Recollections of Past Days

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Appendix 4

The Mormon on Handcart Emigration,
December 1, 1855

(Published in New York City)
Hand Carts for the Plains, ———

There has, for several years past, been a desire among some of the Elders and Saints of the Church, to introduce handcarts as a means of conveyance across the plains, for those of limited means. The idea at first excited ridicule, and its advocates were subjected, in many instances, to severe and caustic jokes; as time rolled on, however, like all other new, unpopular and unpalatable theories, the idea gained ground; prejudice gradually gave way, until it has gained sufficient force to present itself calmly and seriously before us, as a feasible and efficient mode of locomotion for many of the hardy and strong Saints to adopt in their transit across the plains to the valleys of the mountains. It has not been without its advocates in Deseret and the States; but especially has it found grace and become a favorite topic among the laboring classes of the English, Welsh, Scotch, German, Danish, and other European Saints. Those who have crossed the plains argue, that as Europeans, as well as many of the Saints in our eastern cities, have never been accustomed to the management of cattle, and as many of the oxen obtained on the frontiers are young, and either poorly broken, or not broken-in at all, and are difficult to be governed by the most competent hands; that, therefore, to those unaccustomed to cattle, there is a great amount of labor, toil, privation, loss of time, breakages, and other annoyances, consequent upon the management or mismanagement of those unruly animals; that the time and labor thus expended could be more usefully and efficiently employed in propelling a hand-cart; and that in the several weeks which are frequently expended in waiting for, and breaking cattle, in repairing breakages, and in other detentions, they would be as many hundred miles on their journey, and with less time, labor and annoyance than is generally experienced by the uninitiated at their outfitting stations. Others argue that it
would be no more labor to perform a day’s work at propelling a hand-cart than it would be to perform many other kinds of manual labor; and that being more in accordance with the habits and pursuits of many of the stalwart laboring classes, it would not be uncongenial, and would be for them a most efficient mode of locomotion. The cheapness of the outfit is also introduced as an important item: thus affording the means of transportation to many, that would otherwise take years, in some instances, to prepare for the journey. The strong desire and urgent solicitations of many of the Saints, in relation to this matter, have finally reached the ears of President Young, who has paid some attention to this matter. In a communication to us he has stated that he would not object to an experiment of this kind being tried, if judiciously arranged, wisely and prudently conducted, and sufficiently guarded against contingencies by the contiguity of ox or other trains, which, in case of trouble, would be sufficiently near to render timely assistance.

Having had this subject frequently urged upon us, at the suggestion of President Young, we have taken the thing seriously into consideration; and being at St. Louis at the time the late missionaries from the valley arrived, and knowing that many of them were men of experience in those matters, we appointed a committee from among them to investigate this subject, give us their opinion as to the feasibility of the enterprise, and if they thought it practicable to give in a report of what they thought would be a necessary outfit; the kind of carts; what amount of provisions, clothing, tents, &c, would be required, together with their weight; what number of cows, and of ox teams would be necessary as auxiliaries, and to give in a report of such a fit-out as any of them would be willing to take the charge of across the plains, giving them to understand that some of them might be chosen to conduct them. The following is the report:

PRESIDENT J. TAYLOR—Dear Sir: the undersigned having been requested, by you, to make an estimate of an outfit, for a hand-cart [line omitted here] able, having had but little time for reflection. Our estimates having been made under these circumstances, may, perhaps, upon trial, be found to be more or less impracticable. We have had some experience in crossing the plains, and on foot; yet we are aware that there is a wide difference between walking across the plains by the side of a team and wagon and drawing the wagon yourself; that is as yet an untried experiment; still, we are of the unanimous opinion that it can be done with much less expense, and comparatively little increase of toil and hardship, than with ox teams, and that with a judicious selection of a pioneer hand-cart company, and careful and proper management of that company through, the ice, as it were, will be broken, and a way opened through which thousands of our brethren, who are not able to furnish themselves with an outfit under the present system of emigration; but who could
nevertheless very readily fit themselves out for this mode, as well as a
great portion of our Perpetual Fund emigration will hereafter move on to
the Valley. We have crossed the plains several times, and with both ox and
horse teams, and are of the opinion that, in addition to travelling, the
labor of driving, herding, guarding, and attending to the teams, together
with the care and anxiety necessarily experienced by every careful team-
ster, is nearly, if not quite equal to the additional labor of pushing or haul-
ing a hand-cart.

