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**The Sweetwater River.** On November 4, 1856, the Martin Company, assisted by members of the Grant rescue party, forded this river under extreme conditions of cold and wind. The rescuers' names have been immortalized for the heroics performed that day for the company. After crossing the river, the company made its way to a sheltered cove, which became known as Martin's Cove. The cove is a half mile behind the photographer's position here. The photograph looks to the east, with Devil's Gate two miles away and slightly to the left. Courtesy Howard A. Christy.

# The Martin Handcart Company at the Sweetwater

## Another Look

*Chad M. Orton*

On November 4, 1856, members of the beleaguered Martin Handcart Company reached the Sweetwater River. More than two weeks earlier, on October 19, the day an early winter storm overtook the company, these same handcart pioneers had forded the Platte River. “Very trying in consequence of its width and the cold weather,” James Bleak wrote of that experience.<sup>1</sup> Now after sixteen days’ exposure to snow and relentless cold, the company faced the challenge of another river crossing. The thought of fording the relatively shallow but freezing-cold river was more than many weak and frozen pioneers could bear.<sup>2</sup> One member of the company, who was “much worn down,” upon reaching the river

asked in a plaintive tone, “Have we got to go across there?” On being answered yes, he was so much affected that he was completely overcome.

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1. James G. Bleak, Journal, October 19, 1856, holograph, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Church Archives).

2. John Jaques, who came to Utah in the Martin Company, left a vivid description of the spot where the company forded the Sweetwater:

The passage of the Sweetwater at this point was a severe operation to many of the company. . . . It was the last ford that the emigrants waded over. The water was not less than two feet deep, perhaps a little more in the deepest parts, but it was intensely cold. The ice was three or four inches thick, and the bottom of the river muddy or sandy. I forget exactly how wide the stream was there, but I think thirty or forty yards. It seemed a good deal wider than that to those who pulled their handcarts through it. (J. J. [John Jaques], “Some Reminiscences,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 15, 1878, 1)

**Chad M. Orton**

The 1856 rescue of the Willie and Martin handcart companies and the Hunt and Hodgetts wagon companies by a virtual army of modern day good Samaritans is one of the great stories of both LDS and Western U.S. history. Because of the quick action of Brigham Young and the willingness of individuals to answer the clarion call of a prophet, the number of deaths in these companies resulting from the early winter storms that trapped them hundreds of miles from their destination was greatly reduced.



Few stories of this massive rescue effort have captured the hearts of Latter-day Saints like the story of rescuers from the Salt Lake Valley carrying members of the Martin Company across the Sweetwater River. The thought of individuals risking their health and possibly their lives by spending an extended period of time in a freezing and ice filled river to assist virtual strangers who had become physically and emotionally drained by what they had endured is both touching and inspiring.

Like so many, I was first introduced to the Sweetwater crossing through the best-known account of these heroics, which is particularly moving because of its powerful simplicity. Over time, I learned of other accounts and documents that also had bearing on this frequently told story. Taken together these sources present a new, more accurate view of this event. Although not the only remarkable story associated with the rescue, the Martin Company's crossing of the Sweetwater serves as a reminder that for an extended period of time countless individuals demonstrated the best of human nature under extremely adverse conditions.



**Panorama of the Sweetwater River.** The river's meandering course demonstrates why the Martin Handcart Company had already crossed the Sweetwater five times before undertaking a sixth crossing during an early winter storm. Courtesy Howard A. Christy.

That was the last straw. His fortitude and manhood gave way. He exclaimed, "O Dear? I can't go through that," and burst into tears. His wife, who was by his side, had the stouter heart of the two at that juncture, and she said soothingly, "Don't cry, Jimmy. I'll pull the handcart for you."<sup>3</sup>

This emigrant and his wife, however, were spared the additional trial of having to wade the ice-filled river. Members of a relief party that had

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Although the Sweetwater is only thirty to forty feet wide where the Martin Company crossed, they were not able to go directly across as the ford of the river necessitated a diagonal crossing. The company entered at a low spot in the bank, angled across to another low spot, then exited. Jaques noted, "It was easy enough to go into the river, but not so easy to pull across it and get out again. The way of the ford was to go into the river a few yards, then turn to the right down stream a distance, perhaps forty or fifty yards, and then turn to the left and made for the opposite bank." Jaques, "Some Reminiscences," December 15, 1878, 1.

Josiah Rogerson, who was a teenager during the journey, later wrote: "The creek here was at least two rods wide, and from two to three feet deep, with plenty of ice and snow, so as to carve the recollection forever in the minds of all that waded that stream." Josiah Rogerson, "Martin's Handcart Company, 1856," *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, November 24, 1907, magazine section, 8.

3. Jaques, "Some Reminiscences," December 15, 1878, 1.

arrived a few days earlier from the Salt Lake Valley were at the river to assist the Martin Company across.

The best-known account of the crossing of that cold November day was written by Solomon F. Kimball:

After they [Martin Company] had given up in despair, after all hopes had vanished, after every apparent avenue of escape seemed closed, three eighteen-year-old boys belonging to the relief party came to the rescue, and to the astonishment of all who saw, carried nearly every member of the illfated handcart company across the snowbound stream. The strain was so terrible, and the exposure so great, that in later years all the boys died from the effects of it. When President Brigham Young heard of this heroic act, he wept like a child, and later declared publicly, "that act alone will ensure C. Allen Huntington, George W. Grant and David P. Kimball an everlasting salvation in the Celestial Kingdom of God, worlds without end."<sup>4</sup>

While Solomon Kimball left a moving description of a truly heroic act, his is not the only account of the rescue. These various accounts, which include both published and unpublished statements, frequently differ regarding specific details. Taken together, however, they present a fairly unified view of the heroics on November 4, 1856.

Because Solomon Kimball did not have access to all the records available today, he did not get every detail exactly right when he told the story. However, because he made the effort, the Sweetwater crossing continues to receive the attention it deserves and continues to be a source of inspiration to those who know about what has been called "a deed of especial valor."<sup>5</sup>

The evidence indicates that more than three rescuers braved the icy water that day. Of those positively identified as being involved in the Sweetwater crossing, none were exactly eighteen. Although these rescuers helped a great many of the handcart pioneers across the river, they carried only a portion of the company across. While some of these rescuers complained of health problems that resulted from the experience, most lived long and active lives that terminated in deaths that cannot be definitively attributed to their exposure to the icy water that day.

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4. Solomon F. Kimball, "Belated Emigrants of 1856," *Improvement Era* 17, no. 4 (February 1914): 288. Solomon Kimball, who was nine at the time of the Martin Company, was the younger brother of one of the rescuers, David P. Kimball.

5. "Gen. Kimball Is Called by Death," *Salt Lake Herald*, December 31, 1907, 12.

The underlying meaning of the statement attributed to Brigham Young—publicly promising rescuers eternal life for this one act alone—is not entirely evident. Because there are no contemporary records of this statement, it needs to be examined in terms of both what was being said around the time of the rescue and in terms of gospel principles. Brigham Young did publicly associate exaltation with the effort to rescue the stranded pioneer companies, as did Heber C. Kimball, who publicly praised by name two who helped at the Sweetwater. However, both Young and Kimball taught that the tie between the rescue and the celestial kingdom was conditional in that the individuals involved needed to meet established requirements that all Latter-day Saints must attain of living their religion and enduring to the end. Individuals should not be misled to believe that one heroic act on their part will guarantee exaltation in the celestial kingdom.

In a variant account of the Sweetwater crossing also written by Solomon Kimball, he reported Young's comments differently (discussed below). Rather than stating that Young promised eternal life, Kimball wrote that Young proclaimed that the rescuers would become immortalized for their heroics. This prophecy, written at a time when the Willie and Martin experience was widely seen only as a disaster, is not necessarily inconsistent with what Kimball wrote later and has come true primarily because he was willing to retell the story. As a result, he helped change the perception of Latter-day Saints concerning the handcarts and helped elevate the Willie and Martin story from simply a tragic event to one that demonstrated the triumph of the human spirit under adverse conditions.



**C. Allen Huntington**

Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



**George W. Grant**

Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



**David P. Kimball**

Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

## How Many Rescuers Were There?

Although Kimball mentioned three rescuers, it cannot be determined exactly how many men risked their lives and health to help the emigrants across the Sweetwater. Available information suggests there were more than three.

Martin Company member William Binder was imprecise about the number but later recalled that “several of the Valley brethren whose names I did not know labored dilligently for hours.”<sup>6</sup> Binder’s recollection of “several” rescuers is similar to that of another company member, John Jaques.

