Pulling toward Zion

Young Calls Flock to Travel to Mountain Home by Handcart

1850–1856

President Millard Fillmore’s first appointees to the new Territory of Utah were, bluntly speaking, a disaster. Despite his support and sympathy for the Mormons, the nation’s chief executive managed to select men remarkably unfit for important territorial positions; the situation did not improve with time. It was said Fillmore had once thought of appointing Utahns to the posts, but the pressures of patronage shouldered that possibility aside. He did, however, appoint Brigham Young as Utah’s first governor. The territorial legislature gratefully named its capital city Fillmore, county of Millard, in the president’s honor.

First to arrive in the territory was its new Chief Justice Lemuel G. Brandebury, a colorless man with no strong personal convictions. Then came Broughton D. Harris and his wife. He was a twenty-seven-year-old easterner who took his appointment as territorial secretary seriously, so much so he developed a wilfulness that infuriated Brigham Young. Harris brought with him $24,000 in gold earmarked as government operating funds, but he refused to heed the governor’s instructions and withheld monies in a feud with Young over procedures. The legislature had completed a territorial census, but because it was not done with the proper bureaucratic paperwork in the presence of Harris (neither the forms nor Harris were available at the time), the secretary insisted on a new census, a demand Young rejected out of hand.

A third appointee, Associate Justice Perry S. Brocchus, was patronizing, pompous, and windy. Invited to speak to the citizenry on the subject of supplying a Utah marble block for the Washington Monument, Brocchus discoursed on patriotism for two hours to a restless audience. He was intoxicated by his own eloquence and, having noticed an unusually large number of women in attendance, turned to a mention of polygamy and the importance of virtue. He expressed a hope that the “sweet ladies of the congregation would become virtuous.” Instead of applause, he found himself suddenly in imminent peril of an unpleasant death at the hands of an incensed throng. He later said he feared the people would “spring on me like hyenas and destroy me.” Brigham Young stood to calm the tempest and in doing so unburdened himself of a few recent aggravations by scorching Brocchus. He accused Brocchus of excessive political ambition, profligate debauchery, and lechery and measured him as “one of those corrupt fellows” for sale by the handful. (Young later would remark he could have loosed the women of the congregation on Brocchus by “crooking his little finger.”)

Ashen, Brocchus informed Brandebury and Harris that he intended to return to Washington as
soon as possible. Good idea, they would do likewise. Harris informed a fuming Brigham Young that he was taking the $24,000 back with him, leaving the governor free to argue the point with the secretary of the treasury. The trio, joined by another appointee, Indian sub-agent Henry Day, departed Utah and for a time became a cause célèbre in the national press. In the years to come, however, the incident of the “runaway officials” would be pointed to as an example of Utah’s rebellious nature.

Back in the territory, Brigham Young had other problems; his efforts to suppress slave trading among the tribes had precipitated an Indian war. Walker, or Walkara, war chief of the Utes, took to raiding outlying settlements in 1853 before peace was restored. Then, late in the fall, a wagon train bound for California became involved in an incident with some Pahvant Utes near Fillmore. Several Indian men were wounded, and one, the father of their war chief, died. Some weeks later, a war party, vowing vengeance on whites, moved toward the Sevier River—where Captain John W. Gunnison and his Pacific Railroad surveying expedition had camped. The Pahvants ambushed the government party, massacring Gunnison and seven others, among them their Mormon guide.

Persistent rumors that Brigham Young was somehow implicated in Gunnison’s murder would prove groundless. Chief accuser was Judge William Wormer Drummond, appointed by President Franklin Pierce to replace Leonidas Shaver, who died in Great Salt Lake City in June 1855 of an inflammation of the inner ear (compounded by the jurist’s use of opium). Shaver had succeeded Brocchus, the “runaway,” as associate justice of the Territorial Supreme Court of Utah. Drummond was one of a batch of Pierce appointees, as was Lieutenant Colonel Edward Jenner Steptoe, who was ordered to Utah to arrest and punish the murderers of Captain Gunnison and also to be military governor replacing Young. But Steptoe, a career army officer, could see no
advantage to being subjected to the whim of Washington politicians. He declined the honor and recommended Brigham Young's reappointment. It was an unexpected answer, but Steptoe's endorsement with other powerful Utahns urging Young be renamed gave Pierce reason to allow Young to stay in office.

His choices for the territorial court, however, proved a mixed bag, indeed. Pierce appointed John F. Kinney as chief justice, with Drummond and George P. Stiles as associate justices. Kinney was an Iowan with experience. Drummond—a hypocrite, liar, adulterer, gambler, bully, and horse trader—was also ruthlessly ambitious. He would figure prominently in scandals to come. Stiles was a wavering Mormon from Nauvoo.

The situation with the judiciary was especially delicate because of the Mormon Church’s decision in September 1852 to publicly acknowledge its doctrine of “a plurality of wives.” This thunderbolt from the pulpit was embarrassing to many of the church’s missionaries, who had not been forewarned and still were denying its existence. The shock wave of excommunications for apostacy because of the proclamation was swift in coming. Mormon critics found renewed ammunition for their tirades, and the bitterness of the national press was typified by the New York Mirror’s denouncement of Mormonism as “an immoral excrescence.” The New York Herald, the New York Sun, and the New York Tribune joined its outrage in print. Brigham Young countered with editorials in
the church-owned Deseret News, the St. Louis Luminary in Missouri, the Mormon in New York, and, in San Francisco, the Western Standard. That there was no law against polygamy only enraged critics who called it to one of the “twin relics of barbarism,” the other being slavery.