We think that four persons of sufficient age and strength to walk
the journey; say two men and two women, and perhaps an infant or two,
would be safe in commencing the journey with the following outfit, to
wit:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Tent</td>
<td>20 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flour</td>
<td>240 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacon</td>
<td>50 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groceries, fruit, &amp;c</td>
<td>30 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedding and clothing</td>
<td>60 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking utensils</td>
<td>15 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun and ammunition</td>
<td>10 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sundries</td>
<td>10 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>435 lbs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One team of three yoke of oxen and wagon to each fifty persons, or
perhaps ten carts, to convey the sick, &c.; one cow to each ten persons, or
say two carts.* [Asterisk in original not annotated or explained.]

This estimate is made upon the supposition that the outfit will be
procured mainly on the Missouri River, near Council Bluffs, and that the
train will be met with supplies from the Valley, at the last crossing of the
Platte, or at farthest, at Devil’s Gate. In addition to the team above-men-
tioned, individuals having but little means may club together, if it should
be thought advisable, and fit out an additional team and wagon, in which
they may transport any additional freight or lighten their hand-carts at
pleasure.

The hand-carts should, we think, be sufficiently narrow to run within
the tracks of common wagons, to avoid the ruts. The hub should be six
inches long and five inches in diameter with two and one and a quarter
inch boxes; the wheel at least four and a half feet across, the rim of good
hickory, bent, not more than one and an eighth inch deep and seven-
eights or one inch wide. A broad, thin rim, although it would move over
the sand and mud with considerable more ease than a narrow one, yet it
would, we think, be very likely to split, inasmuch as it would project con-
siderably beyond the spoke on each side; and if it was sufficiently thick to
prevent splitting, it would be much too heavy, and when it dropped into
ruts, as it must unavoidably do, it would require heavy lifting and pulling
to extricate it. On the other hand, if the narrow rim is used, it should be
as narrow as practicable, that it may meet with as little resistance as pos-
sible. The axle tree should be hickory, two by three or three and a half
inches; the bed about fifty-four by thirty-two inches, of quarter inch stuff,
with three bows to support the cover, as low as possible, to avoid gather-
ing wind.

A. Calkin,
J. Lavander,
J. S. Scofield,
William Allen,
H. Bowley,
C. Klineman,
C. Christianson.

The above report we should think to be generally correct, and will
be adopted as a test, with perhaps some little variations in the details.
While at St. Louis we had the first hand-cart made for emigration purposes;
it was light and strong; its weight probably not more than sixty or seventy
pounds; some little alterations were suggested, and another one ordered
as a pattern. The wood of which it was made was well seasoned and tough,
and the workmanship of the best kind. The wheels have light iron bands,
which are thought to be cheaper and safer than any other kind, whilst
their weight would not be much, as they are only about one and one-
eighth of an inch wide and one-eighth of an inch thick. The cart was very
much admired by the brethren, many of whom anticipated the pleasure
of going westward with the first “Telegraphic Hand-Cart Express.”

In regard to the feasibility of the enterprise, men, of course, dif-
fer in their opinions, and we must confess that on its first introduction
our prejudices were strong against it; we thought it looked too much like
hard work for men to perform labor that has hitherto only been consid-
ered proper for beasts of draught and burden; but like many others with
whom we have conversed on this subject, the more we investigate it the
more are we satisfied of its practicability. Our reasons are brief, as follows:
So far as men are concerned, we, upon reflection, are led to believe that
they perform as hard labor in breaking cattle and making them way-wise,
in hunting them up and yoking them in a morning, in travelling all day
and driving team, in driving them from one to four miles to grass of an
evening, and in guarding them, as they would have to perform in pulling
or pushing a hand-cart, with out all these other extra duties, which are
frequently very vexations and annoying, particularly to the uninitiated;
several of the Elders and friends with whom we have conversed on the
subject, who have conducted companies across the plains, say, that for the man, the hand-cart system would, in their opinion, be lighter labor than that of driving and taking care of cattle to those unacquainted with it; again, in regard to big boys and girls and frequently women, when their teams are light and loads heavy, they have in hundreds of instances walked nearly all the distance.

We do not here, however, present ourselves as its advocate; we mention the foregoing merely to show its possibility or practicability. We would not recommend them to those who have means to carry them in a more comfortable manner. We do not recognize anything very brilliant in dragging a hand-cart, and landing among strangers, brethren though they be, with the very limited amount of clothing and other absolute necessaries for the journey; but we think we discover in it barely a means of transit for thousands of limited means, many of whom have been, and are likely to be, detained for years from accomplishing a journey which is to them of the first importance, if they have to fit out in the ordinary manner. We discover also another thing, in the present mode of transit; men have frequently to obtain aid from their friends to assist them in their outfits, which to a high-minded, sensitive, though poor man, is very painful; but in this case they aid themselves by their own right arm; they depend on their own resources; they spend not another’s wealth, but their own nerve and muscle; they are delivered from the humiliation of obligation, and are free as the antelope or buffalo that rove the plains.

