

A Dilemma of Faith Resulting from the Crucible of Tragedy:

The Less Told Story of the Struggles of Faith of Members of the Willie and Martin Handcart  
Companies.

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The stories of pioneers and overland travel during the period of westward expansion are frequently rife with trials, determination, and eventual success. Many pioneers believed in Manifest Destiny—that it was “Gods will” for them to resettle in the West and spread American values and culture across the continent. As historian William G. Hartley notes approximately 350,000 trail emigrants crossed the plains to California or Oregon, mostly in wagons. Among those travelers were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, hereafter called Latter-day Saints or the LDS Church, where about 70,000 emigrants traveled to Utah. Members of the LDS Church were often persecuted and driven from city to city and from state to state. Eventually, after their founder, Joseph Smith, was killed, their new prophet, Brigham Young, led them across the plains to establish a new home called Salt Lake City where all Latter-day Saints could be gathered to “Zion.” Approximately 3,000 Latter-day Saints made the journey between 1856 and 1860 using handcarts. This small group comprised less than five percent of all Latter-day Saint emigrants, and these men, women, and children are the subject of this essay.<sup>1</sup>

Although handcarts were rarely used, the tragedy of the Willie Handcart Company and Martin Handcart Company in 1856 are one of the most popular stories told among Latter-day Saints. Although two separate companies, the Willie and Martin companies departed westward close together, and their experiences often overlapped. The stories of these companies and how they fit into westward expansion and Manifest Destiny is unique. Despite the efforts made by the LDS Church and handcart system leaders, not all travelers made it across the plains to their “Salt Lake Zion” with their faith intact, resulting in departures from their handcart groups and Salt Lake. An important question addressed in this essay is whether these people lost their faith in God and the LDS Church, which resulted in them not finishing their journey, or if they simply lost their will to continue such an arduous journey but still maintained their faith. Unfortunately,

the documentary evidence is scant, which makes it hard to determine if their exit resulted from a lack of faith or a lack of will.

The journey was, to say the least, difficult. One member of the Martin Handcart Company John Jaques described the rough terrain, the summer heat, the freezing winters, the lack of provisions, and the disease and death that the pioneers endured. They suffered “through the roasting heats of July and August,” he wrote, “with insufficient food, ...scanty clothing and bedding and worn out shoes, at great altitudes, in a climate of exceptional severity, in an unusually early and piercingly sharp winter ... and with the members of the company decimated by disease and death ..., until a sufficiency of relief wagons was met, so that all could ride and none need longer walk.”<sup>2</sup>

His moving description provides much needed context to the plight the Latter-day Saints faced as they crossed the plains. Their experience was not like the other handcart company’s experiences, which is why it deserves greater consideration.

Joseph Smith founded the LDS Church in 1830, and it quickly grew throughout the United States and later Europe. By the mid-1800s, droves of converts were emigrating to join the “Saints” in Utah. With fruitful missionary efforts in Great Britain converts emigrated en masse, often spending most or all they had on ocean passage from Liverpool. Because many emigrants were poor when they arrived, the traditional ox-and-wagon travel method was not economical. A new and cheaper method was needed, which is how the handcart program was created. Don H. Smith stated that, “the goal of the handcart plan was to bring out, at minimum expense” members of the church in Britain, as well as the poor and infirm members in the Eastern states to their “Salt Lake Zion”.<sup>3</sup>

According to Smith, although Latter-day Saints were not the first to invent or use handcarts, “the idea for the handcart system originated with Brigham Young, but the primary responsibility for its execution was placed on the shoulders of Elders John Taylor in New York, Orson Spencer in St. Louis, and Franklin D. Richards in Liverpool.”<sup>4</sup> Handcarts were cheaper because they required less material and were operated by the person pushing, rather than oxen pulling. However, wagons offered significantly more shelter from the elements and were often sturdier, even though they were costly and time consuming to manufacture. To aid recently emigrated converts in their travel to Salt Lake City, the LDS Church set up a structure whereby members and leaders could donate to a general fund called the Perpetual Emigrating Fund (PEF). These funds subsidized the handcart system, and poor emigrants were encouraged to use it because it was cheaper than ox and wagon teams.<sup>5</sup> Travelers would then use the handcarts and needed supplies for the trek on loan, then signed a contract upon arrival in Salt Lake City to pay the full cost of their emigration. Despite the aid provided to the emigrants, James Loynd of the Willie Company noted that the poorest of these travelers had to choose upon their arrival whether they would travel with the handcart companies, regardless of the season, or remain where they were and possibly starve to death.<sup>6</sup> Many Latter-day Saints had a bitter choice to make when deciding whether to press forward across the plains on a dangerous journey where they may lose their lives, or to stay and possibly starve to death while they waited to travel the following year. Many chose to risk crossing.

