

BODIL MALENE MORTENSEN

Born: Aug 5, 1846 Denmark (Died October 24, 1856, buried in common grave at Rock Creek)

Age: 9

Willie Handcart Company



The Gathering
by Julie Rogers
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Bodil's parents combined her first and middle names into the nickname "Balena." She was the fourth of their five children. Bodil's father, Neils, was a weaver by trade. He also dug wells. He had a particular way of bricking up the well as he dug. He said that he would use an iron ring the size that he wanted the well to be. He would lay the brick on the ring and then start to dig under the ring. As the ring and the brick settled into the hole, he would lay more brick and when he got the well dug down to the water, it would already be bricked up.

When the LDS missionaries came to Denmark, Bodil's oldest sister, Anne Margrette, became interested. At first, her parents did not approve, but they later investigated the Church and were baptized along with Anne and their son, Hans Peter, in November of 1852. When Neils Mortensen heard Elder Erastus Snow preach about the gathering of Israel, he told his children he always believed that he was one of the children of Israel being gathered to the mountains.

In 1856, Bodil emigrated in the care of her parents' friends, Jens and Elsie Nielson. The Peder and Helena Mortensen family paid her ship's passage. Bodil's older sister, Anne Margrette, had crossed the plains and mountains to Utah the previous year. Bodil's parents, Neils and Maren Mortensen, and other siblings, were still in Denmark, planning to make the journey the next season.

Peter Madsen, one of the Danish Saints, kept a daily diary. He wrote, "The saints were joyous and bid the saints of Copenhagen a hearty farewell. ... The company was happy and thankful; a good spirit and order prevailed." They traveled by train and ship until they arrived in Liverpool, England. On May 1, 1856, they boarded the ship *Thornton*, "a large three decker from America, commanded by Captain Collins. [They] joined the company of 608 English brothers and sisters who had gone on board before [them]."

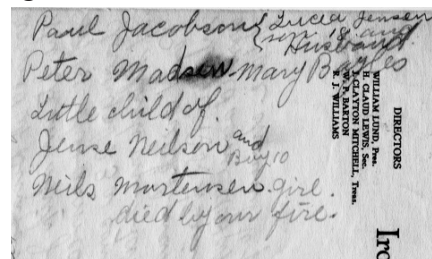
One of Bodil's responsibilities was to care for Niels Nielson, the 5-year-old son of Jens and Elsie. This must have been quite an adventure for Bodil and Niels. As recorded by Peter Madsen during the month of May, they passed huge icebergs and a damaged ship "not worth retrieving." That was a day selected for worship, prayer, and fasting. Many talks were given and Elder Ahmanson told his Danish flock that they "were highly favored of the Lord." That night "a fire broke out and burned between the decks, but the Lord preserved us so that the fire did not over power us. An English boy who had stowed away on the ship was discovered. He had accompanied us without permission and ticket. For this action he would have been punished and caused to bear a wooden jacket or barrel; but since he was a member of the Church he was forgiven." Surely, Bodil and Niels were saddened as a young boy fell down from the top to the bottom deck and died four days later. He was buried in the same manner as the others who had died previously. This included being wrapped in canvas and the American flag, and then deposited in the ocean.

Bodil and Niels had happy experiences, as well as the tragic. Imagine their delight as they watched "many seahorses" [dolphins] appear on the water during the month of June. After arriving in America, they traveled by train to Iowa City, where they built their handcarts and sewed their tents and prepared for their trek to their promised Valley. Bodil turned 10 years old at Iowa City. Her birthday was probably spent mainly in camp duties.

