

PIONEER RESCUES

Arza Erastus Hinckley was a member of the Mormon Battalion and was quite skilled in handling horses and mules. For a number of years he was Brigham Young's personal teamster. This led to his participation in the timely rescue of three pioneer companies bound for Utah who had gotten into difficulties from which they could not extricate themselves without help.

In 1856, there began the daring experiment of sending Mormon emigrants to the Salt Lake Valley in handcart companies instead of covered wagon trains. This meant traveling on foot through Indian country pulling wooden handcarts carrying a baggage allowance of seventeen pounds of personal belongings per person, following wagon trails, a distance of about 1300 miles from the railroad terminus at Iowa City, Iowa, through Nebraska, Wyoming, and the mountains of eastern Utah. The first handcart company under Edmund Ellsworth was beset by delays from handcart breakdowns, fatigue, and other causes and ran very low on food many days short of their goal. A relief party, including Arza Hinckley, age 30, went out from Salt Lake City and met them on August 31st at a place called Deer Creek. Arza's account stated briefly and modestly, "I went out and met the first handcart company 400 miles and traveled in with them." According to the accounts of others, he often took the places of tired and elderly handcart people and helped pull their handcarts while they drove his team. They reached the Valley September 26th. In the handcart company by coincidence was 18-year-old David Bowen from Wales. Neither of these men ever mentioned the other in their sparse accounts, but 47 years later David's middle son, Frank, would marry Arza's youngest daughter, Minnie. They were my father and mother.

About two weeks after Arza's return to Salt Lake City with the first handcart company, word reached Brigham Young that two handcart companies under J. G. Willie and Edward Martin had made a very late start across the plains in the latter half of August and because of costly delays and being slowed down, were in desperate plight, trapped in the deep snows and blizzards of an unusually early Wyoming winter. Church leaders were unaware that there were any handcart companies on the trail that late. The next day, a hurriedly organized company of relief wagons was sent out and in due time rescued the Willie company after over 50 had died from freezing and starvation. But no one knew how far back the Martin company was. A group of wagons pushed further out on the trail another hundred miles in bitter winter conditions, trying in vain to find the Martin company. In the meantime, Brigham Young, who started out to follow the relief train a few days later with Arza Hinckley as his driver, became ill and was forced to return to Salt Lake. After a few more days, Arza and his friend, Dan Johnson, started out from Salt Lake with two wagons loaded with more relief supplies. Reaching Fort Bridger in a raging blizzard, they were delayed a few days waiting out the blizzard, then moved on. Two days later they met two companies of wagons returning to Salt Lake after having given up the search for the Martin company, which they concluded had either gone into a winter camp or had perished. Among them was Ephraim Hanks, a Mormon Battalion chum of Arza's. Arza persuaded them to make camp nearby and wait while he went on to find the handcarts. When asked why he thought he could find the carts when they hadn't been able to, he replied, "Brigham Young sent me out to find the handcart folks and I will find them or give my life trying to find them."

After Arza and Dan moved on, Ephraim Hanks became troubled in his mind about an earlier dream and decided to follow them. Arza was very pleased when Ephraim caught up with them and it was decided that Dan should take his tired mules (which belonged to Brigham Young) back to Fort Bridger and Ephraim would hitch his horses to Dan's wagon. Arza and Ephraim pushed on and on and one afternoon stopped to rest Arza's mules while Ephraim took his horses and went buffalo hunting to have

some meat for the handcart people. After hunting a long time he killed a buffalo cow. By the time he had skinned it and cut the meat off the bones and loaded his pack horse, it was quite dark. He happened to notice a light twinkle in the distance to the east and then another. As he rode toward them more lights appeared and he soon realized he had found the Martin handcart company. They wept with joy on being found. Leaving the buffalo meat with them and promising to return next day with his partner and two wagonloads of supplies, about ten o'clock he hastened back to Arza, who by then was fearful that Ephraim had become lost, but who was elated at the good news. Early next morning they drove to the handcart camp and unloaded their wagons for some very thankful people. This was at Ice Springs on the Sweetwater River, thereafter known as Martin's Cove.

The plight of the Martin company was pitiful beyond belief -- much worse than the Willie company. Expecting to replenish their food supplies at Fort Laramie, they found none because no one expected any more people would be crossing the plains so late in the year. Their flour ration had been cut to only four ounces per person per day -- not enough to make bread so they simply mixed it with water and drank it. They had nothing else. Children had been eating bark off the willows. Many were sick from starvation, freezing, and utter exhaustion. In sub-freezing weather, some days they couldn't drive their tent stakes into the frozen ground nor dig graves to bury the dead. There were deaths every day. From the day the company was found, Arza and Ephraim spent much of their time administering to the sick. After a few days rest to regain strength, they resumed travel on November ninth and arrived in the Salt Lake Valley November 30th. The death toll was about 150 out of 576 souls. One of the survivors, when he occasionally met Arza thereafter, would put his arms around him and call him, "my saviour."

Ten years later, in late July of 1866, Arza again went out across the plains as captain of a relief wagon train to meet and assist the westward traveling Mormon wagon trains which had some of their cattle stolen by Indians. One such train was the William Henry Chipman company. When they were about 382 miles from Salt Lake, Indians stampeded their cattle and they lost 100 of their strongest oxen and several riding horses. Thus weakened, their progress became dangerously slow and their food supplies were soon exhausted. This company included ten-year-old Brigham Henry Roberts and his older sister Polly. The biography of B. H. Roberts says that for several days "food for the 375 emigrants consisted of whatever the camp hunters with their diminishing energies could provide, such as sage hens, rabbits, mountain hares, and once in a while an antelope. As the daily diet diminished and more and more snowflakes brushed their cheeks like the kiss of death, the veterans were forewarned (that they) were in danger of starvation on the plains." On September third, "a day that seemed bleak and hostile," Arza's relief train found them just in time to rescue them from absolute starvation. "This was near the Big Sandy River, about 196 miles from Salt Lake Valley. The forty sacks of flour out of Arza's wagons were bestowed like heavenly manna on the company." The biographer further relates that on that day a "surging gratitude" filled young Brigham Henry Roberts which, as he grew older, gave rise to a lifelong dream that someday "a writer of insight and skill could pull into sacrosanct imagery the stories of men like Hinckley who patrolled (hundreds of miles of lonely emigrant wagon trails at considerable personal risk), often with no recompense except peace of conscience." Never, he felt, "did these Saints of the saddle receive their just due in the chronicles of the plains."

There is no way of estimating the number of lives saved by Arza E. Hinckley's unflagging efforts on his relief and rescue trips out on the emigrant trails of Wyoming and beyond, but he was a man for the times and filled a useful niche in the saga of the Mormon pioneers.

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