Pioneer Margaret Bennett hinted at one of the major issues that eventually beleaguered the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies, her group’s late start across the plains.<sup>7</sup> Their journey started well, despite unexpected stops and delays. They sailed from Liverpool to New York, then traveled to Iowa City before even beginning their trek through the wilderness. The

first three companies all departed in June from Iowa City—and arrived by October 2, 1856, suffering only 27 deaths among their nearly 800 members between the three companies.<sup>8</sup> The problems with the handcart system, how it was organized, and how carts were supplied only then began to manifest themselves. Members of the two later companies encountered delays before they even left England as well as after they arrived. Josiah Rogerson of the Martin Company mentioned in his personal writings that his company was delayed in commencing their trek after they arrived at the handcart location to construct carts. Even more significant was that this came after delays in Britain due to “the difficulty of obtaining emigrant ships at Liverpool”, where he cited that he had been informed that “ships are very scarce, indeed, on account of a great number employed in the war department.”<sup>9</sup> Margaret Bennett of the Willie Company noted that “the hand carts were frail, the material being too green, they kept breaking so that only a few miles could be made a day,”<sup>10</sup> as well as upon arrival “they waited for handcarts to be made up. This delayed the company considerably, in fact, fall was upon them before they were ready.”<sup>11</sup> These delays often fatal for members of these companies, as later starts directly resulted in exposure to winter conditions in the latest stages of their journeys, when many were the most frail or ill.

Even with the increased risks associated with weather, the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies departed Iowa City July 15<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> respectively. Some company assistant leaders expressed concern about the lateness of their departure. Despite the frontier experiences that both James Willie and Edward Martin had, they still chose to press forward. Levi Savage, another experienced frontiersman and assistant leader who had crossed the plains on multiple occasions, expressed warning when given the opportunity to speak in a camp meeting. James Sherlock Cantwell of the Willie Company noted in his autobiography that:

Levi Savage spoke against starting on so long a Journey at that late season of year. He said the company was not clothed or shod to face the mountain storms and they would freeze and suffer death, many of them. He said he knew what the country was in winter as he was well acquainted with the climate of the mountains. At the conclusion of his discourse, James G. Willie denounced him as a recreant to the cause of truth and a disturber of the peace of the brethren and an opposer of those who were placed over him and called upon him to repent. James G. Willie was filled with the spirit of enthusiasm and had a zeal for God but not according to knowledge. Levi Savage still maintained that he firmly believed all he had said, but said he was ready to go if the authority here said so; and if he lost his life in the journey it was all right.<sup>12</sup>

Savage's concerns were legitimate and were shared by many of the travelers. Yet, even some of the experienced leaders relied more on their faith and zeal for their cause, than the knowledge often gained through difficult experience. Savage's words would prove to be prophetic, when over fifty of his fellow members of the Willie Handcart company perished before arriving in the Salt Lake valley.

Nevertheless, the Latter-day Saints pressed on, despite the delays and concerns from leaders. As the weather eventually and expectedly turned harsh, rescue and, relief, were needed for the companies to make it to their "Salt Lake Zion." Some Latter-day Saints cited personal ingenuity in trading and reported miraculous assistance that helped them along the road to "Zion". Adolph Reeder mentioned his family, as well as others, who traded goods and personal objects for items and food needed to survive.<sup>13</sup> John Jaques of the Martin Company documented the revived spirits, cheerful hearts, renewed hope, and exhilaration that, to these people, reportedly resulted from the hand of God bringing their rescuers to them in their hour of need.<sup>14</sup> Susannah Stone of the Willie Company spoke of the blessings, strength, and courage bestowed upon all the travelers, and despite this she faltered. An alleged miracle and divine manifestation helped her continue, as she said, "I felt I could go no further, and withdrew from the little