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Winter storms began in October that year and slowed the travel of the company. Beginning October 20, they were stopped near the sixth crossing of the Sweetwater River and the base of Rocky Ridge. The cold was intense. The only remaining provisions were a few hard sea biscuits left over from the ocean voyage. The pioneers were in a very weakened condition. Captain Willie and Joseph Elder left the company to find the rescue wagons. The rescue party had also stopped to wait out the storm. Captain Willie returned with some help and the company resumed their march. What lay immediately ahead on October 23 was the treacherous ascent of Rocky Ridge to the summit of the rockiest part, and another climb immediately after Strawberry Creek where the trail reached its highest elevation, 200 feet higher than the rocky summit, and 71 feet higher than the summit of South Pass. The last members of the company did not reach camp until just before dawn the next morning. While adults wrestled handcarts up the steep trail, Bodil and others had fought their way through the snow, wind, and freezing temperatures to get to Rock Creek, four miles past Strawberry Creek. Some families became separated that day as some lagged behind or went ahead. Others were riding in the few “sick wagons.” Exhausted and weak, Bodil and Niels struggled on their way. Bodil hoped to reach her sister in Salt Lake City, but it was not to be.

Ole Madsen was one of the men who also died that night. The Madsen family was in the same tent with the Nielson’s and Bodil. In an account by Ole’s daughter, Christina Madsen, we learn that Bodil “sat down by the side of the road ... she was so hungry, she also died that same night. They who died that night were laid in a small ditch with their boots or shoes on and covered.” Mette Mortensen, Bodil’s friend, wrote that Bodil (described as “Neils Mortensen[’s] girl”) died by the Mortensen family fire.¹ Mette’s mother, Lena, prepared the bodies for burial. (See Mortensen and Madsen family stories in *Tell My Story, Too*.) Bodil was buried in a common grave with twelve or thirteen others.² One of them was Niels Nielson, shown as “Little child of Jense Neilson” in Mette’s writing. Niels was just five days short of his 6th birthday. What surely began as a grand adventure for these two children, came to a sad but finally blessed end. Before bodies were covered, James Hurren held up his eight-year-old daughter, Mary, to let her see one of her playmates, possibly Bodil, lying among the dead.



Bodil’s father, Neils (age 39), mother, Maren (45), brother, Hans Peter (12), and sister, Maren (7), emigrated to Utah the following year, reportedly leaving Denmark before they could be notified of Bodil’s death. From the outfitting point in Iowa, Niels was a teamster for a prairie schooner and four oxen owned by a friend, John Lund. The Lund family occupied the back of the wagon and the Mortensen family the front. It was late in the fall when they arrived, perhaps expecting to find their daughters together. Bodil’s mother never had vigorous health, and she became despondent upon learning the sad news. Maren reportedly never recovered from the loss of her child, possibly suffered from a breakdown, and died in Parowan in 1862.

Neils became a farmer, but also continued as a weaver. He helped to set up the first looms for weaving in the western part of the United States. He made beautiful tablecloths and suit material for clothing. His charity for others was well known in his community of Parowan, Utah. The farm house opened to the main road. When Neils saw a vehicle approaching in the evening, he would go to the road, wave one of the two canes he had as he got older, and as the vehicle stopped, his standard greeting was, “Vell, vell. Where are you going? When will you be back? Is your mother alive? Is your father dead? Vill you come in to have something to eat?” Passing “hobos” also felt welcome there. They marked the front fence to tell others coming later that they could get a good meal in this house. Neils also housed and fed some Indian boys for several years. Perhaps the years of service he gave helped to soften his heartache at the loss of his little “Balena.”

BODIL MORTENSEN, 1846-1856, WILLIE COMPANY
 ONCE LOST NEVER AGAIN FORGOTTEN, SYMBOL OF THE CHILDEN WHO WALKED
 TOWARD ZION. INSPIRATION OF THE RIVERTON WYOMING STAKE'S "SECOND
 RESCUE" AND ABOVE ALL AN EXAMPLE FOR THOSE WHO HAVE YET TO WALK TO
 THEIR OWN ZION. BOUNTIFUL CHAPTER SONS OF THE UTAH PIONEERS SUP 150,
 STAN WATTS ATLAS BRONZE (Plaque on monument at This Is The Place State Park, Salt Lake
 City, Utah)



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From the book *History of Iron County Mission, Parowan, Utah* by Mrs. Luella Adams Dalton, we learn a little more of Bodil's father:

About 1870, the shepherders in Parowan decided to put their sheep together in a Cooperative Sheep Herd. Neils Otto Mortensen had acquired quite a large number of sheep and they had increased until he was the biggest sheep man in Parowan, owning about two or three hundred head, so he was put in as President of the organization.