More than twenty years after the events, Jaques wrote the first published history of the Martin Company in a series of letters that appeared in the *Salt Lake Daily Herald* between December 1, 1878, and January 19, 1879. In his letter of December 14, 1878, Jaques discussed the Sweetwater crossing. Like Binder, he did not mention men by name, but he did try to identify two individuals. In addition to these two, Jaques reported that “several others” were involved. “A son of Heber C. Kimball and a son of George D. Grant, and I believe several others of the relief party, waded the river. . . . If I were certain of the names of all those brave waders I would insert them here.”<sup>7</sup>

A month later, on January 19, 1879, the *Herald* published Jaques’s final article. “All things earthly have an end. So must these handcart papers, and this is the last of them,” he wrote. Before closing his account, however, he revisited the Sweetwater crossing rescue. This time he provided something he did not have a month earlier—names of rescuers. While Jaques provided names, he noted that he did not know this information himself but was only recounting what he had been told. Rather than three individuals, Jaques mentioned four by name: “I am told that the ‘boys’ who waded the Sweetwater and carried the women and children across were D. P. Kimball, George W. Grant, Stephen W. Taylor, and C. A. Huntington.”<sup>8</sup>

Kimball, Grant, Taylor, and Huntington were not the only members of the relief company with the Martin Company when it crossed the Sweetwater. They were part of a group of twenty-seven rescuers, according to Daniel W. Jones’s published autobiography. “These are all the names that I remember, if there were any more I have been unable to find them,” Jones

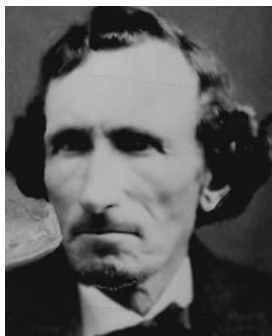
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6. William Binder, *Reminiscences*, [n.d.], holograph, 4, Church Archives.

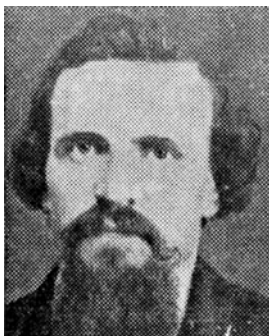
7. Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” December 15, 1878, 1.

8. J. J. [John Jaques], “Some Reminiscences,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, January 19, 1879, 1.





**George D. Grant**  
Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



**William Broomhead**  
Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



**Charles Franklin Decker**  
Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



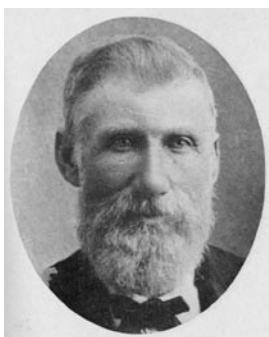
**Harvey Harris Cluff**  
Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



**Robert T. Burton**  
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**Stephen W. Taylor**  
Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



**Ira Nebeker**  
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**Thomas E. Ricks**  
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wrote.<sup>9</sup> While some members of the relief party remained behind to fulfill specific duties along the trail, Jones noted that “most of the [rescue] company” met the Martin “hand-cart company at Greasewood creek” several days prior to the Sweetwater crossing.<sup>10</sup>

Of the rescuers mentioned by Jones, eighteen have been positively identified as assisting the Martin Company on the day they crossed the Sweetwater, November 4, 1856: Thomas Alexander, William Broomhead, Robert Burton, Harvey Cluff, Charles Decker, George D. Grant, George W. Grant, Benjamin Hampton, C. Allen Huntington, Daniel W. Jones, David P. Kimball, Ira Nebeker, Joel Parrish, Edward Peck, Thomas Ricks, Stephen Taylor, Chauncey Webb, and Cyrus Wheelock.<sup>11</sup> Of the remaining nine, four are known to have been elsewhere fulfilling other assignments: Joseph A. Young and Abel Garr were heading back to Salt Lake with George D. Grant’s written report to Brigham Young about the situation; William H. Kimball was with the Willie Handcart Company to assist its members; and Reddick Allred had remained at South Pass to guard a wagonload of flour. The whereabouts of the other five—Tom Bankhead, Amos Fairbanks, Charles Grey, Henry Goldsborough, and John R. Murdock—are not known for certain, although it is likely that they were the “few men” that Jones reported to have turned back with William Kimball to assist the Willie Company.<sup>12</sup>

Given the number of rescuers with the Martin Company at the time, it is not surprising that at least one more rescuer has been identified by name as also ferrying people across the river. A brief published biography of Ira Nebeker identifies him as another who helped at the Sweetwater: “In the fall of 1856 . . . he went with George D. Grant’s company to the relief of the belated handcart immigrants . . . many times wading in the icy cold Sweetwater and carrying on his back enfeebled immigrants.”<sup>13</sup>

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9. Daniel W. Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians. A True Yet Thrilling Narrative of the Author’s Experiences among the Natives* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1890), 63.

10. Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians*, 69.

11. Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians*, 63–65; Patience Loader Archer, *Reminiscences* [ca. 1890], Church Archives; William Broadhead, *Diary*, typescript, Church Archives; “Harvey Cluff’s Account of the Rescue,” as included in LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*; Robert Taylor Burtson, *Diaries*, Church Archives.

12. Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians*, 63–65; LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856–1860* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1960), 116, 223–24.

13. Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in The Church of Jesus Christ of*

How the five rescuers mentioned by name in other sources—and there may have been more—came to be reported as only three in Solomon Kimball's account is an interesting path. When Orson F. Whitney published his *Life of Heber C. Kimball* in 1888, he mentioned only the three: C. Allen Huntington, George W. Grant, and David P. Kimball. Four years later, however, when he again addressed the Sweetwater rescue in his *History of Utah*, Whitney also mentioned Stephen Taylor. While it is obvious that Whitney had access to Jacques's newspaper account of the Martin Company when he wrote *History of Utah*—since he quoted extensively from Jacques's December 15, 1878 letter recounting the crossing—the sources Whitney used for *Life of Heber C. Kimball* are less certain, although he acknowledges the help of Solomon Kimball in compiling the volume. If Solomon Kimball did not provide that particular information, Solomon at least appears to have relied upon Whitney's *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, the biography of his father, rather than *History of Utah* when he wrote his account.<sup>14</sup>

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*Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History, 1901–36), 2:34.

In addition to those known to have been at the Sweetwater, a number of other individuals have been mistakenly associated with the river crossing, including William Kimball, Ephraim Hanks, James Ferguson, and Leonard Rice. William Kimball, Hanks, and Ferguson were mentioned by Jacques's sister-in-law, Patience Loader Archer, in her reminiscences:

William Kimble[,] Ephrem Hanks and I think the other was James Furgeson those poor brethren was in the water nearly all day we wanted to thank them but they would not listen to [us] My dear Mother fealt in her heart to bless them for there Kindnes she said God bless you for taking me over this water and in such an awfull rough way oh D—n that I dont want any of that you are welcome we have come to help you Mother turned to me saying what do [you] think of that man he is arough fellow I told her that is Brother William Kimble I am told thay are all good men but I daresay that thay are all rather rought in there Manners but we found that thay all had kind good hearts. (Patience Loader Archer, Reminiscences [ca. 1890], 182–83, Church Archives)

William Kimball, Ephraim Hanks, and James Ferguson were not with the Martin Company on the day it crossed the Sweetwater. At the time of the crossing, Kimball was assisting the Willie Company while Hanks and Ferguson were still en route. Likewise, Leonard G. Rice was elsewhere, despite one account that puts him at the Sweetwater crossing. Leonard Rice and Lucy, in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, comp. Kate B. Carter, 20 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1958–77), 11:39.