company and sat down to wait the end, being somewhat in a stupor. After a time I was aroused by a voice, which seemed as audible as anything could be, and which spoke to my very soul of the promises and blessings I had received, and which should surely be fulfilled and that I had a mission to perform in Zion. I received strength and was filled with the Spirit of the Lord and arose, and traveled on with a light heart.”<sup>15</sup> Personal accounts of Latter-day Saints are filled with experiences like Stone’s, which further reinforced her belief that it was divine destiny to establish their “Salt Lake Zion”, and illustrates how the Latter-day Saints felt divine will aided their trek to get there.

Another alleged miracle that was well documented among members of the Willie Handcart company, and those rescuers they first encountered, was the efforts of James Willie. Accounts hold that he left camp to find a rumored nearby relief party in a driving snowstorm, and after he happened upon a seemingly randomly placed sign, he found the rescue party and supplies. Without the swift arrival of the aid that he returned with, greater suffering and death would have resulted. Rescuer Ephraim Hanks wrote of another alleged miracle, finding buffalo where none should be, which enabled him to provide food as one of the first rescuers to reach any group. Still other perceived miracles occurred, when rescuers seemingly at random showed up in camp. Many Latter-day Saints had forgotten the promises of Franklin Richards to send aid, and once they saw their saviors, they were often overcome with emotion.<sup>16</sup>

The travelers endured much, and many cited their own inability to express their experiences, or those of others. Jens Nielson of the Willie Company said, “Speaking of the hardships of the handcart company no pen can describe nor can it be understood or comprehended by any human being in this life but only those who were called to pass through

it,”<sup>17</sup> Daniel Tyler asserted that “these scenes are too painful[,] a detailed account would melt a heart of Stone.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps John Jaques of the Martin Company said it best, “No human being could tell it all....Only the All-seeing eye saw and only the All-seeing Ear heard all the occurrences in that long and wearisome journey.”<sup>19</sup> Latter-day Saints believed that the divine hand of God, blessed, strengthened, and sustained them throughout their trials. Many noted they would not have made it without the rescuers, yet even greater numbers cited the intervention of God, seemingly imposing his will that these hearty travelers make it to their “Salt Lake Zion.”

Notwithstanding all the perceived spiritual experiences and divine intervention, not all the Latter-day Saint travelers fell into this joyous and divinely watched over group. One of the greatest discoveries and most poignant stories told in the personal accounts of those heading to “Salt Lake Zion” is that of those who left or lost the faith. Many pioneers enjoyed time with friends, family, or even people they had never met and most, journals, diaries, and personal writings document feelings of elation and relief. The untold story is about those for whom, after relief and arrival, the experienced crucible was far too much for them to bear. The prevalence among personal writings of people who expressed their bitterness, anger, or resentment conflicts significantly with the narrative that many religious groups, including Latter-day Saints, posit. Those who expressed these sentiments, whose expressions conflict with the traditional historical narrative, comprise the group who fit into the handcart trek's untold story. Despite the LDS Church and handcart organization leader's best efforts, this is the group that did not make it to their “Salt Lake Zion.”

One traveler wrote, “The resentment toward [Willie] was quite general; I myself was simple-minded enough to threaten him that I would present a complaint against him to Brigham

Young! Oh, you trusting simpleton! The prophet laughed right in my face. It was no longer necessary for him to wear the mask of his counterfeit holiness. Through the Mormon sheep's fleece the wolf's claws were beginning to show.”<sup>20</sup> The traveler plainly noted disdain and distrust for leadership, and how he felt he was treated by them. While not all agreed with this assessment or feeling about handcart company leadership,<sup>21</sup> others echoed this critic's views. Elizabeth Sermon, complained bitterly in her journal and letters to children, even expressing her bitterness that no one came to support her when she arrived in the valley.<sup>22</sup>

Some travelers took their bitterness, resentment, and anger and left. These individuals often were ostracized or verbally accosted as apostates for their departure. Yet, when reading the words of many of those who experienced these hardships, it is hard to imagine how some people would not leave or give up. To document some of the phrases used, Langley Allgood of the Martin Company wrote “No one can describe the suffering we endured... I refrain from writing about the suffering of these people[.] It never can or will be told.”<sup>23</sup> Rescuer Robert Burton asserted “the hardships and sufferings of this company of people can never be told,”<sup>24</sup> while Joseph Lewis Sr. stated, “Language is inadequate and no one, but those who suffered will ever know what this brace and hardy band of pilgrims endured.”<sup>25</sup> Using powerful language, even the greatest imaginations would be unable to comprehend the depth and breadth of suffering.

