9 February 1846, an accident endangered several men as they crossed the river. The *Manuscript History of Brigham Young* chronicles that incident as follows:

At the same time that the Temple was on fire, a number of brethren were crossing the river in a flatboat, when in their rear a man and two boys were in a skiff in a sinking condition, on account of being

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¹Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 27 March 1846, p. 2, Library--Archives of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church Office Building, Salt Lake City, Utah.

overloaded and the unskillfulness of the helmsman. They hailed to the flatboat, which was soon turned, and rendered them assistance. As soon as they had got the three on board the flatboat, a filthy wicked man squirted some tobacco juice into the eyes of one of the oxen that was attached to Thomas Grover's wagon, which immediately plunged into the river, dragging another with him, and as he was going overboard he tore off one of the sideboards which caused the water to flow into the flatboat, and as they approached the shore the boat sank to the bottom, before all the men could leap off. Several of the brethren were picked up in an exhausted condition. Two oxen were drowned and a few things floated away and were lost. The wagon was drawn out of the river with its contents damaged.²

Hosea Stout refers to the same incident as he writes about his own trials in crossing the Mississippi:

We stook [stood] there & contemplated the sad spectacle of our brethren & sisters struggling in death & our own narrow escape from the same fate. Fatigued and worn out with my family sick we proceeded down the shores of the island to the camp which at length we reached in a desolate situation the brethren rendered us all the comfort in their power while those from the sunken boat also landed almost chilled to death excited the liveliest sympathy in every breast.³

When considering the melancholy scene that Hosea witnessed, one can understand his remark, "I remembered the revelation which said the Lord had cursed [cursed] the waters in the Last Days and said in my heart it was verily true."⁴

Soon the river froze over, and the travelers could walk across the ice. But with the ice bridge came freezing snowstorms and intense suffering to the camps.

The Saints made their first encampment on the banks of Sugar Creek. However, they had not prepared well to face the fierce winter storms, and soon the Sugar Creek encampment turned into a bitter experience for them. B. H. Roberts records that "eight hundred men reported themselves at the Sugar Creek encampment, during the last two weeks of February, without more than a fortnight's provisions for themselves and teams."⁵

The pioneers lacked adequate shelter. Only a scant supply of tents and wagon covers shielded them from the elements, and most of those coverings leaked during storms. Hosea Stout graphically

²Brigham Young, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young 1846-1847* (Salt Lake City: Elden J. Watson, 1971), p. 30.

³Hosea Stout, "Diary of Hosea Stout," 5 vols., typescript copy in Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 2:145.

⁴Ibid.

⁵B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 3:41.

illustrates the pathetic state of the exiles in his simple, yet objective, entry concerning his own shelter: "There prepared for the night by erecting a temporary tent out of bed clothes at this time my wife was hardly able to set up and my little son was sick with a very high fever and would not even notice any thin[g] that was going on."⁶

Besides creating great discomfort, the winter storms caused many accidents. In his 16 February entry, Hosea Stout records:

In the night a tree which hung over Capt Luddington's Company commenced giving away and just give them notice to get out of the way with their waggons before it fell. In getting his waggons away Capt Luddington got his hand mashed very badly.⁷

Brigham Young's history records several similar incidents:

It thundered and lightnined at intervals all day, with a strong northwesterly wind which prostrated a tree, twelve inches in diameter, across brother Tanner's wagon, in which were three persons who escaped unhurt. The tents of the second and fourth companies were mostly blown down. . . . conference adjourned until tomorrow because of the severity of the weather.⁸

On another occasion the history notes,

A large tree fell within five inches of Parley P. Pratt's wagon without touching it. Capt. C. C. Rich's family narrowly escaped.⁹

The accidents, though distressing, did not afflict the pioneers nearly as much as the sickness that the bitter winter brought. Brigham Young's history frequently records cases of illness: "Dr. Richards was sick in bed with a severe cough."¹⁰ Another time, the history states, "Four cases of Measles and one of mumps were reported in Camp."¹¹ Another entry indicates that "Brother Isaac Chase continues sick with the lung fever. . . . several cases of the fever and ague, coughs, etc. are reported."¹² But the history optimistically adds that "in general the Camp is much more healthy than could reasonably be anticipated, after such a severe storm."