14. The Orson F. Whitney accounts of the crossing are found in Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball, an Apostle: The Father and Founder of the British Mission* (Salt Lake City: Kimball Family, 1888), 426; and Orson F. Whitney,

Although the focus of the Sweetwater crossing has long been on rescuers from the Salt Lake Valley carrying members of the company across the river, at least one account tells of a Martin Company member ferrying his fellow pioneers. While William Binder mentioned only members of the relief party carrying emigrants across, Albert Jones, age sixteen at the time, publicly proclaimed that the twenty-four-year-old Binder, whom Jones described as “a man of unbounded charity and a loveable disposition,” returned to the river and carried him across. In a 1906 talk to the Handcart Veterans Association, Jones announced that Binder “carried me across the Sweetwater when it was freezing terribly hard.” But in notes written years later, Jones stated that “[David P.] Kimball carried me over,” and that Binder provided an equally valuable service and helped pull Jones’s handcart through.<sup>15</sup>

### What Were the Ages of the Rescuers?

While the number of Sweetwater crossing rescuers is uncertain, the ages of those mentioned by name is more certain. C. Allen Huntington, born December 6, 1831, was twenty-four and was the oldest of those named. Stephen Taylor, whose date of birth is December 25, 1835, was twenty. Ira Nebeker and David P. Kimball were both seventeen, their birthdays being June 23 and August 23, 1839, respectively. George W. Grant, the youngest of the group, born December 12, 1839, was only sixteen years old.<sup>16</sup>

### How Many Emigrants Did the Rescuers Carry Across?

Solomon F. Kimball claimed that the three rescuers “carried nearly every member of the illfated handcart company across the snowbound stream.”<sup>17</sup> At that time the company would have numbered around five hundred.<sup>18</sup> In his *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, Orson F. Whitney similarly

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*History of Utah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1892–1904), 1:562–63.

15. “Address Read by Albert Jones of Provo to the Hand Cart Veterans Assembled in the Assembly Hall Temple Block Salt Lake City on the Evening of October 4th 1906,” Handcart Veterans Association Scrapbook, Church Archives; Albert Jones, Notes [ca. 1918], Church Archives. Jones’s notes, which are a cryptic outline of his handcart experience, state that at the Sweetwater “W L Binder hauls my hand Cart through . . . Kimball carried me over.”

16. Patriarchal Blessing Index, Church Archives.

17. Kimball, “Belated Emigrants of 1856,” 288.

18. Various accounts place the number of members of the Martin Company that started from Iowa City anywhere between 575 and 625. Around 100 or more of these pioneers had died prior to the company reaching the Sweetwater. In

states, “David P. Kimball, George W. Grant and C. Allen Huntington carried upwards of five hundred of these emigrants on their backs across the Sweetwater, breaking the thin ice of the frozen river before them, as they waded from shore to shore.”<sup>19</sup> Exactly how many members of the Martin Company were physically carried across by the relief party is not known, but the evidence suggests that only a portion of the company crossed in that manner.

Several factors argue against the idea that a few rescuers carried all the company over the Sweetwater. First, there likely was not enough time. The company did not reach the river until the afternoon, thus giving them only hours to cross before darkness overtook them. Second, the relief party had access to a number of wagons, which were used to ferry many emigrants across. Third, both rescuers and handcart pioneers recounted that some company members waded through the water themselves.

When John Jaques first wrote about the Sweetwater crossing, he briefly mentioned each of these aspects:

Before the crossing was completed, the shades of evening were closing around, and, as everybody knows, that is the coldest hour of the twenty-four, or at least it seems to be so, in a frosty time, and it seemed so then, for cold enough it was. The teams and wagons and handcarts and some of the men forded the river. . . . [S]everal . . . of the relief party, waded the river, helping the handcarts through and carrying the women and children and some of the weaker of the men over.<sup>20</sup>

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addition to those who died, an unknown number of company members had previously dropped out during the journey.

19. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 426. A brief biographical sketch of David P. Kimball published in the *Deseret Evening News* in 1907 also reports that the rescuers carried every individual across, although it does not give a number:

A signal service to Utah pioneering was performed by Mr. Kimball when the first handcart company was reported in distress at the Platte river. Together with George D. Grant and Lot Huntington he went to the Platte, and found the emigrants in a famished condition. The three men realized at once that they must be taken across the river, and then hurried on towards the settlements, and that for them to wade through the icy waters would be fatal. Therefore, the men turned to the task of carrying the weakened emigrants across the river on their backs, and they did not cease until all were landed in safety without being wet. (“Leaves from Old Albums,” *Deseret Evening News*, May 4, 1907, 23)

In addition to having the company wrong, the account also misidentifies the river and the identity of those involved in carrying the emigrants.

20. Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” December 15, 1878, 1.



**Camp at Devil's Gate.** The Martin Handcart Company and the Hodgetts Wagon Company joined the Grant rescue party here on November 2 and 3, 1856. From the campsite, this photograph looks north along the Sweetwater towards the river's upstream entrance to Devil's Gate. Courtesy Howard A. Christy.

**Time Limitations.** The weather that day, November 4, was initially unfavorable for travel: for much of the morning a bitter wind howled down upon the pioneers, keeping the wind-chill factor well below zero.<sup>21</sup> When the wind moderated somewhat in late morning, the rescuers determined to take advantage of this opportunity and move the Martin Company to

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21. Daniel W. Jones later wrote that prior to Joseph Young returning to Salt Lake City on November 2 with a letter written by George D. Grant to Brigham Young outlining the desperate situation of the handcart pioneers and requesting more help be sent, Joseph Young had "told the people to gather up and move on at once as the only salvation was to travel a little every day. This was right and no doubt saved many lives for we, among so many . . . could do but little, and there was danger of starvation before help could arrive unless the people made some head-way toward the valley." Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians*, 66–67. In his letter to Young, George D. Grant proclaimed his intention to pursue such a course: "We will move every day toward the valley, if we shovel snow to do it, the Lord helping us." George D. Grant to Brigham Young, November 2, 1856, Brigham Young Collection, Church Archives. This letter was subsequently published in the *Deseret News*, November 19, 1856, 293.

a cove where the relief party had previously camped. Handcart pioneer Josiah Rogerson wrote that the “Martin’s hand[cart] company left the camp at Devil’s Gate some time in the forenoon, making straight west to the Sweetwater.”<sup>22</sup> Harvey Cluff, one of the Utah rescuers, noted: “Northern blizzards prevailed, the thermometer showing ten to twenty degrees below zero, making it utterly impossible to proceed homeward; finally a lull in the raging wind from the north enabled the handcart companies to cross the river and go up to the cove.”<sup>23</sup> The company only had to travel two miles to reach the Sweetwater, but given the combination of worn-out emigrants and horrific traveling conditions such as snow reportedly eighteen inches deep, the journey would have taken some time.

William Binder recalled that the several rescuers “laboured dilligently for hours” helping emigrants across the river.<sup>24</sup> Patience Loader Archer reported that “Br Kimble staid so long in the water that he had to be taken out and packed to camp and he was a long time before he recovered as he was a child.”<sup>25</sup> Josiah Rogerson singled George W. Grant out for praise: “We had one hero on this occasion, whose name deserves to be chiseled on the pedestal of the throne in heaven, and that was Daniel H. [George W.] Grant, the son of General [George] D. Grant.” According to Rogerson, Grant was in the “cold, icy stream” “for nearly two hours,” during which time he carried “fully 150 children, young ladies and the aged of both sexes.”<sup>26</sup> Rogerson’s claim that Grant was able to carry seventy-five emigrants an hour seems an exaggeration, given the distance that had to be traveled back and forth across the icy stream (upwards of one hundred yards round trip), coupled with the slippery river banks that had to be negotiated, and the soft, muddy river bottom through which they had to slosh. If members of the relief party carried emigrants across at a more imaginable but still Herculean rate of twenty individuals an hour, it would have taken three rescuers eight hours to get five hundred pioneers across—a time frame that the rescuers did not have to operate in. Since it is unlikely that Grant was able to carry 150 people across by himself in two hours, the figure given by Rogerson may represent the entire number of emigrants

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22. Rogerson, “Martin’s Handcart Company, 1856,” 8.

23. “Harvey Cluff’s Account of the Rescue,” as included in Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 236.

24. Binder, *Reminiscences*, 4.

25. Archer, *Reminiscences*, 183.

26. Rogerson, “Martin’s Handcart Company, 1856,” 8.

carried by the relief party. If such was indeed the case, that number is still monumental, especially under the circumstances.<sup>27</sup>

**Use of Wagons.** Another factor that argues against the rescuers carrying all the members of the handcart company across on their backs was the presence of wagons. The Martin Company, like all handcart companies, traveled with supply wagons that carried tents, extra food, and other provisions. Inasmuch as one wagon was allocated for each one hundred members of a company, six supply wagons started out from Iowa City along with the handcarts. Along with these wagons, there was also an ambulance wagon used to carry those too sick to walk.<sup>28</sup> Long before the arrival of winter, at least one supply wagon was used to transport company members in addition to the ambulance wagon. During the journey across Nebraska, William and John Middleton, who drove one of the supply wagons, “would pick up the children that were walking with their mothers and take others from the arms of their parents and put them in their wagon.”<sup>29</sup> In addition to these wagons, the relief party that reached the Martin Company prior to the Sweetwater crossing also brought upwards of ten wagons with them.<sup>30</sup>

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27. It is possible that Rogerson may have been low in his totals of both the number of emigrants carried across the river and the actual time George W. Grant spent in the water, although his totals coincide better with the available evidence than the traditional story.

28. Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 15, 1878, 1; Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 8, 1878, 1; see also Rogerson, “Martin’s Handcart Company, 1856,” 8.

29. Josiah Rogerson Sr., “Tells Story of Trials of the Handcart Pioneers,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 30, 1913, 11. Rogerson’s entire statement regarding the kindness of the Middletons reads as follows:

The father of Dr. George W. Middleton, the physician and surgeon, now residing in Salt Lake, and his grandfather were in charge of one of the provision wagons of Martin’s handcart company with three yoke of oxen, and from Fort Kearney to Laramie and up to the time this ill-fated company became snowbound at the Devil’s Gate, the father and grandfather of Dr. Middleton would pick up the children that were walking with their mothers and take others from the arms of their parents and put them in their wagon. The fatherly and kindly solicitude characteristic of the grandfather and his son deserves all praise.

30. Although Heber McBride later recalled the rescue party having brought ten wagons with them, members of the company reported they left with fifteen wagons, six of which remained behind with the Willie Company.





**Traditional site of Martin's Cove.** The Martin Company was forced to move on due to the crowded conditions at the Devil's Gate Stockade; after crossing the Sweetwater River during difficult blizzard conditions, the company arrived here on November 4, 1856. The cove provided some protection from the elements not only by rock walls front, left, and rear, but also by a large, brush-covered hill to the immediate right. Courtesy Howard A. Christy.

The presence of these wagons was vital to the survival of many company members. When the relief party reached the Martin Company at Greasewood Creek, they faced an unimaginable crisis. Reportedly, more than one third of the company was unable to walk, prompting George D. Grant to write to Brigham Young that "our co. is too small to help them much, it is only a drop to a bucket, as it were, in comparison to what is needed."<sup>31</sup> As a result, the rescuers implemented a plan that would enable them to make the most of their limited resources, particularly wagons. They established a hierarchy of those who had first claim on their services, with priority being given to the infirm, elderly, children, and widows.<sup>32</sup> This hierarchy was implemented throughout the journey from Greasewood Creek to the cove, not just at the Sweetwater. As additional rescuers

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31. Grant to Young, November 2, 1856.

32. Patience Loader Archer wrote about the extra attention her widowed mother received from one of the relief party: "During the time we was waiting [for supper] a good brother came to our camp fiar. . . . He ask[ed] Mother if she had no husband she told [him] her husband had died two Month ago and he was bured on the plains. He was standing with his hands behind him then he handed us a nice peice of beef to cook for our Supper." Archer, *Reminiscences*, 181.



**Martin Company campsite at Greasewood Creek.** Here the Grant rescue party first brought supplies to the Martin Company. Courtesy Howard A. Christy.

from the Salt Lake Valley reached the company with more wagons in the days following the crossing, the opportunity to ride was eventually expanded until all company members completed the journey by wagon.

When the Martin Company left Greasewood Creek for Devil's Gate on November 1—the first day they traveled with members of the relief party—the rescuers employed all available wagon space to carry emigrants. George Grant reported that “after Stowing our Wagons full of the sick the Children &c with a good ammount of lugage started homeward about noon.”<sup>33</sup>

According to three handcart pioneers, the same pattern was employed during the day's journey that led from Devil's Gate across the Sweetwater and to the cove. Patience Loader Archer recalled:

It was reported around camp that we would not have to pull our hand-carts any further that we would leave them at Devels gate and that we would all be able to ride in the wagons this was dileghtfull news to us to think to think [*sic*] we would not have to pull the cart any more I felt

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33. Grant to Young, November 2, 1856. When this letter was published in the November 19, 1856, *Deseret News*, the line was changed to read the “wagons full of the sick, the children and the infirm.” *Deseret News*, November 19, 1856, 293.

that I could still walk if I did not have the cart to pull but oh what a disappointment the next morning we found [found] it was only those could ride that was to sick and weak to pull these carts.<sup>34</sup>

Josiah Rogerson noted that the “few wagons helped to carry all the children they could, the aged and wornout.”<sup>35</sup>

Heber McBride wrote that “the 10 wagons relieved us of some of our load by taking the sick into their wagons and a few other things such as tents and cooking things.”<sup>36</sup> Apparently Heber’s mother, Margaret (who had become a widow on the journey and was numbered among the sick), and her three youngest children, ages two to eight, were among those who crossed the Sweetwater by wagon. The two remaining McBride children, thirteen-year-old Heber and sixteen-year-old Janetta, had to make the journey on foot. Although Heber did not specifically mention that his mother traveled by wagon, he noted that his mother and younger siblings had gone on ahead to the cove, where he and his sister were reunited with them.<sup>37</sup>

Given time constraints, the limited number of the relief party, and the insufficient number of wagons, circumstances necessitated that many in the company had to get themselves across by wading the river. The presence of wagons, however, provided benefit to those who still had to travel by foot. The wagons led the way, thus creating a trail through the deep snow for those on foot to follow. At the Sweetwater, they broke a path through the thin layer of ice that covered the river.<sup>38</sup> Equally important, the wagons were also used to give hope to those still on foot. Patience Loader Archer noted that the rescuers “tried to encourage us by saying soon we would all be able to ride in wagons.”<sup>39</sup>

**Company Members Crossing Unassisted.** As with deciding who would ride in the wagons, the rescuers implemented a priority system at

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34. Archer, *Reminiscences*, 181–82.

35. Rogerson, “Martin’s Handcart Company, 1856,” 8.

36. Heber Robert McBride, *Autobiography*, photocopy of typescript, 14, Church Archives.

37. Heber Robert McBride to Elizabeth Ririe, 1923, as published in Lyndia Carter, “Tongue nor Pen Can Never Tell the Sorrow: Heber McBride Describes the 1856 Martin Handcart Disaster,” *Crossroads* [Quarterly newsletter of the Utah Crossroads chapter of the Oregon-California Trails Association] 5 (Spring 1994): 4.

38. Although Patience Loader Archer later complained that the wagons prevented the company from crossing on an ice bridge, the thin layer of ice was likely not thick enough to support the weight. Archer’s comments are found in Archer, *Reminiscences*, 182.

39. Archer, *Reminiscences*, 182.

the Sweetwater. While those who had difficulty walking had first claim on the wagons, those who had first claim on being carried by the rescuers at the river were women and children. S. S. Jones wrote: "The brave boys from the valley, under George D. Grant carried the women and children over the Sweet Water river, but the men and able bodied had to wade."<sup>40</sup> Patience Loader Archer also wrote of rescuers "packing the women and children over on there backs," a recollection likewise shared by William Binder and Janetta McBride.<sup>41</sup> Binder recalled men from the valley "carrying the women and children over the stream," and Janetta McBride confirmed that "the brethren from Utah carried the women and children over the river."<sup>42</sup> Heber McBride, just thirteen at the time, wrote, "We felt very bad to think we had to ford that stream and I don't think we could have made it in our weekned condition but when we got there we was very much surprised for there were some men there they carried us across."<sup>43</sup> When Elizabeth Robinson and her brother Solomon reached the Sweetwater, one of the men offered to carry her across. Fearing that Solomon was too ill to withstand the cold water, Elizabeth offered to wade across if the rescuer would carry her brother instead. She started to wade across but another man came and carried her the remainder of the way.<sup>44</sup>

While John Jaques agreed that the members of the rescue party carried "the women and children," he also recalled that they also transported "some of the weaker of the men over." One of those was the previously mentioned Jimmy, who broke down on the banks of the Sweetwater. According to Jaques, "Jimmy besought one of the 'boys' from 'the valley,' who was in the water, to carry him over. The 'boy' urged that the women and children had the first claim, but finally consented to carry him across."<sup>45</sup>

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40. "Utah Heroes Who Pulled Their All across the Plains," *Deseret Evening News*, September 1, 1906, 20.

41. Archer, *Reminiscences*, 182.

42. Binder, *Reminiscences*, 4; "History of Janetta Ann McBride Ferrin," April 15, 1924, photocopy of typescript, 3, in possession of Lyndia Carter, Springville, Utah.

43. McBride to Ririe, 1923.

44. Mary C. Burns, "Solomon Robinson," in *Heart Throbs of the West*, comp. Kate B. Carter, 12 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1939-51), 2:181; "Elizabeth Robinson Telford," in "Lakeshore Pioneers," *Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museum*, Spanish Fork, Utah, 3:4. The *Lakeshore Pioneers* publication is a group of separate articles bound together, some with pagination, some without. The cited information is found on page 4 of the Elizabeth Telford biographical sketch.

