

The Long Road to Zion

The Final Journey of Mary Murray Murdoch

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May 2001

In the Spring of 1856, a tiny 72 year-old Scottish widow by the name of Mary Murdoch became one of thousands of European immigrants who left their homelands in search of a new life in America. Each of these persons has their own unique story. Given that almost all Americans are immigrants themselves or are descendants of immigrants, these stories are our own.

But unlike the stories of so many other immigrants, Mary Murdoch's story has not been forgotten as the years have transpired. To her numerous descendants and to many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Mary Murdoch's journey to and across America has, over the passage of time, taken on profound significance as a spiritual journey and act of faith and sacrifice.

She was one of well over 1,000 European converts to "Mormonism" who in 1856 crossed the Atlantic Ocean by ship, went from the east coast of the U.S. to Iowa by rail and steamer, and trekked west from Iowa City on foot as a member of one of five Mormon handcart companies. These pilgrims set out to join their fellow Saints in "Zion" as they sojourned toward the Valley of the Great Salt Lake in the Utah Territory.

Assigned to the Martin handcart company, Mary Murdoch walked some 700 miles along the trail from Iowa City, over a period of slightly more than nine weeks. Like all of her fellow travelers, she experienced the severe testing exacted by this journey. A few miles northeast of Chimney Rock, Nebraska, her exhausted and depleted body could take no more, and she died there in the windswept high plains, and was buried in an anonymous shallow grave.

Several of Mary Murdoch's descendants have devoted a significant portion of their life to keeping her story alive for future generations, and it has been told in numerous family histories, collections, and genealogies. My treatment of her incredible story is not an attempt to duplicate

what has already been done so well. Rather, it is to illuminate in detail a small but significant portion of Mary Murdoch's life: the period from May 25 to October 2, 1856, when she crossed the Atlantic, went to the center of the American heartland, and struggled along the handcart trail until she met her death.

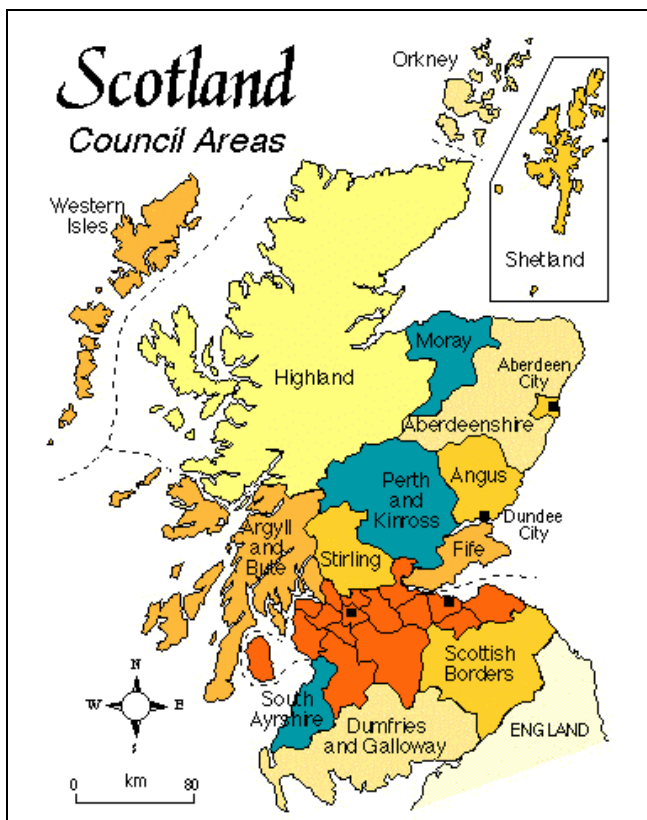
This small portion of her life is what she is best known for among her posterity. What I have attempted to do in these pages is to describe some of the few known facts regarding Mary Murdoch's life within the context of the rich historical record of the Mormon handcart pioneers, particularly the fifth company, the Martin Handcart Company of 1856, of which she was a member. In doing so, I have taken a few historical liberties, but only as they seemed justified by relevant facts. This work has relied heavily upon the availability of various historical texts, which are listed. I have tried to portray as realistic a picture of these four months of Mary Murdoch's life as possible, for the purpose of bringing her story alive and preserving it in the minds and hearts of her descendants. If there are errors of fact, they are my responsibility and were done unwittingly.

In the years that I have researched this topic, and in the several months it has taken to write this document, the story of Mary Murdoch and the Mormon handcart pioneers has become a central part of my identity, and a great source of strength to me. It is my hope that this effort will have a similar effect on those who read it.

Some Background: A Brief History Of Mary Murray Murdoch

Although Mary Murdoch's entire life story is not the focus of this article, some basic facts of her life are useful in setting the stage for her final four months. She is known affectionately among her numerous posterity as "Wee Granny,"

because she is said to have stood 4 feet, 7 inches tall, and to have weighed barely 90 pounds. She was born Mary Murray in 1782 at Glencairn, Dumfries, Scotland. On January 10, 1811, at age 28, she married James Murdoch, a man 4 years her junior. Together they had nearly 21 years of marriage and 8 children. James lost his life in a mining accident, breathing poisonous gas as he tried to rescue a fellow worker who met the same demise. Thus, at age 49, Wee Granny found herself a single mother, with the responsibility of raising several of her children (the youngest of whom was only 5 years of age) as well as an orphaned niece.



map of Scotland and surrounding area

In the midst of these very difficult circumstances, she made the best life she could for herself and her family, living in a small stone cottage with a thatched roof, which had been built with the help of her children and some neighbors, a few years after the death of her husband James.

Years later, at age 67, Mary Murdoch was introduced to the message of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or "Mormonism," by her son John, a recent convert along with his wife Ann Steele. As was true with thousands of other

converts to Mormonism from the British Isles during the mid-1800s, the power of this restorationist message was unlike anything she had before heard. This was an expansive theology that rejected the barriers and class distinctions of the dominant European religions. Here was a religion that taught that the Heavens were once again open, that God again spoke to mankind through his appointed prophets, and that his power was again in force upon the earth. This was a message that emerged out of obscurity along the expanding American frontier from the time of the organization of the Church in 1830 by its founding Prophet, Joseph Smith. Mormonism was a religion that advocated a belief in true eternal progression, in obedience to its leaders, and in a guaranty of salvation to those who were faithful and endured to the end. This was a practical religion where members saw themselves as the body of Christ, and looked after each other's needs, specifically not distinguishing between the earthly and spiritual, which were intertwined. Moreover, this was a religion that demanded the sacrifice of all earthly things in return for the ultimate blessings that would be derived, for in the words of its martyred prophet Joseph, *"... a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation..."*

Wee Granny studied and pondered this compelling message, and it rang true. At an age where most people are thinking about winding down their lives, maintaining some stability, and enjoying whatever comforts of life they may have been able to obtain, she was about to make a dramatic move. She was baptized a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints on Dec. 22, 1851 by her son John, and soon began to experience some of the persecution that typically was received by converts to this strange new faith.