Although illness is never pleasant, to be ill under those conditions was particularly distressing. After all, the Saints no longer had a plaster-walled home with a fire burning in the fireplace and a dry bed in the corner in which they could recover. Instead, they slept on the

⁶Stout, "Diary of Hosea Stout," 2:146.

⁷Ibid., 2:153.

⁸Brigham Young, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, pp. 125-26.

⁹Ibid., p. 153.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 43.

¹¹Ibid., p. 77.

¹²Ibid., pp. 81-82.

icy ground under a makeshift covering that scarcely resisted the storm. Hosea Stout's account of his ailing wife tells much about the pitiable state of the sick. He writes that his wife was so afflicted with pain she could not sit up in the wagon. They made a bed for her to lie in as they traveled, but notwithstanding all their care, the traveling injured her very much.¹³ Three days later, Hosea records: "It clouded up earley and began to rain and turned out to be a wet rainy day. My tent leaked badly all day & I was troubled to keep our selves and thing[s] dry At night we had trouble by our beds getting wet thus endangering my sick wife. . . . The rain continued and it was Eleven o'clock before we could lay down and then we were rained on all night."¹⁴ Though the conditions were hardly comfortable, the Saints endured their afflictions well, demonstrating devotion to the Lord.

Probably those among the exiles to suffer the most were the women who gave birth amidst those destitute conditions. One such woman was the wife of Rufus Putman Stewart. Sister Stewart walked two miles and crossed a creek after her labor pains had commenced. Finally, she arrived at a vacant house which shielded her from the storm. There she brought forth a son.¹⁵

Despite deprivations, the Saints enjoyed a generally good attitude. Brigham Young's history notes: "The Saints in Camp were patient, and endured all their privations without murmuring."¹⁶ Another time the history brightly records,

I did not think there had ever been a body of people since the days of Enoch, placed under the same unpleasant circumstances that this people have been, where there was so little grumbling, and I was satisfied that the Lord was pleased with the majority of the Camp of Israel.¹⁷

On another occasion, Brigham's optimism as well as his gift of prophecy evidenced itself concerning Willard Richards, who was then very ill: "There is Dr. Richards, who has to be poulticed all over to keep life in him, before we get to the pass in the mountains, he will skip and run like a boy, with a gun on his shoulder, after deer, elk, and buffaloes."¹⁸ In fact, in the same entry it is noted that several of the brethren had improved their health and endurance by being exposed to such hardships.¹⁹

¹³Stout, "Diary of Hosea Stout," 2:175.

¹⁴Ibid., 2:177.

¹⁵Brigham Young, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, pp. 126-27.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁹Ibid.

Notwithstanding his optimism, however, Brigham sometimes tired of having to care for an entire church. He claimed that he acted the part of a father to everybody.²⁰ One entry manifests his discouragement:

Unless this people are more united in spirit and cease to pray against Counsel, It will bring me down to my grave. I am reduced in flesh so that my coat that would scarcely meet around me last Winter now laps over twelve inches. It is with much ado that I can keep from lying down and sleeping to wait the resurrection.²¹

Yet even at this point, when he called for a vote of support, all hands were raised in his favor.

Brigham did not escape the illness that afflicted the Saints, either: "I was so afflicted with the Rheumatism it was with difficulty I could walk."²²

The Saints seem to have remained optimistic because they trusted in God. Sarah Rich, for example, writes of how her year-old son and her sister contracted measles. In spite of this trial, Sarah felt that the Lord blessed them, because her baby and her sister recovered and no one else seemed to catch the disease. "The Lord is all wise," she writes, "merciful to those who put their trust in Him."²³

The Saints could also remain optimistic because they suffered few deaths. Even though they underwent great trials, as long as they had life, they had reason to praise God. Nevertheless, the trying conditions proved great enough to take a handful of lives—enough to leave martyrs' prints on the sod of Iowa.