45. Jaques, "Some Reminiscences," December 15, 1878, 1.

The rescuers also offered the elderly assistance across the river. Harvey Cluff, one of the Utah relief company, wrote that “men of old age and women were carried across the river on the backs of those sturdy mountain boys.”<sup>46</sup> Josiah Rogerson noted in his praise of George W. Grant that the latter carried over “children, young ladies and the aged of both sexes.”<sup>47</sup>

In addition to carrying individuals over, the rescuers also helped the emigrants pull handcarts through. While the company abandoned some handcarts at Devil’s Gate, the sturdier handcarts, approximately a quarter of the total, were taken to the cove. Patience Loader Archer reported that since she and her sister were “all pretty well in health we had to start out with our cart again” from Devil’s Gate.<sup>48</sup> S. S. Jones recalled that upon reaching the Sweetwater, emigrants “had to wade and take the handcarts with them.”<sup>49</sup>

As a result of “Jimmy” being carried over, the man with whom he shared a handcart was left to himself to pull it across. The cart’s wheels “cut into the soft bottom of the river bed, and he soon got stalled. Two of the rescuers in the water went to his help. . . . So hard was the tugging at the cart that it required the utmost combined strength of the three to take the vehicle through safe to dry land.”<sup>50</sup>

A similar drama played itself out in regard to Albert and Samuel Jones. William Binder wrote, “After I had crossed I again went in the stream and assisted Bros. S S and Albert Jones out of the water they being fast in the bed of the River and perfectly discouraged so that they could not pull an ounce.”<sup>51</sup> Albert Jones himself recalled that he was carried over the crossing, and “my brother S. S. pulled our cart through the cold stream.”<sup>52</sup>

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46. “Harvey Cluff’s Account of the Rescue,” as included in Hafen and Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion*, 236.

47. Rogerson, “Martin’s Handcart Company, 1856,” 8.

48. Archer, *Reminiscences*, 182.

49. “Utah Heroes Who Pulled Their All,” 20.

50. Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” December 15, 1878, 1.

51. Binder, *Reminiscences*, 4.

52. In two separate recollections, Albert Jones gave two different men credit for carrying him over: in 1906 he said William Binder “carried me across the Sweet water when it was freezing terribly hard,” but in later notes he wrote that “W L Binder hauls my hand Cart through[.] The axle broke[.] Kimball carried me over[.] S. S. went on[.] I remain & get another Cart and took on our things.” “Address Read by Albert Jones of Provo to the Hand Cart Veterans”; Albert Jones, Notes [ca. 1918]. Apparently the axle broke because it was unable to take the strain placed upon it during the crossing: “Our hand cart broke down, upon it coming out of the water on the other bank.” “Address Read by Albert Jones of Provo to the Hand Cart Veterans.”

The handcarts that were kept were the covered handcarts, which had been professionally built in St. Louis. In addition to being sturdier than those built at the company's starting point of Iowa City, Iowa, their design allowed individuals to ride inside, somewhat protected from the elements. Rogerson recalled that in addition to children riding in wagons and being carried over by rescuers, "many a child was pulled across in the father's covered cart."<sup>53</sup>

### When Did the Rescuers Die and What Caused Their Deaths?

The first account retelling how the rescue caused the deaths of the rescuers is found in the *Life of Heber C. Kimball*: "The effects of the severe colds then contracted by these brethren, remained with them, and finally conduced to the death of the two former [Kimball and Grant], while the survivor, Brother Huntington, is a sufferer from the same cause to this day."<sup>54</sup> Later, following the death of C. Allen Huntington, Solomon Kimball reported that "the strain was so terrible, and the exposure so great, that in later years all the boys died from the effects of it."<sup>55</sup>

Given the fact that medical science during this time lacked many of the diagnostic capabilities of today and that the cause of death was often a guess, it probably cannot be determined with accuracy the effect that the Sweetwater experience had on the lifelong health of these rescuers. To what extent the great sacrifices of that day may have weakened them, thus making them susceptible to health problems or illnesses that eventually claimed their lives, may never be known. While rescuers and their families reported lingering effects from the events of that cold November day, and while some died prematurely according to today's standards, most lived active and relatively long lives.

**George W. Grant.** Grant was the first of the five named heroes to die, passing away in August 1872, at age thirty-two and nearly sixteen years after the Sweetwater rescue. According to Josiah Rogerson, Grant did not accompany the pioneers the half mile to the cove but made the longer journey back to Devil's Gate, where his father had remained:

When we were all across, he walked in his suit of ice some two and a half miles to the camp at the Gate [Devil's Gate], where his father did all possible for him that night, but he told me ten or twelve years afterward

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53. Rogerson, "Martin's Handcart Company, 1856," 8.

54. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 426.

55. Kimball, "Belated Emigrants of 1856," 288.

in Utah that his services that day in the Sweetwater had made him an invalid for life and a permanent rheumatic, and so far as health and strength, a ruined man.<sup>56</sup>

Grant's reported health problems were not enough, however, to keep him from serving a four-year mission in England beginning in 1861, five years after the rescue.

The cause of Grant's death was listed as consumption (tuberculosis), a common cause of death in the 1800s with an estimated one-quarter of all deaths in the United States in the nineteenth century attributed to it. The *Deseret News* noted that he had suffered with the condition for two years: "Although his sickness (consumption) extended over a period of two years, probably no one thought that his earthly career was so near a close as it appeared to be, for, being a young man of cheerful disposition and indomitable will, he never was, during the whole period, confined to his bed for one day."<sup>57</sup>

**David P. Kimball.** The next to die was David Kimball, his death occurring on November 22, 1883, at the age of forty-four. In the intervening years he, too, seemed to live an active life. He married Caroline Williams on April 13, 1857 (just a few months after the rescue) following which they honeymooned "on Antelope Island, where a week or more was enjoyed in horseback riding, visiting places of interest, and in having a jolly good time."<sup>58</sup> After filling a mission to England (1863–66), he helped build the transcontinental railroad through Utah (1868–69). During the 1870s he served as president of the Bear Lake Stake in northern Utah before moving to Arizona in 1877, where he followed the vigorous occupation of a teamster and was serving as first counselor in the St. Joseph Stake presidency at the time of his death.<sup>59</sup>

The story of his death that initially circulated in Salt Lake City is substantially different than that told by family members in Arizona. The *Deseret News* first reported the cause of death as "typhoid pneumonia,"

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56. Rogerson, "Martin's Handcart Company, 1856," 8.

57. "Departed This Life," *Deseret News*, August 14, 1872, 416. The paper began its article by noting that "the many friends of Elder George W. Grant would be surprised to learn of his decease."

58. Solomon F. Kimball, *Life of David P. Kimball and Other Sketches* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1918), 11, 67.

59. Jenson, *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4:601; "Leaves from Old Albums," *Deseret Evening News*, May 4, 1907, 23.

a common by-product of typhoid fever.<sup>60</sup> Concerning his passing, the *Deseret News* initially noted that

in the winter of 1856, the year of the hand-cart company disaster, he with many others went out to meet and rescue the perishing immigrants. It was from wading rivers and working his way through snow banks, carrying the people in his arms, and performing such like offices of kindness, to the exposure of his own person, that he contracted a serious cold from the effects of which he never afterwards entirely recovered.<sup>61</sup>

The paper also reported that the end came quickly: “He seemed to have no idea of his approaching end, in fact expressed himself quite to the opposite of such a probability, remarking to his sister, Mrs. Helen M. Whitney, while visiting at her house, ‘You will go, I think, before I do. I am not good enough to die. I shall likely live for many years.’”<sup>62</sup> The paper further noted:

He was, when he left here for the south, evidently in prime health, and expressed himself as feeling in excellent condition. He stated several times in our hearing that he purposed devoting the remainder of his days—little thinking they were so near a termination—to helping to build up the work of God on the earth, and doubtless this devotional sentiment remained with him to the end.<sup>63</sup>

Six days later, the *Deseret News*, in an apparent effort to correct misinformation that had appeared in print regarding the death of David P. Kimball, published extracts of a letter Helen M. Whitney received from her son Charles Whitney, who was present when David died at St. David, Arizona, and which provided a slightly different account of his death.<sup>64</sup> This variant account of his passing was later described in greater detail by Solomon F. Kimball in a biography of David P. Kimball, published in 1918, four years after Solomon’s famous account of the Sweetwater rescue.<sup>65</sup> Although the *Life of David P. Kimball* reprints the famous quote when the rescue is discussed, later in the volume it describes the unique and inspiring circumstances surrounding David’s death as told in contemporary family letters, including the letter of Charles Whitney to his mother.