The Gathering to Zion and The New Plan

Although the Mormon missionaries laboring to bring the message of the restoration to the people in the British Isles had phenomenal success for a time in the 1840s and 1850s, the time was not yet right for this new religion to take strong root in

Europe. Rather, like the Israelites of the Old Testament, these new converts were encouraged to gather together for strength and safety in the land of Zion. But in their case, Zion was in the sparsely inhabited Intermountain West region of the United States, in the Utah Territory. It was here that the Mormon refugees from persecution in New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois had fled for safety and stability only a handful of years earlier. Zion was now literally in the tops of the mountains as had been predicted in the Bible, and the Church's second leader, Brigham Young, was encouraging its missionaries to urge converts to join with their fellow Saints and receive safety from the outside world as they gathered strength and built a new society.

The main contingent of Mormon refugees from the midwest reached Utah in 1847. Although they faced a harsh challenge in building a new society, Brigham Young and the 12 Apostles were charged with spreading the message of the Restoration, and Elders were called on missions in various locations of the world. Their greatest success was in Europe. The fruits of their labor, the new European Saints, were eager to join their kindred spirits in Zion, and by the early 1850s, many had forsaken their former lives and made the daunting trip to and across America.

During the first six years of emigration along the Mormon Trail, most companies of Saints traveled by wagontrain, the most common and tested method of travel west in those days. However, by the mid-1850s it was obvious to Brigham Young and other leaders of the Church that this method would have to be improved. It was somewhat slow and required a huge investment in capital, livestock, equipment, and trained personnel, all of which were in short supply. Given that most of the European converts to Mormonism were among the poor (a large segment of European society at that time), many if not most of these new Saints lacked the resources needed to undertake such an immense journey. Moreover, there were literally thousands of European converts who were more than eager to make the journey, but who lacked the means. In short, the processes currently available to help the new converts assemble in Utah were simply not sufficient.

Brigham Young was well aware of this problem, and worked on ways to make the gathering a reality for all Saints who desired. In 1849, Brigham proposed the creation of a revolving fund to be used for aiding the poorest Saints in their desire to reach Zion. This fund, which became known as the *Perpetual Emigration Fund*, began with a few thousand dollars contributed by members of the Church. From these funds, indigent Saints would be able to borrow the resources necessary to help get them to Zion. After their arrival, they would then repay their loan back into the fund, thus making additional resources available for others in their circumstances. For a while, this system worked very effectively. However, a combination of economic distress in Utah and burgeoning numbers of poor converts desiring passage to Zion put incredible stresses on the system. By 1855, it was determined that emigration would need to be reduced, even at a time when their numbers were desperately needed as the Kingdom was being built. It was clear that a less expensive mode of travel would need to be developed.

For Brigham Young and his associates, the answer to this significant set of problems was the development of a plan to have new converts emigrate to Utah on foot, aided by handcarts for hauling their provisions. Although handcarts were not a totally new invention—they had been used for years by peddlers on the east coast, and although many trappers and pioneers had trekked west on foot, Brigham Young's marriage of these ideas was unique. It would afford economical and timely passage of vast numbers of emigrants. Thus, the handcart plan was born, the Perpetual Emigration Fund was revitalized, and in late 1855, the call went out from the Church leadership to the European missions to renew the gathering.

The idea went forth to have the Saints travel to the east coast—New York, Philadelphia, or Boston—by ship, and then by steamer and train to Iowa City, Iowa, the westward railroad terminus in the U. S. At Iowa City, provisions would be gathered, handcarts and tents would be constructed, and a well-organized trek some 1300 miles to Zion in the space of an estimated 70 to 90 days would ensue. The leaders of the Church

in Europe promoted the new plan with optimism and zeal, and the membership of the Church there responded en masse. Thus, one of the most unique forms of immigration in American history was born. Mary Murdoch, whose son John and his family had emigrated to Utah in 1852, was eager to join them, and would be among the first wave of Saints to test this new means of travel.

**Across the Atlantic on the *Horizon*:
May 25 - June 28, 1856**

Mary Murdoch left Liverpool England for Boston on May 25, 1856, aboard the *Horizon*. This was the final of four ships that carried handcart emigrants to Boston or New York that year, and by far, it was the largest vessel. Wee Granny was among 856 passengers on the *Horizon* during that voyage, and this vast group was placed in the charge of Edward G. Martin (“Captain Martin”), a returning missionary. By contrast, the other three ships, the *Enoch Train*, *S. Curling*, and *Thornton*, which left Liverpool between March 23 and May 4, carried between 534 and 764 passengers each.

Most of the passengers on these ships were from the British Isles—primarily from England, where missionaries had encountered phenomenal success; but also from Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. In addition, there were also a fair number of Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, and a few Swiss and Italians who made these trips. The majority of the handcart pioneers that year, 68% to be exact, had their travel expenses paid for at least in part through the Church’s Perpetual Emigration Fund. By and large, this was a poor group of immigrants.

Historian Wallace Stegner wrote poignantly of the desperate financial straights in which many of these people found themselves, and the great hopes for a better life that they had found in Mormonism: *Mainly Englishmen from the depressed collieries and mill towns, with some Scots and a handful from the Cape of Good Hope and the East Indian Mission, they were the casualties of the industrial revolution, life’s discards, to whom Mormonism had brought its irresistible double promise of a new start on earth and a guaranteed Hereafter.*

Although many previous emigrants to Utah

had stayed for a time in the Eastern United States to work and earn money for the remainder of the trip to Zion, Brigham Young committed the resources of the Fund to get these Saints to Utah as soon as possible. He was well aware of the high rate of apostacy among those who had attempted this route. He did not want to lose members, and he did not want the Fund to be used as a means to simply escape the terrible economic trap that existed in Europe at that time. He wanted the Fund to be used to support “the honest poor” as he put it. He planned for these groups of travelers to get from Europe to Utah as soon as possible, where they would find strength in numbers and provide additional strength to the vast melting pot of pilgrims who had gathered in the mountain west.