The most touching of those martyrs' tales may be that of Catherine Curtis Spencer. On 12 March 1846, at Indian Creek near Keosauqua, Iowa Territory, Catherine died, just nine days short of her thirty-fifth birthday. She was the youngest daughter of a large and affluent family, and she had become accustomed to her father's fond and tender care. But when she joined the Church, she had to give up the refined life her father had given her and take up the persecuted life her membership offered.

In the trying conditions of the exodus, she often sang to her six children to relieve their hunger and chill. But the changes from a warm, brick home to an icy floor and canvas roof proved too much for her to endure. When her little ones came to the wagon to inquire of

²⁰Ibid., p. 33.

²¹Ibid., pp. 150–51.

²²Ibid., p. 54.

²³Sarah D. Pea Rich, *Journal of Sarah DeArmon Pea Rich*, p. 51, typescript copy in Special Collections, Lee Library, BYU.

her condition, she would respond, "Oh you dear little children, how I do hope you may fall into kind hands when I am gone!"²⁴

A night or two before she died, she asked her husband, Orson Spencer, to gather her children and friends around her. After she had kissed her loved ones, she said to her husband, "I love you more than ever, but you must let me go. I only want to live for your sake and that of our children."²⁵ When asked if she had any advice for her father's family, she replied, "Charge them to obey the gospel."²⁶

Soon afterwards, she asked to be taken to a house, because the incessant rain had soaked her bedding and had made comfort impossible. Immediately a man named Barnes consented to have her brought to his house, which was not far from the camp. There she "died in peace with a smile upon her countenance, and a cordial pressure of her husband's hand."²⁷

After her death, Orson Spencer buried her in Nauvoo next to their youngest child, who had died nearly six months before. Brother Spencer notes in his wife's eulogy "her unceasing and dutiful bearing to her husband, and her matronly diligence in infusing the purest and loftiest virtues into the minds of her children."²⁸ He explained that he did not write such a tribute in order to mourn for the dead; the dead would be taken from many evils to come. He wanted only to preserve his wife's image in their young children's memories.

John R. Young records a few more details about Orson and Catherine Spencer. Orson had graduated from an eastern college, Brother Young writes, and had become a popular Baptist minister. But when he heard the teachings of Joseph Smith, he and his highly educated wife gave up their home, friends, popularity, and occupation, and followed the Savior. Almost overnight, they had become strangers to their own kindred.

John R. Young's comments add to the pathos of Catherine's death, particularly his account of the exchange between Catherine and her husband after they had received a reply letter from her parents:

The sorrowing husband wrote imploringly to the wife's parents, asking them to receive her into their home until the Saints should find an abiding place. The answer came, "Let her renounce her degrading faith and she can come back, but never until she does."

²⁴Preston Nibley, *Exodus to Greatness* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News Press, 1947), p. 134.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

When the letter was read to her, she asked her husband to get his Bible and to turn to the Book of Ruth and read the first chapter, sixteenth and seventeenth verses: "Entreat me not to leave thee or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God."²⁹

Sarah Rich also praised Sister Spencer in her tribute to the martyr:

She was a noble, faithful, Latter-day-Saint, and was a kind mother to her beautiful children who were left motherless by her death. She was a lady in every respect, and left a beautiful family of children who kept all together and the daughters though then small, managed to do the work and were united together, and became honorable sisters in the Church; and the sons became honorable men, and are all now living to do good.³⁰

Her children did indeed become honorable members of the Church. One of them, Aurelia Spencer Rogers, grew up to become the founder of the Primary Association on 25 August 1871 at Farmington, Utah.