While this turmoil was festering, it was time for Brigham Young to push ahead with another “noble experiment,” one he had been mulling since the Saints took root in the Great Salt Lake Valley— he spoke of immigration by handcart. Young had alluded to the plan in 1851 in a general epistle on the subject of “Gathering to Zion.” He stated then, in part, “you have been expecting the time would come when you could journey across the mountains in your fine carriages, your good wagons, and have all the comforts of life that heart could wish; but your expectations are vain, and if you wait for those things you will never come . . . . Some of the Saints now in our midst, came hither with wagons or carts made of wood, without a particle of iron, hooping their wheels with hickory, or rawhide, or ropes, and had as good and safe a journey as any in the camps . . . and can you not do the same?”

Young now was asking for the “gathering” to begin in earnest, for converts in the East, in Europe, and elsewhere to pack up and set out for Great Salt Lake Valley—their Zion in the mountains. On October 31, 1855, he made his case for handcarts: “We are sanguine that such a train will out-travel any ox train that can be started. They should have a few good cows to furnish milk, and a few beef cattle to drive and butcher as they may need. In this way the expense, risk, loss and perplexity of teams will be obviated, and the saints will more effectually escape the scenes of distress, anguish and death which have often laid so many of our brethren and sisters in the dust.” The “expense” and “perplexity of teams” may have been nullified, but even Brigham Young’s confident assurances couldn’t mask the fact that distress, anguish, and death were realities handcart companies would face on the trail.

Iowa was to be the terminus, the jumping-off place where immigrants would be issued handcarts. It was summer 1856. The first two companies—led by Edmund Ellsworth (266 people, 52 handcarts) and Daniel D. McArthur
(220 people, 44 handcarts)—left on June 9 and 11, respectively. A third, smaller company, led by Edward Bunker, left Iowa City on June 23. After the expected rigors of such an overland journey the Ellsworth-McArthur companies reached Great Salt Lake City on September 26; the Bunker party pulled in six days later. But the handcart experiment was far from an unqualified success. There were two other companies that fall and their thirteen-hundred-mile trek would become an ordeal hauntingly paralleling the debacle ten years earlier when the Donner-Reed wagon train was caught by winter.

James G. Willie and Edward Martin captained the remaining companies of 1856. In all, 980 immigrants were in their care. Willie’s mob of Liverpool Saints was ready to leave on June 26. But their tents and handcarts were not finished; the crushing demand brought a great sacrifice in quality. The already frail structures now were fashioned of green unseasoned wood; the wheels went without metal tire bands. Compounding this problem, Martin’s company had a “disproportionate number of women, children, aged and feeble emigrants,” Franklin D. Richards, who passed them on the trail, would recall.

Willie’s group trundled across Iowa to Winter Quarters (since renamed Florence), Nebraska, in twenty-six days. They debated whether to continue so late in the season and risk mountain storms or spend the winter in Florence. A majority of the elders in charge decided the issue: Onward to Great Salt Lake Valley! Departing August 19, Willie’s company made 265 miles by September 5, but lost thirty head of cattle along the way. The immigrants, city dwellers mostly, had no interest in herding animals; they were occupied pulling handcarts. At Platte River they experienced the first severe frost. It would get worse.

By September 30, they reached Fort Laramie—still five hundred miles from their destination. Now the food supply, already meager, was rationed. Barely enough to sustain life. At Willow Creek on the Sweetwater River just east of South Pass, fierce storms caught the handcarts and swept them into drifts. Dysentery broke out in the camp, frostbite was common, and death a constant companion. Fifteen perished in the days before the Willow Creek camp, and expectations of a relief train from Great Salt Lake buoyed spirits briefly, but the howling storms smothered hope that help would reach them in time.

Each morning the immigrants crawled from their tents, numb, exhausted, unable to properly feed themselves, faced with the realization of making miles. The camp was a disaster of disease and pain; dysentery reduced the handcarters to apparitions. As they steadily weakened, John Chislett, one of the company, was later to confide, “Life went out as smoothly as a lamp ceases to burn when the oil is gone. At first the deaths occurred slowly and irregularly, but in a few days at more frequent intervals, until we soon thought it unusual to leave a camp without burying one or more persons.” Many a father pulled his cart with his little children on it until he died, Chislett said.

Captain Willie and another started out alone to find help, before all in the camp went under. He stumbled on the relief train a few miles distant, and returned with fourteen wagons. Eight wagons remained with the Willie company and six pressed on to Martin’s handcarts stranded farther back. Once over South Pass and descending into Green River Valley, the weather moderated such that many of the frozen and disabled could be carried in wagons. Willie’s company arrived in Great Salt Lake City on November 9—the total number of deaths seventy-seven.

Martin’s company fared even worse. With a larger number of women and children and many aged and feeble, coupled with the delayed start and poorly made handcarts, they could not overcome two-foot snowdrifts and ice. Children who tried to ride in the carts only caused them to break down more readily. Martin and his company reached Green River by November 21 and by the 28th made it to the Weber River. Two days later they struggled into Great Salt Lake City.

Chislett said of Martin’s company that of six hundred who started, more than one-quarter perished. One hundred and fifty deaths. “Their campground [on the North Platte] became a veritable graveyard before they left,” Chislett wrote. That number plus Willie’s death toll, brought the total to 227, not counting other casualties. For years, frostbite survivors without feet, toes, or fingers could be seen in the territory—many crippled for life, Chislett said. But the handcart experiment was not abandoned. A company traveled east
from Utah in April 1857, two smaller parties jour­neyed to the valley from the States that summer, still another company trekked to Utah in 1859, and two made the westward trip in 1860—that was the last use of that method of travel.

And so it was that handcart pioneers added their strength, spirit, and indomitable will to Utah's legacy in its struggle for statehood.