As an elderly widow living in difficult economic times, Wee Granny was undoubtedly in a financially difficult situation. However, she did not have to rely on the Perpetual Emigration Fund to pay the cost of her trip. Her son John, and his wife, Ann Steele, who had emigrated to Utah in 1852, desperately wanted Wee Granny to join them. They worked exceedingly hard to save every cent they could until they had enough to get her there.

Although Wee Granny traveled alone in terms of family, there were at least some other Scottish Saints in this immigrating group to whom she had a connection. Traveling with her on the *Horizon*, and later in the Martin Handcart Company was James Steele, age 29, brother to Mary’s daughter-in-law in Utah, Ann Steele Murdoch. With James was his family: his wife Elizabeth (age 28), and their two children, James (3) and George (1). In addition, Elizabeth Steele’s mother, Mary Ann George Wylie, widow of Oliver Wylie Jr., traveled with the Steele Family. Mary Wylie’s age is not listed in the official Fifth Company Roster, but various family sources have indicated that she was 66, only a few years younger than Wee Granny.

We don’t know the specific details regarding Mary Murdoch’s relationship with the Steele’s and Mary Wylie. However, many of Wee Granny’s descendants who have studied her situation believe that she interacted closely with them, perhaps sharing a handcart and being assigned to the same tent. Because Mary

Murdoch and Mary Wylie were indirectly connected through their children, and because they were of a similar age and in a similar situation in many respects, it seems likely that they may have relied on each other to some extent, and perhaps even developed a close friendship. Given the challenge that James and Elizabeth Steele must have had in making this journey with two small children, it is very likely that both Mary Murdoch and Mary Wylie assisted with their care. Perhaps Wee Granny became somewhat of another grandmother to these two young boys.

The trip across the Atlantic on the *Horizon* took slightly more than one month, arriving in Boston on June 28. Because the trip was long and likely rough in spots, the accommodations modest, and quarters crowded, we can assume that Wee Granny experienced a fair amount of discomfort during the voyage. However, it would be a mistake to think that the voyage was a terrible situation. On the contrary, most of the Saints who kept journals or later wrote of their experience reported enjoying the voyage across the Atlantic.

Because the ships were chartered by the Church, the passengers enjoyed a commonality of purpose, as well as a communal spirit among them. As Wallace Stegner wrote, "A Mormon charter ship differed as sharply from the usual emigrant vessel as a Mormon village on wheels differed from the usual Missouri wagontrain. It was ordered to the smallest corner and to the ultimate quarter-hour."

The ships were divided into Wards with Bishops to head them. Each day consisted of a sequence of orderly activities, ranging from the temporal (eating meals, cleaning quarters, disposing waste over the side of the ship) to the spiritual (prayer meetings, instructive talks by leaders, and occasional baptisms, weddings, and burials) to the social (music, dance, or group singing). In Mormonism, unlike most other faiths of the day, there was no great disconnect between these activities, because all things were believed to be spiritual in their own realm.

Because we know that many of the women in the emigrating companies spent a considerable amount of time during these voyages sewing tents and cart covers from heavy rolls of drilling fabric

that were issued to them in Liverpool, it is likely that Wee Granny spent much of her days thus occupied, and possibly teaching some of the younger sisters some of the intricacies of sewing.

From Boston to Iowa City: June 28 - July 8, 1856

On a bitterly cold New Year's Eve in 1855, just a few months before the first handcart pioneers began their trek westward, the last rail of the Mississippi and Missouri railroad was laid in Iowa City, Iowa. With this event Iowa City became the western terminus for railway travel in this sector of the United States. Thus, Iowa City became the destination point for embarkment by handcart for Mary Murdoch and the other handcart pioneers of 1856 and 1857.

Most of the handcart pioneers from the seven companies who started their journey from Iowa City during those two years arrived by railroad from New York or Boston, through Chicago. Because Wee Granny arrived in Boston on the *Horizon*, her railroad journey from Boston to Chicago would have taken her through New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, on into Illinois, a total distance of just over 1,000 miles. In Chicago, she and her traveling companions would have changed trains for the additional 250 mile trip to Iowa City.

Wee Granny and most of her traveling companions from the *Horizon*, many of whom would become members of the Martin Handcart Company, arrived by rail in Iowa City on July 8, 1856. This leg of the trip took approximately 10 days. It is unclear how many of those days were actually spent traveling and how many were spent transferring, dealing with U.S. emigration officials, and so forth. It was not a matter of getting on a train in Boston and getting off in Iowa City. Rather, there were at least a couple of occasions when the group had to be shuttled across large bodies of water (including the Mississippi River) on steamships to make connections, and they also would have been required to make a connection in Chicago.

Because most of these immigrants were financially destitute, and were being supported by Perpetual Emigration Funds, they would have purchased the lowest price fares for this trip, and

did railway travel in what were commonly called “emigrant cars,” which were converted freight cars, roughly 40 feet long, with tiers of wooden benches on all four sides. As many as 80 passengers would have been in each of these cars, crowded conditions by any standard. They likely had little access to sanitary facilities, and probably slept as best they could. Although the rigors of this part of the journey paled in comparison with what they would experience once they began their trek on foot, this was likely a very challenging and uncomfortable segment of the journey.

In addition to Wee Granny’s introduction to the vast American landscape—the eastern hardwood forest turning into the tallgrass prairie, she and her fellow travelers undoubtedly were introduced to oppressive heat and humidity, something that would have been foreign to their experience in the British Isles. But given the cramped quarters she had experienced by ship and rail, by the time Wee Granny reached Iowa City on July 8, she may have welcomed the prospect of camping out on the prairie.

Waiting To Go: The Iowa City Encampment: July 8 - July 28, 1856

After arriving in Iowa City, the first task for Mary Murdoch and her fellow travelers was to get from the railroad terminal in downtown Iowa City to the Mormon encampment site approximately three miles away. There, they expected to be organized, assigned to handcart companies, assigned equipment, and be on their way in short order.

Although it has since been rebuilt, the railroad terminal building (which now houses office space) still sits on the same spot that it did in 1856, off of South Dubuque Street. In 1856, Iowa City was the capital of the State of Iowa, and one of Iowa’s largest cities. The Iowa City railroad terminal was only a few blocks from the recently completed capital building, a large elegant domed limestone structure on a hill that served as the headquarters for Iowa government until Des Moines became the permanent capital in 1857. Today, the “Old Capitol” is surrounded by the University of Iowa campus and still figures most prominently in the cityscape and in the

region. This building was likely one of the first landmarks that Wee Granny would have seen in this growing prairie-city.