Others besides Catherine Spencer died, and they also hallowed the Saints' trek. The accounts of their deaths, however, are not as moving; quite often, the accounts are mere entries of time and cause of death. Brigham Young seems to have shown particular interest, however, in the condition of his nephew, Edwin Little: "At dusk, Dr. Richards and I called on Edwin Little, who was sick in his tent, and counseled him to leave the Camp and stay with some brother in the vicinity, Edwin was taken sick at Sugar Creek encampment, and had suffered from a fever, and severe affection of the lungs ever since."³¹ Brigham Young's appraisal of Edwin's condition wavered, however, as Edwin's condition fluctuated. On 9 March, Brigham indicated that Edwin "has been quite sick, but is getting better."³² Yet in a letter to Joseph Young, written that same evening, Brigham declared, "I should not think it strange if Edwin should not live through his sickness."³³ Still later, Brigham again changed his opinion and wrote that Edwin Little was better.³⁴ Finally, Brigham's history succinctly records, "At 7:20 A.M., Edwin Little died, and was

²⁹John R. Young, *Memoirs of John R. Young, Utah Pioneer 1847* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1920), pp. 17-18.

³⁰Rich, *Journal of Sarah DeArman Pea Rich*, p. 48.

³¹Brigham Young, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, p. 73.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 74.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 75.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 76.

buried at dusk on the divide between Fox and Chequest rivers.”³⁵ Doubtless, the death of kindred pained Brigham, but he was not given the luxury of grieving over his nephew. He knew, as others would, that death could not stop the march to the promised land: “I was very busy through the day in preparing for the burial of Brother Little, and rolling out in the morning.”³⁶

As an apt eulogy, John R. Young includes Edwin Little as the first name in his glowing tribute of the Saints.

Today, as I recall the scene, and remember the names of some of those heroic exiles: Edwin Little . . . and many others whose lives are interwoven with whatever is great and enduring in our beloved commonwealth, I cannot but liken them to the brave men who faced ice and cold on Christmas night when the invincible Washington led them across the Delaware to do battle with their country’s foes.³⁷

A few more deaths were recorded, but they received little attention. Brigham Young’s history records that “James Monroe, son of Sidney Tanner, died at 5 a.m. of inflammation of the brain, aged fifteen months.”³⁸ Also, “two of bro. Boswick’s children were buried; their death was caused by measles.”³⁹ Another entry notes that “Samuel Thomas died of consumption.”⁴⁰ “Hyrum, son of Hosea and Louisa Stout, died, aged about two years.”⁴¹ Finally, “William Edwards died at three a.m. of billious fever; he had been sick for ten weeks.”⁴²

Because of the objective tone of the entries in Brigham Young’s history, one might think of these deaths as mere statistics, as names that cease to represent people who breathed, laughed, sorrowed, and suffered. A list of names can too easily become simple designations of those who died on the Iowa plains, but to their parents and kindred, the name of a loved one who died was more than a name in a catalogue; each name identified a child, a brother, a mother, a father. Doubtless, the kindred faced their beloveds’ deaths both gratefully and sorrowfully. The families must have been grateful that those who died were released from a painful existence. Yet those deaths must have left an emptiness only a hope in God and a miraculous objectivity and optimism could relieve.

³⁵Ibid., p. 92.

³⁶Ibid., p. 93.

³⁷John R. Young, *Memoirs of John R. Young*, p. 13.

³⁸Brigham Young, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, p. 91.

³⁹Ibid., p. 134.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 149.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 157.

⁴²Ibid., p. 159.

Though few died on the plains of Iowa, the small number cannot lessen the degree of their sacrifice. Their deaths prove their devotion as much as do the deaths of the Saints in Missouri, Illinois, or Nebraska. In addition, the Saints who endured the bitter winter storms and accompanying sickness, either to reach the promised land or to die in the journey, equally proved their devotion. Indeed, their hope, faith, and objective, good-natured attitudes during these trials offer to the modern Saints a graphic lesson in true courage.