Neils Mortensen used to freight his wool up to the Provo Woolen Mills and trade for cloth and all kinds of merchandise. On his freighting trips, he became acquainted with Charlie Crane of Kanosh, who was one of the leading sheep men of Millard County, and a man who was always ready to help his friends. He had read about the Basques in Spain, who were the owners of a very fine breed of sheep. On one of his trips they had talked it over and had decided to be on the lookout for a bunch of men who were interested in building up their herds by sending to Spain for a bunch of Spanish Merino Rams.

Among others who wanted some purebred rams were Francis Webster [of the Martin handcart company] of Cedar City and Doc Brown of Kanarra. So the Basque rams were sent for and in due time they arrived at York, the southern railroad terminal, just northwest of Nephi. This was the summer of 1880. Charlie Crane with others drove the rams to Kanosh and sent word to Neils Mortensen, Webster and Brown to come and get their sheep.

Neils Mortensen took his son, Samuel, a boy of about 13 years, along on horseback so he could drive the sheep, and Doc Brown drove the camp wagon. When they arrived at Kanosh, they drew lots and Neils Mortensen bought twelve rams, Webster ten and Brown eight. Then Neils and Francis Webster started home leaving the boy, Samuel, and Doc Brown to bring the thirty head of Basque Spanish Merino Rams to Iron County.

They had a lot of trouble with the sheep, as they didn't want to move, and were just about impossible to drive. But they finally hit on to the plan of stringing a little hay along the road back of the wagon every once in awhile. The sheep would follow along after the hay. It took several days to get to Parowan. Some of the rams had brass knobs screwed onto the ends of their horns.

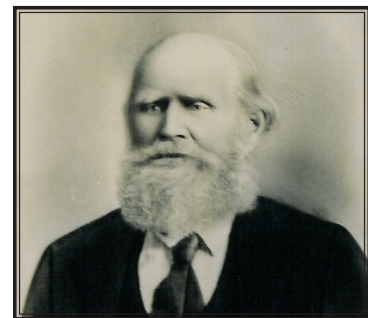
Francis Webster and Randel Lunt met them in Parowan where they loaded the Webster sheep into wagons and hauled them to Cedar. Doc Brown loaded his into his wagon and started for Kanarra.

Prior to this, all the sheep throughout this southern section were a coarse hairy wool breed, and the bringing in of these fine Merino Rams soon made a big difference. They used to shear about 2 lbs. per head, but after a few years it jumped up to seven and eight pounds per head.

The farsightedness of men like Neils Mortensen and Charlie Crane helped out the whole of Southern Utah in bringing in a fine bunch of Spanish Merino Rams and building up the herds in the country. It's men like these whose influence was one of the outstanding pillars in our march of progress. This was the first big stepping stone in what later became a million dollar industry to Southern Utah.

¹ This handwritten note of Mette Mortensen, a girl Bodil's age in the Willie company, also states (not shown): "Those who were with the 14 buried in one grave," meaning people in the company who had been with Bodil, not those buried at Rock Creek. Mette is also naming people who moved to Parowan. Paul Jacobson, who is indicated as Lucia Jensen's husband, died Oct. 13. Lucia remarried, to Peter Jensen. "Son 18" is Rasmus Peder Hansen, an adopted son with Paul and Lucia. He died Nov. 6, three days short of reaching Utah. Of the two men named *Peter Madsen* in the Willie company, this refers to the 49-year-old. He died Nov. 2, 1856. His wife "Mary" remarried, to Herman Bayles Sr.

² There are discrepancies in the number of people buried in the common grave at Rock Creek. The official Willie company journal names 13, but quite a few other sources indicate that 14 were buried in this grave.



Bodil's father,
 Neils Otto Mortensen