1853 photo of Iowa State Capital Building in Iowa City

The walk to the Mormon encampment site was likely the first opportunity Wee Granny and her companions had to stretch their legs in nearly six weeks. The encampment site was in an area of tallgrass prairie along the banks of Clear Creek, where a few hardwood trees lined the creek banks and provided shade from the hot summer sun for the weary emigrants. Today, the Mormon handcart encampment site must look substantially different than it did to Wee Granny in 1856. The present “handcart park” is jointly managed by the University of Iowa and The Church, and is surrounded by student housing, soccer fields, and roads. The encampment area is now heavily wooded. A small parking lot, and a half-mile trail with a few markers and commemorative plaques is all that serves to remind visitors of the amazing story of the more than 2,000 handcart pioneers who passed through there in 1856 and 1857.

Under the best of circumstances, a July 8 arrival in Iowa City would have been precariously late for pilgrims intending to make it to the valley of the Great Salt Lake on foot before the cold weather season. It was clearly Brigham Young’s intent for the handcart pioneers to be approaching the Rocky Mountains by July. However, for the Mormon pioneers who crossed the Atlantic on the *Thornton* and *Horizon* in May of that year, most of whom became members of the Fourth (Willie) and Fifth (Martin) handcart companies, the circumstances were anything but optimal.

For a variety of complex reasons, the last two

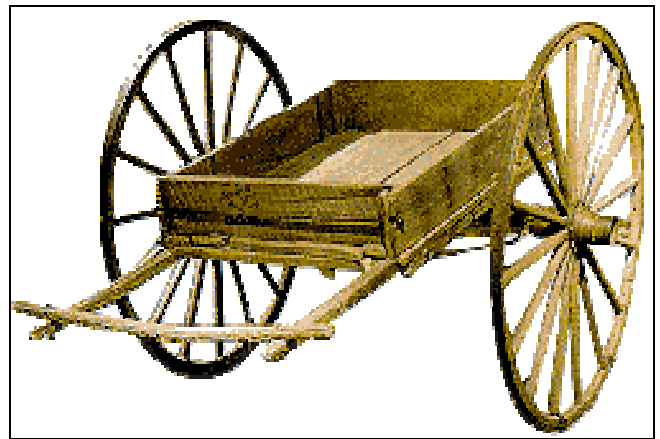
companies of the 1856 emigration were delayed substantially longer than desirable. Stormy spring weather in England, high prices, difficult economic times, tight finances, labor shortages, poor communication, and a fervent desire by a vast number of Saints to make the trip to Zion that year all conspired to delay all the charter ships from leaving England, and to keep the last two groups in Iowa City much longer than was desirable.

At any given time, three to four Church agents were assigned with the gargantuan task of getting the handcart pioneers outfitted and on their way. Under the leadership of Daniel Spencer and with the expertise of skilled wagonwright Chauncey Webb, these agents worked incessantly to move the emigrants from Iowa City to the handcart trail as quickly as possible. However, the late arrival and enormous size of the groups from both the Thornton and Horizon, coupled with a number of adverse conditions, made the task of a timely and well-equipped departure virtually impossible.

Historians who have pieced together the circumstances surrounding the late departures and ill-prepared outfitting of the Willie and Martin companies have noted a number of significant challenges facing these preparations. There were insufficient foodstuffs available for purchase, prices were higher than expected and P.E.F. funds were short. There were not enough tents and insufficient fabric to construct more tents in a timely manner. In addition, many of the cast iron cooking pots and other implements that had been ordered had not yet arrived in Iowa City. But most significantly, by late June and early July of 1856, there was not a sufficient supply of appropriate raw materials to construct enough handcarts in time, nor were there sufficient skilled workers to build these handcarts. Despite these adverse circumstances, Chauncey Webb put every available man to work on the construction of the handcarts, and the women in the camp worked on making the tents.

Although it was a risky proposition, the movement of greenhorn immigrants across the plains and mountains on foot with handcarts, rather than with individual wagons and oxen, was actually an ingenious idea. The design of these handcarts was similar to that of the carts that were

used by apple peddlers in the eastern United States. The handcarts were built mostly of native oak or hickory, were six or seven feet long, approximately four feet wide, and could carry 400 to 500 pounds. They were built on-site near the encampment area. Five people (often a family) were assigned to each handcart, and each person was allowed 17 pounds of possessions, which mostly consisted of bedding, clothing, and cooking utensils. After the weigh-in process at the Iowa City encampment prior to departure, many of the pioneers had to leave behind treasured personal possessions because of the weight limit. Because she left no written record, we can only guess whether or not Wee Granny had to leave behind any of the few personal possessions that she might have brought with her from Scotland.



reproduction of a handcart

The process of assembling the handcarts had worked well for the first three companies, but the fourth and fifth companies (the Willie and Martin companies) experienced substantial difficulties because of the lateness of the season, the lack of availability of seasoned wood, and the scarcity of other needed materials. Thus, the handcarts that were made for the company with which Wee Granny traveled were done so in a hurry, were constructed with green (unseasoned) wood, and without the iron and leather that were needed to maximize the strength and stability of the axles and wheels.

Written records left by some individuals who were in the Iowa City encampment area during July of 1856 can provide us with some clues regarding what Wee Granny's life there was like.

The weather was often hot and oppressively humid. The incredible power of the midwestern thunderstorms that rolled through the camp with powerful lightning bolts on a regular basis (certainly including some severe storms with tornadoes nearby) must have astounded the European immigrants. There were ticks, chiggers, mosquitoes, prairie rattlers, and assorted other pests to contend with. There were births and deaths and sickness in the camp. As was true on the voyage across the Atlantic, the encampment was highly organized. There were daily prayers, frequent devotionals, and motivational meetings. Above all, there was work and waiting. Wee Granny likely put her experience to good use, possibly helping to make tents and providing tips to some of the younger sisters in the camp regarding outdoor cooking.