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60. “Death of David P. Kimball: A Few Facts Relating to the Deceased,” *Deseret Evening News*, November 21, 1883, 3.

61. “Death of David P. Kimball,” 3.

62. “Death of David P. Kimball,” 3.

63. “Demise of Elder D. P. Kimball,” *Deseret Evening News*, November 21, 1883, 2.

64. “Called to Go: Particulars of the Death of Elder David P. Kimball,” *Deseret Evening News*, November 27, 1883, 3.

65. Kimball, *Life of David P. Kimball*, 43–69.



In November 1881, David P. Kimball was “freighting goods from the Maricopa railroad station to Prescott” and “was caught in a snowstorm at Prescott, resulting in a severe cold which brought on pneumonia and lung fever.”<sup>66</sup> In January 1882, David reported to his sister Helen: “I took a very severe cold in a snowstorm . . . being clad in light clothing, which brought on pneumonia or lung fever.”<sup>67</sup> In spite of his illness, David pushed forward on the return trip. During this sickness, he had many visions, being visited often by his father, Heber C. Kimball. David wrote, “Father finally told me that I could remain two years, and to do all the good I could during that time, after which he would come for me.”<sup>68</sup> Later, David found himself stranded in the Arizona desert without food or water. As he neared death, his father and mother, Vilate, came to him from beyond the veil. After he had given up hope of living any longer, they gave him a drink and promised him that he would be rescued the next day. After recounting in detail what happened, David told his sister: “I know these things were . . . no dream but a glorious and awful reality.”<sup>69</sup>

In the fall of 1883, nearly two years after the incident in the desert, David left his home in St. David, Arizona, for an extended visit to family and friends in Salt Lake City. Shortly after returning to Arizona, he died.

On the day of his death, Charles Whitney described to his mother what had transpired:

Uncle David died this morning at half-past six, easily, and apparently without a bit of pain. Shortly before he died, he looked up and called, “Father, father!” All night long he had called for Uncle Heber. You remember hearing him tell how grandpa came to him when he was lost on the desert, and how he pleaded for two more years and was given that much longer to stay. Last Saturday, the day he was so bad, was just two years from the day he was lost, and today is just two years from the day his father and mother came to him and gave him a drink of water, and told him that his friends would find him and he should live two years longer. He knew that he was going to die, and bade Aunt Caroline goodby, day before yesterday.<sup>70</sup>

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66. Kimball, *Life of David P. Kimball*, 43.

67. David P. Kimball to Helen M. Whitney, January 8, 1882, published in Kimball, *Life of David P. Kimball*, 43–44.

68. David P. Kimball to Helen M. Whitney, January 8, 1882, 51.

69. Kimball, *Life of David P. Kimball*, 55.

70. Letter of Charles S. Whitney, November 22 [sic], 1883, published in Kimball, *Life of David P. Kimball*, 67–69. Extracts of Charles S. Whitney’s letter were also published in “Called to Go. Particulars of the Death of Elder David P. Kimball,” *Deseret Evening News*, November 27, 1883, 3, six days after the paper published its first account of Kimball’s death.

**C. Allen Huntington.** Huntington, who died on November 16, 1896, a few weeks shy of his sixty-fifth birthday, became the renegade of the group, and in March 1860 he was serving time in the Utah territorial penitentiary.<sup>71</sup> This was not his only run-in with the law.<sup>72</sup> In 1880 he was living in the southern Utah mining community of Silver Reef. By the 1890s he worked as a hired hand at Lee's Ferry on the Colorado River. He was employed at the ferry when he died in nearby Kanab, Utah. No cause of death was given.<sup>73</sup>

**Ira Nebeker.** Nebeker died April 19, 1905, one month short of his sixty-fifth birthday. In 1861, five years after the rescue, he moved to southern Utah, which was still a sparsely settled region of the territory. Eight years later he was one of the original settlers called to the Bear Lake Valley, where he helped found Laketown. Called as the bishop of the Laketown Ward in 1869, he served more than thirty-five years in that capacity until November 1904,<sup>74</sup> when he was "released on account of ill health."<sup>75</sup>

The cause of Nebeker's death was reported as Bright's Disease,<sup>76</sup> a form of kidney failure. The *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia* noted that "the exposures and hardships" he endured while "many times wading in the icy cold Sweetwater and carrying on his back enfeebled immigrants" had "greatly undermined his otherwise strong constitution." In spite of this, he supported himself through the occupation of "stockman

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71. In a March 26, 1860, letter to Nathaniel V. Jones, George A. Smith wrote that "The Probate Court of this county has been overhauling the horse and cattle thieves. Indictments have been found against Martin Wheeler, Moroni Clawson, Isaac Neibaur, Chas. Manhard, C. Allen Huntington, Truelove Manhard, James Covey and W. W. Wheeler and others. M. Wheeler, C. A. Huntington, Moroni Clawson, and Truelove Manhard were sentenced to the penitentiary for various terms." George A. Smith to Nathaniel V. Jones, March 26, 1860, in *Journal History of the Church*, March 26, 1860, Church Archives, microfilm copy in Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

72. In 1889, Landon Gibson wrote his brother about meeting Huntington: "Al Huntington has a big scar on the back of his head, and this morning I asked him how he came by it. He told me he had an argument with a 'Greaser' and he had cut him. I asked him what he did to him, and he saide he wouldnt tell me, but added, 'Twelve of my Countrymen said I did the right thing.'" Langdon Gibson to Dana Gibson, December 25, 1889, copy included in Otis Marston Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

73. John Hislop to Mr. Stanton, November 30, 1896, copy included in Otis Marston Collection.

74. "Laketown. Mourn the Death of Bishop," *Deseret Evening News*, April 29, 1905, 11.

75. "Utah Pathfinder Goes to His Rest," *Deseret Evening News*, April 26, 1905, 2.

76. "Laketown. Mourn the Death of Bishop," 11.

and farmer.”<sup>77</sup> The *Deseret News* stated that in addition to the 1856 rescue, Nebeker also served in the “Indian wars” as a “member of Capt. R. T. Burton’s company and performed extensive service in that command. It was due to these early exposures that complaints set in from which Mr. Nebeker never fully recovered.”<sup>78</sup>

**Stephen W. Taylor.** Taylor, the last of the group to die, was eighty-four years old at the time of his death, which occurred in 1920, six years after Solomon Kimball’s account appeared in print. Within a few months of the 1856 rescue, Taylor was serving as a “messenger in the territorial legislature.” In 1865 he was part of the detachment mustered under the direction of Robert T. Burton during the Black Hawk War. Two years later he was appointed sheriff of Summit County. From 1869 to 1871 he fulfilled a mission to England, then served as a Salt Lake City police officer from 1874 to 1876. He spent the last part of his life as a stockman and farmer.<sup>79</sup>

### What Did Brigham Young Promise the Rescuers?

Solomon F. Kimball’s assertion that Brigham Young publicly proclaimed that this one heroic act alone guaranteed “everlasting salvation in the Celestial Kingdom; worlds without end” is the only account of such a statement. What is meant by the statement is not entirely clear. Perhaps Brigham was using hyperbole occasioned by his strong feelings concerning the rescue to drive home a point. Perhaps it was a statement of praise and gratitude. Perhaps it was a conditional promise, such as those found in a patriarchal blessing, rather than an absolute pronouncement of eternal judgment. What seems to be clear, however, is that Young was not proclaiming that Latter-day Saints are saved by one act—although individuals will be rewarded for the good they do—but “by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel” (A of F 3).

Before sending out the rescue company, Brigham did make comments tying together the rescue and exaltation. While calling for individuals on October 5, 1856, to assist the stranded pioneers, he told the congregation assembled in the Bowery:

I will tell you all that your faith, religion, and profession of religion, will never save one soul of you in the celestial kingdom of our God, unless you carry out just such principles as I am now teaching you. Go and bring in those people now on the Plains, and attend strictly to those

77. Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 2:34.

78. “Utah Pathfinder Goes to His Rest,” 2.

