

Biography of Robert Hall Bradshaw
A Member of the Edward Martin Handcart Company of 1856

For you must cross the ragin' main
Before the promised land you gain
And with the faithful make a start
To cross the plains with your handcart.

Robert Hall Bradshaw was born in Bolton, Lancashire, England, September 20, 1844. My mother Elizabeth Simpson Haigh was a widow with two children, Samuel Haigh and Sarah Ann Haigh, when my father, Richard Paul Bradshaw, married her. They had three children born to them, two boys, one girl. My father died before the youngest child was born, leaving the family in meager circumstances. However, the family had been baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prior to 1841, by Elder William Haslam, and was looking forward to the time when they could come to Zion. The President of the Church knew there was hundreds of Saints who were anxious to gather to Zion that season and sent the following word to Franklin D. Richards, who was at that time President of the British Mission. "In regard to foreign emigrants for another year, have them take the North route through New York and Chicago and land in Iowa City. There they will be provided with handcarts, there will be a way provided for them, by which they can haul their provisions and clothing. We will send experienced men to instruct and aid them. Let the Saints who intend to emigrate this season to understand they are to walk and draw their carts." This document was published in the *Millennial Star*, February 23, 1856, and sent broadcast among the Saints causing great joy among those who in the past were unable to pay their expenses to Zion. Several left good occupations before arrangements could be made for their transportation and the result was that they either go to the Poor House that winter or run the risk of a late journey across the plains. On the 3rd of May, the ship *Thornton* sailed from Liverpool with 764 Saints, and twenty two days later, the *Horizon* left the same port with 856, making all 1,620 souls. The former company reached Iowa City June 26th and those who sailed in the *Horizon* reached there twelve days later. Here they were met by experienced men whom the authorities of the Church had sent to take charge. Brother Chauncey G. Webb superintended the making of the carts but was unable to purchase suitable timber for the purpose as it was unseasoned. But he did the best he could. He called to his aid all the mechanics in camp to help crowd the work through. The women were all busy making tents. After several weeks' preparation, the belated emigrants of 1856 were organized as the Edward Martin Handcart Company: 575 souls, 145 carts and 8 wagons, 6 mules and 50 cows or beef cattle. On the 28th of July, they started from the camp Iowa on 1300 miles journey. The country for 200 miles was beautiful roads, good grass and game plentiful, and if all went well, they would reach Salt Lake Valley before snow fall.

The year 1856 has often been referred to as the year of calamities, and well might it be so termed, judging it by the conditions in which the Latter-day Saints found themselves. During that time, the trouble was caused principally by drought and the grasshoppers famine of 1855. With the hard winter that followed, stock on the range died by thousands, and when spring came, the people were in a desperate condition.

The Indians were on the warpath that season, massacring whole companies of emigrants. It caused the handcart people to wonder how it was that the Indians had been so merciful with them while other emigrants were being slaughtered on all sides. They felt the Lord had softened the red man's heart in their behalf.

Their food was getting scarce. The weather getting colder and making it hard for them. Brother John Chislett, a member of the company, had to say about that portion of the journey, "We traveled on in misery and sorrow day after day, sometimes going quite a distance, other times we only were able to go a few miles. We were finally overtaken by a snowstorm with the fierce winds blowing furiously about our ears but we dare not stop. We had to make it on to wood and water before camping." Franklin D. Richards and a missionary party were passing through and saw what a condition the Saints were in. When he arrived in Salt Lake, Conference was in session, but he let Brigham Young know that there are a number of our people, who are started to Zion with handcarts, and they need help, and we want twenty teams by tomorrow morning to go to their relief. Conference was adjourned; the women fixed quilts, under clothing, mittens and everything they could make to make the Saints comfortable.

The next morning, sixteen first class four mule teams were seen on their way with provisions. Three days later, winter set in with all its fury. It snowed for three days and nights and when the Saints got to the Sweetwater River, they had to cross it three times in one day. The sight of the torrent filled with snow and ice both wide and deep. My mother being so worn out she began to give way and was going down stream, but with her daughter's strength, she was held on to and was helped through.

They knew if they remained back, it would be certain death from the Indians or ravenous wolves. So press forward they did until the rescuing party over took them. History says if it had not been for the brave Mormon boys from the Valley whom the Lord raised up for just such rescuing work, not enough emigrants would have been left alive to tell the dreadful story. My mother and brothers and sisters arrived in Salt Lake, November 30, 1856.

Postscript: From a talk by James E. Faust, "The Refiner's Fire" (Ensign, May 1979)

Some years ago President David O. McKay told from this pulpit of the experience of some of those in the Martin handcart company. Many of these early converts had emigrated from Europe and were too poor to buy oxen or horses and a wagon. They were forced by their poverty to pull

handcarts containing all of their belongings across the plains by their own brute strength. President McKay relates an occurrence which took place some years after the heroic exodus: “A teacher, conducting a class, said it was unwise ever to attempt, even to permit them [the Martin handcart company] to come across the plains under such conditions.

“[According to a class member,] some sharp criticism of the Church and its leaders was being indulged in for permitting any company of converts to venture across the plains with no more supplies or protection than a handcart caravan afforded.

“An old man in the corner . . . sat silent and listened as long as he could stand it, then he arose and said things that no person who heard him will ever forget. His face was white with emotion, yet he spoke calmly, deliberately, but with great earnestness and sincerity.

“In substance [he] said, ‘I ask you to stop this criticism. You are discussing a matter you know nothing about. Cold historic facts mean nothing here, for they give no proper interpretation of the questions involved. Mistake to send the Handcart Company out so late in the season? Yes. But I was in that company and my wife was in it and Sister Nellie Unthank whom you have cited was there, too. We suffered beyond anything you can imagine and many died of exposure and starvation, but did you ever hear a survivor of that company utter a word of criticism? *Not one of that company ever apostatized or left the Church, because everyone of us came through with the absolute knowledge that God lives for we became acquainted with him in our extremities.*

“I have pulled my handcart when I was so weak and weary from illness and lack of food that I could hardly put one foot ahead of the other. I have looked ahead and seen a patch of sand or a hill slope and I have said, I can go only that far and there I must give up, for I cannot pull the load through it.” He continues: “I have gone on to that sand and when I reached it, the cart began pushing me. I have looked back many times to see who was pushing my cart, but my eyes saw no one. I knew then that the angels of God were there.

“Was I sorry that I chose to come by handcart? No. Neither then nor any minute of my life since. *The price we paid to become acquainted with God was a privilege to pay, and I am thankful that I was privileged to come in the Martin Handcart Company.*” (*Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1948, p. 8)