Mary Murdoch's assigned group, the Martin Handcart Company, was the fifth and last to leave Iowa City in 1856. They departed on July 28, 20 days after reaching Iowa City. Although there was concern among some regarding the lateness of the departure and their state of preparedness for the journey, most of the pioneers were eager to leave, putting their full trust in the Lord and in the brethren assigned to be their leaders. The Martin company consisted of 576 persons, with a total of 146 carts, 7 wagons with 30 oxen for carrying foodstuffs and group supplies, and 50 cows and beef cattle. Each company was further divided into groups of 100 each, with sub-captains over them.

Although the trip across the Atlantic to America, and from Boston to Iowa City had indeed included hardships for Wee Granny and her companions, as had the 20 days in the hot humid encampment site, as the Fifth handcart company left Iowa City, she probably had very little notion of the hardships that lay ahead during the final two months of her life. She was about to be tested beyond the very limits of her strength.

Walking Across Iowa: July 28 - August 22, 1856

The Fifth handcart company is generally known as the Martin company. During the first stretch of the trip via handcart (from Iowa City to Florence, Nebraska), this group was actually divided into

two companies of more than 200 individuals each, one captained by Edward Martin, and the other by Jesse Haven. These two groups traveled separately, but were generally within close distance of each other.

This first leg of the handcart journey, from Iowa City to Florence, Nebraska (near present-day Omaha), was 277 miles long. This stretch took the Fifth Handcart Company slightly less than four weeks (25 days to be exact). Assuming that this large group of over 500 did not travel on Sundays, of which there would have been three, and because it is known that they took a couple of days off for repairs, then they averaged slightly over 13 miles per day, quite an impressive feat under the circumstances. For 72 year old Mary Murdoch, this rate of travel was especially impressive, and it likely began to take a toll on her.

Most of the companies reported that the first few days out from Iowa City found the pioneers in good spirits and glad to be on their way. The road across Iowa was relatively good, and had been well-traveled that year. Although the Martin company coped with the usual heat, dust, thunderstorms, equipment problems, sickness, and drudgery that would accompany such a journey, this stretch went remarkably well. A few travelers from the company dropped out because of sickness or discouragement, but the vast majority stayed with the trek.

Although these Zion-bound pilgrims must have been in awe of the long stretches of empty prairie that they encountered during this stretch, it is important to consider that Iowa was far from an empty wilderness in 1856. In fact, the state was home to approximately 600,000 residents at that time, most of them farmers who had settled there from eastern states or European nations because of the legendary richness of the dark and deep loess soil, which was and still is considered to be the best large stretch of agricultural land in the United States. However, the surrounding population became more sparse as the company traveled west, and the frequent farms along the road gave way to vast stretches of tallgrass prairies. In this same vein, Samuel Openshaw of the Martin company is quoted as entering in his journal on August 7 "*...we could stand and gaze upon the prairies as far as the eye could see, even*

until the prairies themselves seemed to meet the sky on all sides, without being able to see a house. I thought, how many thousands of people there are in England who have scarce room to breathe and not enough to eat. Yet all this good land is lying dormant, except for the prairie grass to grow and decay.”



sculpture of handcart pioneers

As Mary Murdoch and her 500 plus compatriots made their way across the state of Iowa, they wended their way past prosperous farms, tallgrass prairie, and small outposts of towns. The terrain across Iowa is considered to be very flat by Western standards, but deceptively so. The road these pioneers traveled continuously wound up and down slight inclines, which from a distance would have the appearance of small rolling hills. Although the task of walking and pushing or pulling a handcart up and down such stretches of elevation gain and loss would later seem slight in comparison with what would be faced in the Rocky Mountains, it nevertheless would have required a great deal of physical effort during this break-in period, especially considering that this leg of the journey was conducted during the very hottest period of the summer, when daytime highs often reach the upper 90 degree range, and the humidity is often 80% or higher. In these conditions, the low temperature at night likely seldom dipped below 70 degrees, and the dewpoint would have often been in the 65 to 75 degree range, resulting in wet prairie grass every morning and dampness at night.

Based on reports from the five handcart companies that traveled across Iowa during the summer of 1856, the pioneers mainly kept to themselves along the road and at campsites, but there were occasional interactions with Iowa residents. In some cases, there were reports of the Iowans going out of their way to be hospitable and encouraging, providing assistance and support as they could. In other cases, there was jeering and disgust openly shown by some of the less hospitable residents of the Hawkeye State, many of whom certainly had formed negative opinions of “The Mormons,” based on media reports and a general negative public sentiment.

One often-repeated story is that one of the handcart companies traveling across Iowa was held up for two hours while the handcarts and equipment boxes were searched by a sheriff and his men, who were looking for hidden females whom they feared were being taken to Utah against their will to be forced to enter into plural marriages with lecherous old men. The public announcement by the leadership of the Church after their settlement in Utah that the doctrine of polygamy was being practiced led to an increasingly fierce flurry of public opposition and distrust, which would eventually lead to attempts by the United States government to imprison the church hierarchy and seize church property in Utah, and which would result in the official abandonment of the practice in the late 1800's under continuing fierce public opposition. It is likely that rumors of this practice and lifestyle were known and discussed among the Iowa settlers, some of whom likely made negative a priori judgments against the pioneers as a result.

However, to Wee Granny and her traveling companions, such discussions, even among them, must have seemed somewhat abstract. Although polygamy was a known doctrine at that time, most of the European Saints had probably not observed much in the way of day-to-day evidence of the practice. These Saints were likely more concerned with how they were going to get through their next mile on the trail than anything else. Any public sentiment they may have felt against them may have galvanized them together.

By the middle of this 25-day stretch of the trip, it became more obvious that there were significant problems with the construction of

many of the handcarts. Breakdowns were frequent, and those assigned to serve as mechanics could not keep up with the needed repairs at times. In almost every historical source on the Martin and Willie Handcart Companies, two primary problems with the construction of the handcarts are noted. Many of the axles were constructed of wood instead of iron, and the wood that was used was generally unseasoned.

However, poor construction of the handcarts was but one of the challenges faced during this stretch of the journey. As Wee Granny and her companions moved west from central Iowa and closer to the Missouri River, they encountered numerous sand hills, which made traveling very difficult. In addition, water became increasingly scarce during the last several days into Florence. At times, the best they could do was to locate muddy and sandy puddles in lowlands along the way, and try to extract drinking water as best they could. Of course, the result of relying on such poor water supplies was that many of the pioneers became sick. To make matters worse, food supplies were beginning to run short.