79. “Stephen Wells Taylor, Pioneer of 1848, Dies,” *Deseret Evening News*, March 22, 1920, 8.

things which we call temporal, or temporal duties, otherwise your faith will be in vain; the preaching you have heard will be in vain to you, and you will sink to hell, unless you attend to the things we tell you.<sup>80</sup>

On December 4, 1856, only days after the Martin Company reached the Salt Lake Valley, Heber C. Kimball made public comments regarding the rescue company. He mentioned four individuals by name, only two of whom were involved in the Sweetwater Crossing and only one of which was mentioned by Solomon Kimball:

Brother Brigham says that he will have hundreds and thousands of boys right here that will help us with a power greatly increased beyond that of their fathers, and I know that it will be so. When boys go back on the Plains to encounter storms and rescue the suffering, as did David P. Kimball, Stephen Taylor, Joseph A. Young, Ephraim Hanks, and many others, it makes me feel well. . . . Those boys acted valiantly, having been trained up amid the Saints.

Brother Ephraim Hanks has put a feather in his cap, through his noble conduct in aiding our belated immigration, he has unsheathed his sword upon the side of doing good, and I exhort him not to sheath it again.<sup>81</sup>

A little more than two weeks later, December 21, 1856, after the last of the stranded emigrants had reached the Salt Lake Valley, Heber C. Kimball again addressed the issue of the rescue: “God bless those men who went to the rescue of our late immigration, and all who have in anywise assisted it; also those who have come in this season, if they live their religion and appreciate their blessings.”<sup>82</sup> In addition to stressing the responsibility all individuals have in assisting their fellow men in times of crisis, both Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball stressed the need for the Saints to endure to the end. “If the Saints cannot endure, and endure to the end, they have no reason to expect eternal salvation,” Young proclaimed on September 16, 1855, the year prior to the rescue.<sup>83</sup> In June 1859 Young stated: “All I ask is for the grace of God to enable us to endure to the end and be saved. . . . Those only have the promise of salvation who endure to the end; and all I ask is that we may have faith to endure.”<sup>84</sup> The following month he proclaimed: “He that endures to the end the same shall be saved. Not to

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80. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 4:113, October 5, 1856.

81. Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:137, December 4, 1856. Heber Kimball’s remarks were delivered at the funeral of Jedediah M. Grant, held four days after the Martin Company reached Salt Lake City.

82. Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:144, December 21, 1856.

83. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:1, September 16, 1855.

84. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:165–66, June 5, 1859.

run for a season and then turn away; but those who endure to the end will receive a fulness of joy.”<sup>85</sup>

The statements by Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young are consistent with truths taught in scripture concerning the need for individuals to endure to the end. D&C 53:7 reads, “I would that ye should learn that he only is saved who endureth unto the end.” D&C 20:32–34 states, “There is a possibility that man may fall from grace and depart from the living God; Therefore, let the Church take heed and pray always, lest they fall into temptation; Yea, and even let those who are sanctified take heed also.” The Old Testament prophet David is frequently held up as an example of this doctrine. Although he risked his life as a young man against Goliath to save his people, he later transgressed. The Lord told Joseph Smith that as a result of his later actions, David “hath fallen from his exaltation” (D&C 132:39).<sup>86</sup>

Crozier Kimball, a son of David P. Kimball, provides some valuable insight into Brigham Young’s statement promising exaltation. According to Crozier, Brigham Young called David into his office prior to the start of the rescue and said, “David, I know the blood that runs in your veins. I know that you will not let even death, if it be necessary, stop you from saving these people.”<sup>87</sup> According to David P. Kimball’s descendents, his actions in aiding the stranded emigrants, including assisting at the Sweetwater, evidenced his determination to follow the prophet even if it cost him his life. They feel that it was David’s effort to follow counsel that led to Brigham Young’s statement, although it cannot be determined whether the statement referred to immortality, eternal life, was an expression of gratitude, or whether Young had something else in mind.

While much of the focus on Brigham Young’s reaction to the rescue has naturally been on the statement promising exaltation, Solomon Kimball reported that it was not the only comment the Mormon prophet made regarding the rescuers at the Sweetwater. In 1908 Solomon Kimball first wrote about the Sweetwater crossing in a little noted article entitled “Our Pioneer Boys.” He described the rescue in much the same terms as he did in 1914 but included a different promise which has come true: “When

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85. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:7, July 3, 1859.

86. Other scriptures discussing the need to endure to the end include Matt. 10:22; Matt. 24:13; 1 Ne. 13:37; 2 Ne. 9:24; 2 Ne. 31:18–20; 3 Ne. 15:9; 3 Ne. 27:16–17; D&C 10:67–69; D&C 14:7; D&C 18:22; D&C 20:25, 29; and D&C 50:5.

87. Marva Jeanne Kimball Pedersen, *Crozier Kimball: His Life and Works* (Salt Lake City: Crozier Kimball Family, 1995), 7.

President Brigham Young heard of this heroic act, he wept like a child, and declared that this act alone would immortalize them.”<sup>88</sup>

### The Sweetwater Crossing in Perspective

What happened at the Sweetwater was truly inspiring, and the rescuers who braved the frigid water are indeed deserving of praise. But they are not alone in this regard. In truth, the crossing was only one aspect of a massive, heroic rescue effort. For two months the best of human nature was on display as a virtual army of Latter-day Saints from the Salt Lake Valley answered Brigham Young’s call to go to the aid of strangers. The unselfish attitude manifested by the rescuers at the Sweetwater was simply characteristic of the generous and varied assistance given to the Martin Company throughout November 4 and subsequently provided company members until they reached the Salt Lake Valley on November 30. At the same time, similar help was being given to the other emigrant companies stranded on the trail, including the Willie Handcart Company and the Hunt and Hodgetts wagon trains that followed in the wake of the hand-carts, until they reached their Zion.<sup>89</sup>

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88. Solomon F. Kimball, “Our Pioneer Boys,” *Improvement Era* 11 (July 1908): 679. The entire section on the rescue (pages 678–79) states:

During the fall and winter of 1856, many of the “Minute Men” passed through hardships that few persons could have endured. This was the hand-cart season, when so many emigrants perished from cold and hunger. The last hand-cart company that season, numbering about six hundred, were rescued by a party of these young heroes on the Sweetwater, near where it flows through Devil’s Gate, Wyoming. Nearly one-third of these pilgrims died before reaching Salt Lake valley. Three of our brave young men, under twenty years of age, carried on their backs upwards of five hundred of these freezing people across the Sweetwater river, breaking the ice before them as they waded from shore to shore. At that time they contracted colds that finally terminated in their deaths. When President Brigham Young heard of this heroic act, he wept like a child, and declared that this act alone would immortalize them. Their names are George W. Grant, C. Allen Huntington, and David P. Kimball.

89. Prior to reaching the Martin Company, the rescuers encountered the Willie Company east of Rocky Ridge. Daniel W. Jones noted of that experience: “On arriving we found them in a condition that would stir the feelings of the hardest heart. They were in a poor place, the storm having caught them where fuel was scarce. They were out of provisions and really freezing and starving to death. . . . We did all we could to relieve them. The boys struck out on horseback

Given the extent of the succor provided the snowbound emigrants, it is not surprising that while Patience Loader Archer was grateful for the help she received at the Sweetwater, she chose to direct her praise to all the relief party, not just those at the river: "What brave men they must have been to start out from Salt L City in the middle of winter in search of us poor folks," she wrote, for "when they left the city they did not know how far they would have to travel in the snow before they would find us."<sup>90</sup>

Archer's sentiments were echoed by fellow Martin Company member John Jaques in his final installment article for the *Salt Lake Herald*. In addition to those who traveled out to help the emigrants, he also noted those whose assistance occurred at Salt Lake, either by donating items such as food, clothing, and wagons to supply the relief companies prior to the rescue, or later by opening their homes to the emigrants following it:

A most commendable spirit of liberality was manifested by the residents of this valley, not only in hospitable and kindly attention to the emigrants after their arrival here, but in making donations of provisions and clothing and in sending hundreds of wagons, with horse, mule, and ox teams, to the relief of the snowed-up and winter-bound company.

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and dragged up a lot of wood; provisions were distributed and all went to work to cheer the sufferers. Soon there was an improvement in camp." Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians*, 64.

90. Archer, *Reminiscences*, 187. Daniel W. Jones noted that among the rescuers in his group

there was some expectation of meeting the first train, Brother Willie's, on or about Green river. We began to feel great anxiety about the emigrants as the weather was now cold and stormy, and we, strong men with good outfits, found the nights severe. . . . Our hearts began to ache when we reached Green river and yet no word of them. . . .