As things worsened for the companies, many migrants abandoned them as they journeyed across the plains. Edward Rhead and his family fell sick and stopped in Iowa in a civilized area, where they stayed for another 5 years.<sup>26</sup> Four other documents, two from the Martin Company and two from the Willie Company observed multiple people leaving their companies at Fort Laramie, some to stay and help, others for shelter, and still some who enlisted in the United

States Army.<sup>27</sup> Leaving the Latter-day Saints did not just occur from the traveling handcart companies, however. Two travelers, one from each the Willie and Martin Companies noted that several people were met, in one case more than one hundred,<sup>28</sup> that were leaving Salt Lake and returning to the eastern states or Europe.<sup>29</sup> Whether Latter-day Saints left due to sickness, seeking greener pastures, or out of spite, many departed their handcart companies or “Salt Lake Zion”.

Assessing one’s motivations has always been challenging and becomes even more so when involving matters of faith. Did these determined Latter-day Saints who trudged through misery and pain lose their faith or did they keep it and had simply lost their will to continue? Can a fair analysis of faith in word versus faith in action be leveled? These are important questions to ask about the members of this untold story of handcart pioneers. All that can be certain is that there are always consequences to faith. For those who did not survive the trek, many assume they died faithful to their cause, yet for those who lived, there is no doubt they endured more than many for their beliefs. While many felt their arrival, despite their hardships, was the work of God, for others it is hard to tell. For those who left and faced bitterness and scorn, it may have been just as hard to leave as it was to cross the plains. For those who passed judgment and ostracized those who left, they likely had their reasons as well.

These departures had lasting impacts on individual’s progeny, historical narratives, and Westward Expansion. These Latter-day Saints experiences truly are representative of this time period because of the difficulty they faced and the triumph they encountered. Although their plans to move westward stemmed from escaping persecution, they also intended to establish a new home, their “Salt Lake Zion”. The Latter-day Saints may not have embodied the nature of

the perceived divine call that Manifest Destiny brought, that many other Americans experienced this need or desire to fulfill the “will of God” to move west. Yet, in some respects they certainly accomplished their own version of it. Not all stories are known or told for many overland travel groups. Regardless, it is apparent that many did not make it all the way to their planned destination and stopped, grew, and flourished where they stayed. The Latter-day Saints endeavored to follow Gods will for them, by emigrating west to their “Salt Lake Zion.” Those who traveled, regardless of if they departed early or not acted in fulfillment of the commonly held belief of Manifest Destiny. The untold story of many members of the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies is an untold story of many of the pioneers of Manifest Destiny. In essence these hardy groups embodied, and still do, the American dream, and hold an important place in the westward expansion time period and in American History.

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<sup>1</sup> William G. Hartley, “The Place of Mormon Handcart Companies in America's Westward Migration Story,” *The Annals of Iowa* 65, no. 2 (2006): pp. 101-123, <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1045>, 101.

<sup>2</sup> J[ohn] J[aques], "Some Reminiscences," 19 January 1879, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7749/j-aques-j-ohn-some-reminiscences-salt-lake-daily-herald-19-jan-1879-1>.

<sup>3</sup> Don H. Smith, “Leadership, Planning, and Management of the 1856 Mormon Handcart Emigration,” *The Annals of Iowa* 65, no. 2 (2006): pp. 124-161, <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1046>, 125.

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, “Leadership, Planning, and Management of the 1856 Mormon Handcart Emigration,” 125.

<sup>5</sup> Melvin L Bashore, “The 1933 Willie Handcart Company Marker at Rock Creek Hollow.” *Mormon Historical Studies* 16, 1 (2015): 78–96.