By the time this vast collection of humans, animals, and equipment from the Fifth handcart company of 1856 crossed the mighty Missouri River and made their way into Florence, Nebraska, many were showing obvious signs of wear. However, in all, this first 277 miles on the handcart trail went relatively well. Although we don't know the specifics of Mary Murdoch's experience, it is no stretch of the imagination to think that given her age and lack of experience in frontier life, she suffered greatly as she trudged on mile after mile in the stifling heat and humidity. Given what we know about some of the traits that have made their way through generations of descendants in her family line, it is also no stretch of the imagination to think that she suffered these deprivations quietly, without complaining or drawing attention to herself. She couldn't have known what new challenges would lie ahead, and likely only took each day as it presented itself. It rings true to think of her finding the will to endure the daily grind of this journey by focusing constantly on her desire to join loved ones in Zion.

Three Days at Florence: August 22 - August 25, 1856

On August 22, Mary Murdoch and the rest of the two groups of the Martin Handcart Company crossed the Missouri River at Kaneshville, Iowa (Council Bluffs), and arrived at the fort in Florence, Nebraska Territory. Florence was in the vicinity of present-day Omaha. This area held special significance for the Saints. It was here that the Nauvoo Saints erected a large village of forts and sod huts and spent the Winter of 1847-1848 after their forced exodus from Illinois. This was "Winter Quarters," and hundreds of buildings still stood, empty. In the years since the Quarters were constructed the Brethren encouraged immigrating parties of Saints to stay there enroute to Salt Lake. Because of the location and availability of shelter, Florence was a natural spot for rest, repairs, and resupplying.

The day before their arrival in Florence, the Martin company was greeted by Apostle Franklin Richards and his group of high ranking Elders of the Church who overtook them enroute from Liverpool to Salt Lake. The Richards party was traveling by wagon and carriage. This visit certainly must have raised the spirits of the group, who were provided with assistance and encouragement. It was Richards who had been primarily responsible for organizing and planning the emigration of the 1856 handcart companies. Many of these Saints knew some of these Brethren personally, and most had probably heard some of them speak words of encouragement as they left Liverpool on the Horizon. It is known that many in the handcart company shook Elder Richards' hand and thanked him personally for the opportunity to come that year.

One of the company, Cyrus Wheelock (author of the Hymn *Ye Elders of Israel*), reported that "*hundreds bear record of the truth of the words of President Young, wherein he promised them increasing strength by the way.*" Even with the struggles and disappointments that had occurred to this point, the group had made good progress, and almost all appeared to be unanimous in their belief that they would be prospered and protected as they made the rest of the journey to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.

One of the most significant events for the

Martin Handcart Company had occurred in Florence a few days prior to their arrival there. It was here in mid-August that a mass meeting of the Willie Handcart Company, who were continually one to two weeks ahead of the Martin Company, took place. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the feasibility of leaving Florence so late in the season and moving on to Salt Lake that fall. Several leaders in the Willie party were experienced in this route, and were obviously aware of the dangerous possibilities that such a late trek across the high plains and Rocky Mountains might have in store, particularly given the questionable status of many of the handcarts and supplies.

One idea that was proposed was to winter over along the Platte River in Nebraska, perhaps near Grand Island. Most of the public discussion among these leaders had the effect of convincing one and all that they should move on. After all, they had not come this far to sit out the winter in a dreary dugout or sod hut along the Platte. They were on a quest to join their fellow Saints in Zion, and were confident in God's plan to get them there. At this meeting, one of the leaders, Levi Savage, broke ranks with the prevailing sentiment and spoke out against trying to cross the plains and mountains so late. He argued that under the best of circumstances, they would reach Salt Lake at the end of October, and that there could be freezing cold and snow in the Rockies a full two months before that. He stated that they *"could not cross the mountains with a mixed company of aged people, women, and little children, so late in the season without much suffering, sickness, and death."* His advice was to go into winter quarters immediately. But Savage was the lone dissenter when a vote was taken. To his credit, he made his famous statement, both ominous and prophetic: *"Brethren and sisters, what I have said I know to be true; but seeing you are to go forward, I will go with you, will help you all I can, will work with you, will rest with you, will suffer with you, and if necessary I will die with you."*

The decision of the Willie Company to move on was significant for the Martin Company because it set the stage for what they would do. There is no record of such a similar debate occurring at Florence among the Martin Company. However, it is likely that they knew of

this discussion and decision. Given their fresh enthusiasm that came from Franklin Richards' visit, and knowing that the company just ahead of them was pressing on, wintering over likely did not even seem to be an option to consider. And to be fair, wintering over on the plains of Nebraska was no guaranty of comfort and safety. Food and other supplies were short, equipment was questionable, and most of the immigrants had absolutely no experience dealing with severe winter weather. If Wee Granny's experience was anything like that of the several members of the Willie and Martin companies who then or later recorded their feelings, she trusted that the group would be seen through. This was God's plan for them, and their faith in the leadership of the Brethren and the propitiousness of their way was resolute.

During the short stay in Florence, some additional foodstuffs and other equipment were collected, and sore feet and tired backs were given a short reprieve. Perhaps the biggest challenge for the Martin company during this three to four day stop was to repair the many handcarts that were now obviously in a state of disrepair. New axles were put in where possible, iron, leather, and tin reinforcing materials were added to the axles as they could be obtained, and other repairs were made. Still, there was not sufficient iron or time to do an adequate job of reinforcing the problem handcarts, and none of these repairs could change the fact that most of the handcarts were made of unseasoned wood. An additional problem with the handcarts, one for which there was not an apparent solution, was a severe shortage of lubricating materials for the axles. Although bacon grease was in short supply, some in the company used what they could of it to grease the axles of their handcarts, and others even used the little soap that they had, to help make the handcarts trundle more easily.

Into The West:

August 25 - October 1, 1856

When the Martin Handcart Company left Florence, they had just finished 277 miles of travel in slightly more than four weeks. The distance remaining from Florence to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake was over 900 miles. In other

words, they had thus far traveled slightly less than one-fourth of the 1,200 to 1,300 mile distance between Iowa City and Salt Lake City. At this rate, it would take them until about the end of November to reach their destination in Zion. However, even under good weather conditions, late November would be unacceptably and dangerously late in the season.

