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# The Journey of the James G. Willie Handcart Company

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**BOOK NOTICE**

*The Journey of the James G. Willie Handcart Company*, by Gary Duane Long (Glenwood Springs, Colo.: By the author, 2009)

Author Gary D. Long is uniquely equipped to produce this quality map study of the tragic experience of the Willie Handcart Company as it struggled through Wyoming in October and November 1856. During a long career with the Bureau of Land Management in Wyoming, he has made an extensive study of the famed Oregon and Mormon Trails. Additionally, he has exhaustively examined the Willie experience to include walking over the full length of the Company's route through Wyoming and probing all extant written material (books, articles, journals, church records, and individual reminiscences), with particular emphasis on the day-to-day entries found in the excellent James G. Willie Emigrating Company Journal.

The map study picks up the trail at Fort Laramie and leaves off at Fort Bridger. All forty-six full-page map sheets utilized in the study are color photocopies of United States Geological Survey topographic maps, over which Long has, as exactly as possible, annotated the route taken by the Willie Company. (The book's 8½-inch high, 14-inch wide format nicely accommodates the maps.)

Map scales vary from sheet to sheet to accommodate the page-by-page layout, but a simple scale of miles particular to each sheet is provided. Excellent scenic photographs, most of them in color, accompany the maps. Throughout the book, Long has inserted quotations from the Emigrating Journal and reminiscences by eyewitnesses, to which he has added extremely useful day-by-day synopses.

However, the book is more than that. Over time, inaccuracies have

cropped up in popular accounts of the Willie saga, owing in large part to faulty research, some of it perhaps prompted by apparent ambiguities in the extant record. Long has thoroughly investigated these inaccuracies, and, as indicated by the diplomatic way he has dealt with them, with pure intent. In his own words: "The intense level of public interest in this subject, and tragic loss of so many lives, demands that those of us who choose to tell this story get it right! There is a kind of poetry and elegance to an accurately told story" (v).

The most glaring inaccuracies of which he speaks deal with the Willie Company's experiences between October 19 and 25—the most tragic part of the entire trek. Long argues that the company, after its crossing of the "sixteen-mile drive" between the fifth and sixth crossings of the Sweetwater River (during which the storm struck), encamped at the Sixth Crossing for the nights of October 19, 20, and 21. They recommenced their journey west on the morning of October 22, camped on the north bank of the Sweetwater just below Rocky Ridge on the night of October 22, moved up and over Rocky Ridge on October 23, and camped just below the confluence of Willow Creek and the Sweetwater River from the night of October 23 to the morning of October 25.

There has been much disagreement about these locations. Disagreement regarding the encampment at the Sixth Crossing on the nights of October 19, 20, and 21 is surprising, since extant eyewitness evidence is so clear. Long's findings should forever close that debate. Disagreement regarding the encampment on the nights of October 23 and 24 is likely to continue, however. Near consensus after the fact has been reached in favor of Rock Creek, and the physical site has been well developed and

memorialized. Still, Long makes a convincing argument for the Willow Creek/Sweetwater location, this based on the preponderance of written evidence supported by careful personal reconnaissance of the ground.

Long's study suggests two valuable points regarding historical research and writing generally. First, it is always appropriate to carefully weigh the accounts of eyewitnesses against contrary arguments and conclusions made well after the fact. In the particular case of the Willie Handcart story, absent clear proof to the contrary, the eyewitness accounts on the record are the most convincing. And second, where place plays an important part, painstaking personal reconnaissance of the ground can clarify what written evidence is at hand.

It is in all these respects that I believe Gary Long, in this exceptional study, has made an important contribution. Along with Paul D. Lyman's *The Willie Handcart Company* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2006), we now have two recent and useful map studies of the Willie experience. (The Lyman study differs primarily in that it presents maps, quotations, and commentary of the entire route by sea and land from England to Utah. Content of the Wyoming portion of the trek is similar except for location of the encampment from the night of October 23 to the morning of October 25.) A similarly thorough study of the Martin Handcart Company, which followed Willie by a few days and had even more tragic results, would be welcome.

—Howard A. Christy

BYU Studies is happy to draw the following to your attention and regrets any inconvenience or misunderstanding:

David Paulsen and Martin Pulido, the authors of "A Mother There: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," volume 50, number 1, belatedly thank Benjamin Brown, then BYU undergraduate, for his very significant contributions to this paper, including his drafting of the paper's conclusion and methodology sidebar, and apologize for this oversight.

The review of Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, in volume 50, number 2, on page 181, states: "Skousen suggests that we should not conclude that canonized versions of the Book of Mormon should be revised to reflect this text." He has asked BYU Studies to publish the following clarification: "Skousen does not claim that the authorized text of the Book of Mormon should be revised to reflect the Yale text, nor does he suggest that it should not be. He leaves this to the Brethren."