At the South Pass, we encountered a severe snow-storm. After crossing the divide we turned down into a sheltered place on the Sweetwater. While in camp and during the snow-storm two men were seen on horseback going west. . . . On reaching us they proved to be Brothers Willie and J. B. Elder. They reported their company in a starving condition at their camp then east of Rocky Ridge. . . . We started immediately through the storm to reach Brother Willie's camp. (Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians*, 63-64)

The *New York Herald* later reported that the rescuers who left the valley pushed on, despite the weather, while others turned back: "Gov. Brigham Young . . . dispatched some men and provisions to their relief; but these were met by the mail party returning to the city again, having been turned back by the violence of the storms they encountered." "News from the Plains," *New York Herald*, January 22, 1857, 2.

Too much can hardly be said of the self-denying exposure, privations, and labors of those who went with the teams from this city to help the emigrants along. Everybody who went out to meet the company, or who contributed anything to relieve it, might pardonably wish his or her name inserted herein to that effect. But if so, and if I and you were anxious to accommodate all such, how could I find the time or you the space for this friendly detailed acknowledgment.<sup>91</sup>

Even as these handcart pioneers directed their praise towards all those who came to their aid, the other aspects of the rescue began to take a back seat to the river crossing. As the emphasis began to narrowly focus on three men at the Sweetwater, some frustration was manifested by individuals whose contributions were increasingly being overlooked.

Although Daniel W. Jones did not address the issue specifically in his autobiography, he likely was referring to the attention Kimball, Grant, and Huntington were receiving when he wrote: “We did all we possibly could to help and cheer the people. Some writers have endeavored to make individual heroes of some of our company. I have no remembrance of any one shirking his duty. Each and everyone did all they possibly could and justice would give to each his due credit.”<sup>92</sup>

Members of the Martin Company echoed Jones’s assessment. They reported that the assistance the relief party provided at the Sweetwater was only one aspect of the needed help they received throughout the day on November 4.

Heber McBride recalled that the young men from the valley were “workers”: “As they were hearty and strong they took upon themselves to [do] all the work about Camp.” Regarding the help they provided his widowed mother and his siblings he wrote, “The men came and took the tent down and fixed our load on our cart.” McBride was likewise moved by the fact that as the company undertook the day’s journey, boys from the valley “went ahead and broake the road,” thus making the path easier for the majority of the company that still had to walk.<sup>93</sup>

The Sweetwater was not the only body of water the emigrants had to cross that day. Shortly after leaving Devil’s Gate and prior to reaching the Sweetwater, the company had to cross a small stream. With the memory of the Platte River crossing fresh in her mind, Patience Loader Archer found it difficult to hold back her emotions and was grateful for the help

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91. Jaques, “Some Reminiscences,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, January 19, 1879, 1.

92. Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians*, 70.

93. McBride to Ririe, 1923.



she received at the stream and for the rescuers' promise of future help at the river:

As we started out from camp there was quite a number of the brethren from the valley standing in readiness to help us across the stream of water with our cart I was feeling somewhat bad that morning and when I saw this Stream of water we had to go through I felt weak and I could not Keep my tears back I felt ashamed to let those brethren see me shedding tears I pulled my old bonnet over my face as they should not See my tears one brother took the cart and another helped us girls over the water and Said we should not wade the cold water any more and tried to encourage us.<sup>94</sup>

Once the handcart pioneers reached the cove where they were to camp for the night, a great amount of work still needed to be done. Wood had to be gathered, fires built, meals provided, and tents pitched. The rescuers took as much of the burden of these vital needs as possible, with much of this responsibility falling upon those who had taken the weaker members of the company in wagons. Heber McBride recalled that at the cove "the men from Salt Lake would clean off the snow and pitch the tents and get wood for all the families that had lost their Father and then they would help the rest what they could."<sup>95</sup> Concerning the reunion with his mother who had preceded him to the cove, McBride wrote, "We went into a cove in the mountain and got out of the wind and when we got there the tent was up and Mother and Mrs. [Mary Ann] Barton [were] sitting by a good fire." McBride further noted that the rescuers "put the tents up and got wood and took care of Mother [who was very ill] and the 3 little ones."<sup>96</sup>

Harvey Cluff, one of the rescuers with the Martin Company, would later modestly write:

Every possible assistance from the boys from Utah was freely given. And these young hardy men from the Rockies were a mighty force and power in the salvation of that people. . . . In this instance [carrying pioneers across the river], as in many others, the value of the boys from Zion was a great help to the weary Saints. Camp was made, tents set, supper over and the people retired for the night.<sup>97</sup>

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94. Archer, *Reminiscences*, 182.

95. Heber Robert McBride, *Autobiography*, photocopy of typescript, 14, Church Archives.

96. McBride to Ririe, 1923. Like Margaret McBride, Mary Ann Barton had also been widowed during the journey.

97. Cluff, "Harvey Cluff's Account of the Rescue," 235–36.

Except for the Sweetwater crossing, the story of the day's travel would be repeated with only slight variation until the company reached Salt Lake City three weeks later. The aid offered took diverse forms and occurred at various places but undoubtedly contributed to the significant decrease in the number of deaths that occurred among members of the handcart company after the rescuers reached them.

In the final analysis, the Sweetwater crossing needs to be understood in perspective. It is not *the* rescue story, but *a* story of the rescue effort. While the story of the rescue extends far beyond the crossing, that aspect has taken on a life of its own in part because of how it has been romanticized and in part because it also fills a human need to attach names and faces to events.

The scores who answered the call to help the emigrants in the Willie, Martin, Hunt and Hodgetts companies all did so at the peril of their lives, not just those who were at the Sweetwater. Prior to the crossing the rescuers were exposed to conditions similar to those that trapped the handcart pioneers. For those rescuers with the Martin Company, there was still more than three weeks' exposure to snow, cold, and wind after the crossing and before they reached the Salt Lake Valley, and for those with the Hunt and Hodgetts companies, the exposure was even longer. The cumulative effect of this prolonged exposure to cold took its toll—even on rescuers who did not ferry people across the icy waters of the Sweetwater. It is not surprising that as the Sweetwater crossing increasingly became *the* rescue story, the history of individuals who suffered ill health as a result of going to the aid of the stranded pioneers became tied to that crossing.<sup>98</sup>

What transpired at the Sweetwater should not be discounted, but neither should the contributions made by all the Latter-day Saints who came to the aid of the stranded pioneer companies be overlooked. Many

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98. One such man was Leonard Rice, who died in September 1886 at the age of fifty-seven. Family tradition ties him to the icy waters of the Sweetwater because of later physical problems, although his assistance was rendered to the company to the west of Rocky Ridge. Arrested in 1886 for being a polygamist, he reportedly was taken from his home in Farmington, Utah, to Salt Lake City in an open buggy during a rainstorm. During the journey he caught a severe cold which got worse during his brief confinement in the penitentiary. "Twelve days after his arrest, on September 12, 1886, he died at his home in Farmington." His biographer noted: "By that time the cold had settled in his kidneys which had been left in a weakened condition since the day he had caught cold from wading with the stranded emigrants through the ice and mud of the Sweetwater many years before." "Leonard Rice and Lucy," in Carter, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 11:39.

pioneers owe their lives to unnumbered acts of kindness shown them by individuals who today remain largely nameless and faceless. Since most of the stories of the rescue will likely never be known, let the story of the Sweetwater crossing symbolize the many selfless sacrifices forged during a trying time. The identified rescuers at the river should serve as the face of the massive undertaking and be symbolic of the other equally needed and equally heroic assistance provided by hundreds of individuals who freely gave of themselves, most of whom remain anonymous and some of whom may have even carried emigrants across the Sweetwater. Such a position was taken by Orson F. Whitney in his *Life of Heber C. Kimball*. After briefly mentioning the river crossing, he turned his focus upon the entire first group of rescuers. His conclusion is as applicable today as when first written nearly 120 years ago: “These brave men by their heroism—for it was at the peril of their own lives that they thus braved the wintry storms on the plains—immortalized themselves, and won the undying gratitude of hundreds who were undoubtedly saved by their timely action from perishing.”<sup>99</sup>

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99. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 425–26. Along these same lines, Solomon Kimball wrote:

Probably no greater act of heroism was ever recorded in the annals of history than that performed by the twenty-seven young men who, on the morning of October 7, 1856, went from the city of Great Salt Lake to the relief of the 1,550 belated emigrants, who were caught in the early snows of a severe winter, hundreds of miles from human habitation, without food and without shelter. By their indefatigable labors these brave mountain boys were instruments in the hands of the Lord in saving 1,300 of that number. Had it not been for their heroic efforts, not enough emigrants would have been left to tell the dreadful tale. (Kimball, “Belated Emigrants of 1856,” 299)

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