Those individuals in leadership positions in the Willie and Martin companies knew that the pace would have to be picked up from here on out. Several among them figured that if they were able to average somewhat better daily mileage than they had during the first leg of the trek, that they would reach Salt Lake by late October. Although late October would certainly be preferable to late November, those who had made the trek before and were acquainted with the climate of the high plains and Rocky Mountains realized that even under the best of circumstances, they were in for a severe test. As he wrote from Florence on September 3 regarding the possible fortunes of the Willie and Martin companies, even Franklin D. Richards, usually effusive in his optimism regarding the migration, noted some understated caution: *“From the beginning we have done all in our power to hasten matters pertaining to emigration, therefore we confidently look for the blessing of God to crown our humble efforts with success, and for the safe arrival of our brethren the poor Saints in Utah, though they may experience some cold.”*

In comparison with the information available regarding the July through August and October through November time periods of that year, relatively little was recorded or has been later written of the journey of the Martin Handcart Company during the month of September. We know that the trail became progressively more difficult as these pioneers moved west from Florence and across Nebraska. There were numerous sand hills to contend with, and the trail was heavily rutted in many places. After re-provisioning in Florence, and after a redistribution of goods from some of the support wagons, the handcarts carried a substantially heavier load (as much as 100 pounds) than they did during the Iowa portion of the trek. Not only did the increased weight require increased effort,

perhaps just as important, it added additional stress to the already questionable handcarts, most of which were in constant need of attention.



painting of buffalo on the prairie

As the Martin company continued to move west from Florence and across Nebraska, they generally followed the course of two rivers: first the Platte, then the North Platte. The range of travel per day was typically between 10 and 20 miles, with an average distance of about 15 miles. As they reached the Wood River (near present day Grand Island, about 1/3 of the way across Nebraska), there began to be increasing evidence of the vast herds of buffalo that still roamed the high plains in the mid-nineteenth century. The most obvious evidence of their presence were the heavy ruts they left in the shortgrass prairie of that area, along with the omnipresent “Buffalo Chips” that were scattered across the land, and which in their dried and hardened state provided fuel for the fires needed for cooking and warmth as trees became increasingly scarce. There were times when the buffalo were within visual distance, which must have been an impressive sight to these European immigrants. At other times, the sound of moving herds of buffalo thundered across the plains, even when they were not in sight. John Chislett of the Willie company recorded that the presence of buffalo caused their cattle to stampede, which resulted in the loss of milk cows and end to their rations of beef.

Other signs of the changing geography included at times the sounds of wolves howling at night. Although we don’t know the specifics of the Martin company’s experience in this regard, some of the groups that had moved through earlier in 1856 built large fires near their

equipment, cattle, and sleeping areas on several nights as a deterrent to the wolves, who had become increasingly noticeable and fearless.



sketch of type of wolf indigenous to the American plains

As they pushed further west, they gradually began to notice a change in the level of humidity. Because of the combination of the changing seasons, higher altitude, and natural conditions of areas further west in longitude, the oppressive humidity that was experienced across Iowa in mid-summer gave way to dryness. Although there may have been some relief associated with the increased dryness, it also had the effect of more rapidly reducing the moisture content in the unseasoned wood used to construct the handcarts. As a result, there were increased breakdowns of handcarts as wood pieces that were assembled in unseasoned state began to harden and shrink. Some of the handcarts continued to require extensive work to keep them patched together, while others became virtually useless.

Elder Franklin D. Richards and his party, with two wagons and three carriages, finished their business in Florence and overtook the Martin company on September 7th, and then the Willie Company on September 12. Many of the Saints were clearly inspired by the words of encouragement they received from this esteemed leader, who promised them in the name of God that if they would maintain their faith and obedience during the trek that they would be upheld and strengthened, and that their path would be cleared of obstacles. As they sang “All Is Well” around the campfire on so many occasions, that sentiment may have resonated deeply within them, despite their challenges and

trials.

However, Franklin Richards must have been increasingly worried as it became obvious that some of his letters had not reached the Brethren in Salt Lake as anticipated. He and his advisors must have wondered with some sense of terror if the supply wagons with much needed provisions would be waiting for the faithful but beleaguered members of the Martin and Willie companies, or if the leadership in Utah was even aware that there were still several hundred Saints on foot scattered across the Nebraska territory so late in the season.

As Mary Murdoch and her compatriots in the Martin company moved during mid-to late September across central Nebraska and into the increasingly barren, windy, and unforgiving environment to the west, the journey began to take an ever increasing toll on them. Some who had started the trek on foot in good health and spirits began to be worn down, and the daily tedium of their labor turned into a significant struggle. These struggles were particularly apparent for many of the elderly and sickly among the group. By this point in time, Wee Granny had walked over 500 miles. Although she was obviously a tough woman, and although her spirit was still willing, Mary Murdoch’s 73 year-old body was beginning to reach the limits of its capabilities. As the nights began to grow colder with the arrival of autumn, the ability of her diminutive body to generate heat became compromised. Family stories refer to Wee Granny as a tiny, slight woman. She probably had little extra body fat to spare to begin with. But by the time the Martin company reached Western Nebraska and within visual distance of the great landmark of Chimney Rock, she clearly must have lost additional weight, an inevitable result of the insufficient food for fuel, as well as the tremendous physical challenge of walking an average of 15 miles per day. As she reached the last several days of her life, Wee Granny’s exhaustion, weakness, and pain must have been overwhelming. As she lay down in her makeshift bed during those last few nights, her joints must have ached immensely, and her body’s struggle to provide heat at night must have resulted in long nights where she expended a great deal of needed energy through the autonomic act of shivering.

Despite the increasingly apparent difficult circumstances in which they found themselves as they reached the end of Nebraska, we know from many sources that the members of the Martin Handcart Company maintained a great deal of hope, optimism, and faith. Although these were common people, who like anyone else, had their share of faults and foibles (there was the usual amount of pettiness and bickering, and as they moved farther west and foodstuffs became more scarce, there were some incidents of pilfering), the spirit of cooperation among them was strong. Wee Granny and her fellow travelers were united in a common bond of purpose, and their faith in the divine destiny of their purpose sustained them in a very real way.



photo of Chimney Rock, Nebraska

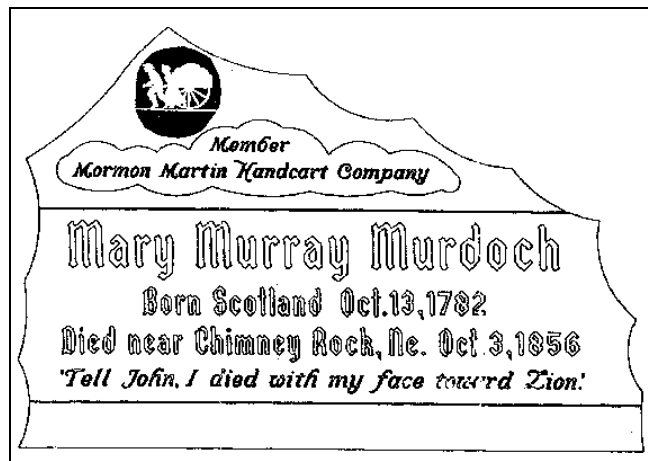
“Tell John I died With My Face Toward Zion”: October 2, 1856