<https://login.proxy181.nclive.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=31h&AN=112173259&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>6</sup> James Loynd, “The Martin Handcart Company,” 1926, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7552/loynd-james-the-martin-handcart-company-1926>.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Bennett, “Interview,” n.d., *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7424/bennett-margaret-interview-in-utah-pioneer-biographies-44-vols-5-7-10>.

<sup>8</sup> Many records conflict with number of deaths that occurred on the treks. Hartley notes that a standardized system or numeration for total people or total deaths in each group has not been established.

William G. Hartley, “The Place of Mormon Handcart Companies in America's Westward Migration Story,” *The Annals of Iowa* 65, no. 2 (2006): pp. 101-123, <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1045>, 118.

<sup>9</sup> Josiah Rogerson, “Martins Handcart Company, 1856,” October 20, 1907, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021,

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<https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/20887/josiah-rogeron-martins-handcart-company-1856-salt-lake-herald-republican-20-o%E2%80%A6>.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Ann McFall Caldwell Bennett, "Reminiscences," n.d., *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/18538/bennett-margaret-ann-mc-fall-caldwell-reminiscences-4-5>.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Bennett, "Interview," n.d., *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7424/bennett-margaret-interview-in-utah-pioneer-biographies-44-vols-5-7-10>.

<sup>12</sup> James Sherlock Cantwell, 'Autobiography,' n.d., *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7427/cantwell-james-sherlock-autobiography-reel-3-item-30-1-3>.

<sup>13</sup> Adolph M Reeder, "writings," 1953, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7454/adolph-m-reeder-writings-circa-1953>.

<sup>14</sup> J[ohn] J[aques], "Some Reminiscences," 15 December 1878, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7744/j-aques-j-ohn-some-reminiscences-salt-lake-daily-herald-15-december-1878-1>.

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<sup>15</sup> Susannah Stone Lloyd, "Lloyd Family Sketches," 1915, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7446/lloyd-susannah-stone-lloyd-family-sketches-1915-1-2>.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel W. Jones, "Forty Years Among the Indians," 1890, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/79989/jones-daniel-w-forty-years-among-the-indians-1890-62-75>.

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<sup>17</sup> Jens Nielson, “Autobiography,” n.d., *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7448/nielson-jens-autobiography>.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Tyler, “Autobiographical Sketch in Autobiographical accounts by Bever Residents,” Ca 1879, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7575/daniel-tyler-autobiographical-sketch-in-autobiographical-accounts-by-beaver-reside%E2%80%A6>.

<sup>19</sup> John Jaques, "Some Reminiscences," 29 December 1878, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7746/john-jaques-some-reminisces-salt-lake-herald-republican-29-december-1878-1>.

<sup>20</sup> John Ahmanson, “Secret History: A translation of Vor Tid Muhamed,” 1984, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021,

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<sup>21</sup> Nicholus Gourley Teeples, “Interview”, n.d., *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7572/teeples-nicholus-gourley-interview-in-utah-pioneer-biographies-44-vols-28-95-101-105-6>.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Whittear Sermon Camm, “Letter, San Francisco, California, to My Dear Children,” March 16, 1892, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7527/elizabeth-w-sermon-camm-letter-san-francisco-california-to-my-dear-children-1892-march-16>.

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<sup>23</sup> Langley Allgood Bailey, “Reminiscences and Journal,” Ca. 1920-1929, 4-7. *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7521/bailey-langley-allgood-reminiscences-and-journal-ca-1920-1929-4-7>.

<sup>24</sup> Robert T. Burton, “Autobiography,” n.d., *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021,

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<sup>25</sup> Jennie S Crane, “Reminiscence,” n.d., *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/103751/lewis-joseph-reminiscence-in-jennie-s-crane-biography-of-joseph-lewis-sr>.

<sup>26</sup> Josiah Rhead, “Excerpts from Record Book,” n.d., *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/9307/rhead-josiah-excerpts-from-record-book-in-edward-h-rhead-journal-and-record-boo%E2%80%A6>.

<sup>27</sup> James G Willie, “Emigrating Company journal,” 1856, *Pioneer Database*, The Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Accessed 26 January 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/sources/7439/james-g-willie-emigrating-company-journal-1856-may-november-16-53.1/26/2021>.

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