With the above consideration, therefore, we are willing to make a test of this matter; but it must be done wisely, prudently, and judiciously, and be under the strictest regulation. We consider ourselves responsible for the proper carrying out of this enterprise; and whilst we are willing to counsel and assist the brethren who may desire to engage in it, we cannot admit of any irregularity. Men of experience and ability will be appointed to direct, and brethren will be expected to be subject to their counsel in all things. We do not consider it wisdom for every one to make or to obtain their own carts; they must be made of well-seasoned, tough timber, and by experienced hands, otherwise they will give way on the plains, and leave their projectors, as well as the company, in a very painful position. To prevent these break-downs and consequent disasters, we shall appoint proper persons to make them, as well as to superintend the outfit; and no person will be allowed to take more, and every person will be required to take as much as prescribed in the above bill, subject, of course to some little alterations as above referred to.

The amount of weight for one cart is estimated at 435 pounds “for four adults and one or two infants.” There should not be more than one infant to a cart; but it will be observed, that to every ten carts there will be three yokes of cattle and one wagon. The 435 pounds might be made to
450 pounds, and that addition made up in bedding or clothing, and then
the wagon would carry 150 pounds from each cart leaving 300 pounds
as the net weight to be drawn, and leaving also the weight of 500 pounds
unoccupied in the ox-wagon for the weak, sick or lame, in case of con-
tingency. There is another important consideration, which is, that every
day the load becomes lighter by the consumption of food, so that at the
end of sixty days the weight would be lessened by about two hundred and
forty pounds of provision from each cart; and about this time the com-
pany would be met by the teams coming to meet them from the valley. As
a precautionary measure also, we shall have an ox-train immediately fol-
lowing the hand-cart train, to assist in case of an unforeseen contingency
requiring aid.

It will be seen by the above, that these estimates are for a hand-cart
company; but, if persons going by this company should wish other things
taken, and have the means, they can either unite together and purchase
an ox-team, or hire their luggage carried. They must not take more than
the above in this company; neither is it understood that this will at all
interfere with our former mode of emigration, which will go on as usual.
We do not wish to cramp men, but to open a wider field, and afford facili-
ties for emigration to a large class that have hitherto been deprived of the
means of moving. We say to all Saints, go, if you can take clothing, mer-
chandize, machinery, tools, books, scientific apparatus, musical instru-
m ents, gold, silver, precious stones, or any thing valuable, beautiful and
useful for science, literature, the arts, or to ornament Zion, and can fur-
nish teams to haul it—take it along; but if you have these things, and not
means, dispose of them; you cannot take them with this company.

As we before stated, there is nothing very pleasing nor inviting about
this journey; but we think, after all, it is better to go there among friends,
poor, than to endure the buffetings of a cold, heartless world, in poverty.
There are thousands of brethren there who have not only the means, but
souls, who have passed through every kind of affliction, and know how
to sympathize with others; and when they hear of a company or compa-
nies going in hand-carts, will come out to meet them, with teams and
provisions, one-third of the way. The committee who made the foregoing
report knew this, and based their calculations on it; and, furthermore,
although the companies will be comparatively destitute when they arrive
at the Valley, they may as well be poor there as here, and can as easily
obtain supplies; if goods are high, so is labor, which equalizes matters.
Again, we have bishops there, whose office is not a mitred sinecure, but
whose business it is to look after and provide for the wants of the people,
and who, previous to, or on their arrival, will make provisions among the
various wards for houses, labor, &c.; so that the Saints, on their arrival,
will find a home; and if not elegant or sumptuous, they will be welcome,
and they will find themselves among brethren who are always ready to lend a helping hand to the honest, industrious, and virtuous.

Upon carefully reviewing the whole subject, therefore, and putting it to ourselves, although we should greatly prefer a carriage, or even an ox team, to that of a hand-cart, yet, if our family was here, and the alternative placed before us, of carrying the hod, wheeling and digging dirt, working on the highways, quarrying rock, digging, coal mining, and performing many other kinds of drudgery which many of our brethren are engaged in here, to obtain an outfit, we should say *give us the hand-cart.*