Mary Murdoch died on October 2, 1856, about 10 miles northeast of Chimney Rock, Nebraska. According to the diary of fellow traveler John Jacques, Wee Granny died at approximately 4:00 p.m., and the day was hot and dry. Jacques also noted that she was suffering from diarrhea at the time of her death. She was one of 18 members of the Martin and Willie companies who died during the mid-September to early October period, before the severe winter weather hit. Several of these deaths were among elderly individuals, such as Mary Murdoch, and the rigors of the trip had obviously taken their toll on them. Some others who died during this time were noted to have been suffering from diarrhea or dysentery. It is quite likely that the

combination of poor nutrition and exhaustion could have caused such a condition, and it is just as likely that the drinking water that was consumed contains various viruses, cysts, bacteria, and so forth.

At the time of her death, Wee Granny was attended by James Steele. In addition, it is likely that his wife Elizabeth, her mother Mary Wylie, and perhaps other souls that she had become acquainted with during the long journey were with her during her final moments. As her death became imminent and she drew her last few breaths, she uttered “*Tell John that I died with my face toward Zion,*” a statement that is now immortalized among her numerous posterity as a token of her faith and sacrifice. As the life ebbed from her in those final minutes she obviously knew that she would not see John and her other children again in this life.

Wee Granny’s body was buried in a shallow grave in the high plains of western Nebraska, perhaps wrapped in the blankets that had provided her with some warmth on the cold nights that ominously crept in as that summer had turned into fall. It is comforting to think of her being surrounded by angels in those final moments, and perhaps receiving a feeling of assurance of a reunion with her husband, James, who had been taken from his family some 25 years earlier. It is comforting to think of her spirit being liberated from her exhausted body, and in a poignant moment of new awareness, crossing the veil to be encircled in the love of her Creator, preparing to continue on in a new path in another journey.



sketch of memorial grave marker for Wee Granny

Epilogue

In one sense, Wee Granny's death on October 2 was oddly merciful, although it probably seemed anything but that at the time. It is virtually impossible that she would have survived the awful circumstances that beset the Martin and Willie Handcart Companies in the next few weeks after October 2, and her passing thus spared her the additional unimaginable suffering that fell upon her comrades. The bitter cold, wind, and snow that unceasingly assaulted them in the high plains and mountains of western Nebraska and Wyoming beginning in mid-October was merciless, and most of the approximately 200 total deaths among the Mormon handcart pioneers occurred in those two companies during that horrendous period. It is estimated that approximately 20% of the combined total membership of the Martin and Willie companies died during those few ghastly weeks.

Among those who died during this period was James Steele. He died on November 10, 1856. One of the most famous paintings done as a memorial to those who died on the high plains was of the burial of James Steele, by artist Clark Kelly Price, his great-great grandson. This painting shows two men lowering a body-filled blanket into a shallow frozen grave, under what appears to be near-blizzard conditions. Standing in the background a few feet away are the figures of two women huddled together, wrapped in blankets and shawls, one holding a small child. It is assumed that these two women represent Elizabeth Steele and Mary Wylie.

Although the story of Mary Murdoch's journey to Zion ends here, it is worth noting that the fate of the Martin and Willie Handcart Companies from mid-October until their arrival in Salt Lake (November 9 for the Willie company, November 30 for the Martin company) is one of the great tragedies of Western U.S. history. As the years since 1856 have slipped away, various amateur and professional historians have attempted to analyze the circumstances that led to this tragedy, and some have gone so far as to place blame.

Perhaps more than anyone else, Apostle Franklin D. Richards has been made out to bear a large share of the responsibility. Given his role as

mission president and his responsibility for organizing and implementing the 1856 handcart migration, and because Brigham Young publicly and privately criticized him for his handling of the situation, such a placement of blame is understandable. However, there is an old saying that "hindsight is always 20/20." Even his detractors have admitted that Franklin D. Richards was a good man who happened to be in the middle of a confluence of an unbelievable array of forces that resulted in as bad of an outcome for the 4th and 5th handcart companies as could have been imagined. In retrospect, this great calamity could have been avoided with better planning, timing, and communication. But under the circumstances they were in and based on the information that they had, most who were involved believed they were making the right decisions.



*painting of handcart pioneers crossing stream
in eastern Wyoming*

Historian Wallace Stegner has ranked the fate of the Martin and Willie companies as the greatest tragedy in Western history. *"If courage and endurance make a story, if human kindness and helpfulness and brotherly love in the midst of raw horror are worth recording, this half-forgotten episode of the Mormon migration is one of the great tales of the West and of America."*

Although this story may have been "half-forgotten" when Wallace Stegner wrote these words in 1956, recent years have witnessed an impressive resurgence of interest in trying to understand and pay tribute to the unparalleled

trek of the handcart pioneers. The tales of bravery, heroism, and faith of these remarkable individuals—ordinary people put in an extraordinary circumstance—continue to be kept alive in the minds and hearts of subsequent generations. The descendents of James and Mary Murdoch will certainly continue to keep this story alive throughout future generations. Wee Granny's story of undaunted courage, remarkable resolve, and powerful faith is an awe-inspiring and heart-wrenching example and challenge to all of us.

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About the Author

Kenneth W. Merrell is a descendent of James and Mary Murdoch through their son, John Murdoch, and their granddaughter, Janett Osborne Murdoch McMullin. He wrote this history of Wee Granny and the Martin Handcart Company from late 2000 to mid-2001, in honor of the Wee Granny Memorial Service held June 24, 2001 in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. A native Oregonian who currently resides in Eugene, Oregon, he did the research and writing for this history while living in Iowa City, Iowa, the location of the handcart encampment site. During that time, he made numerous visits to this site, walking the trails of the area where Wee Granny and her fellow travelers waited in preparation for the trek to Utah. The assistance and encouragement of Dallas E. Murdoch during the preparation of this history is gratefully acknowledged. Copies of this document may be downloaded from the Murdoch Family website at www.murdochfamily.net.