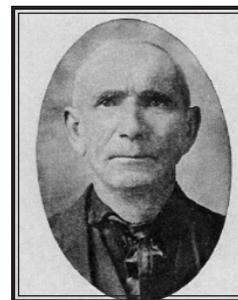


GEORGE CUNNINGHAM



Born: August 17, 1840 in Scotland

Age: 15

Willie Handcart Company

My parents were the first to embrace the Gospel around our district but later nearly half of the citizens joined, probably twenty or thirty families. I was raised in the strictest sense of the word ‘Mormon.’ In the spring of 1856 the chance opened up for us to emigrate to this country, for which we were truly thankful. We sold our small effects and bade our friends farewell, took a train for Glasgow and from there by steamboat to Liverpool. On the 4th of May we embarked on the ship ‘Thornton’ bound for New York.

How well I remember the first step that I took on American soil! How thrilled I was to be in the land of the free—the land of promise! I had been taught to believe it was the land of promise blessed above all other lands, and although only a boy of fifteen years, I felt like thanking God for the blessing I then enjoyed.

George came to Utah with his parents, James (age 54) and Elizabeth Nicholson (48), and his sisters, Catherine (17), Elizabeth (12), and Margaret (9). (An older brother, Robert, had recently been married. He emigrated in 1861 with his wife and 4 children.) The family was promised if they would live the gospel, all the members of the family would arrive safely in Zion. George wrote:

After a few days in New York we sailed up the river to Albany then by railroad about three hundred miles, by ship on the Great Lakes and then again by railroad to Iowa arriving the latter part of June. We went to the Mormon campground just outside the city [Iowa City] and stayed there for five or six weeks. At length we were appointed to continue our journey with Captain James Willie’s handcart company. This meant a three-hundred mile trip through the state of Iowa before reaching a permanent starting place at Winter Quarters or Florence, where we arrived after several weeks of pulling, hauling and praying. People sneered at us and laughed, crying out ‘Gee-haw’ but this did not discourage us in the least. We knew that we were on the right track and that was enough.

I can remember being at a meeting when Brother Levi Savage ... spoke. He counseled the old and sickly to remain until another spring. The tears rolled down his cheeks as he prophesied that if such took the journey at that late season of the year, their bones would strew the way. At length we started, but the number was greatly reduced, about a hundred remaining [in Nebraska]. I must state here that there was not one of our hundred [Scottish] remained for which we received great praise. The wagons were heavily loaded and we were delayed much by having to wait on them.

Indians frequently made the pioneers feel worried, and there were some tragic encounters. However, Indians helped the overland travelers more than they hurt them. George recorded that he and his family were invited to camp one night with a large group of Omaha Indians at Wood River, Nebraska. “We did so and they were very friendly.”

George also wrote about the buffalo stampede followed by “a terrible prairie storm:”

It was dark as pitch and all hands had to hold on to the tents to keep them from going up like balloons. The heavy rain soon flooded the prairie, accompanied by the deafening roar of thunder and vivid flashes of lightning which seemed to electrify everything. When morning came all the able bodied men and boys turned out again to look for the cattle . . . but not even their footprints could be seen because of the heavy rain. The search was kept up for a week and often when we thought we could see old Brin and Nig or Buck and Bright they would invariably take to their heels and prove to be nothing but an old buffalo. I have heard the song, ‘Through the Wildwood I’ll Wander and Chase the Buffalo,’ but I never expected to experience it in this shape. ...

We transferred our provisions from the wagons to the handcarts and hitched the thirty milch cows to the wagons to haul the sick and the children who were not able to walk. We plodded on through the mud with all the courage we could muster. We traveled along slowly and after a few weeks arrived at Ft. Laramie. As our provisions were very nearly exhausted our captain went into Fort Laramie and bought a ton or two of flour for which he had to pay \$20.00 per hundred pounds.

After leaving here we met a company of missionaries going to the states. Elder Parley Pratt came and talked to us trying to encourage us. ... The nights now began to get very cold and feed was poor, also our provisions were running out fast. Starvation looked us in the face. We were put on rations of six ounces of flour each per day and nothing else. The old and the weak began to die for want of proper food. ... I, myself, have helped to bury ten to fifteen in a single day. We who could stand it were barely kept alive and after several weeks of this ration it was reduced to half this amount. I ... stirred my three ounces with some water and gulped it down. To make things worse we were caught in a heavy snowstorm on the Sweetwater. It was extremely cold and the last of our flour was gone. ...

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Our Captain ... commenced to kill off the cattle but they were nearly as poor as we were. We used to boil the bones and drink the soup and eat what little meat there was. We greedily devoured the hides also. I myself had took a piece of hide when I could get it, scorched off hair, roasted it a little on the coals, cut it into little pieces so that I could swallow and bolted it down my throat for supper and thought it was most delicious. ...

Towards the last the weather was so cold that all but five or six men in camp had been severely frozen, and let me add right here is where the great test came - some would sacrifice by giving their food and clothing to their friends, relatives and children while others seemed to be devoid of natural affection and would let their family members die off merely for the sake of getting their few mouthfuls of food or perhaps an old blanket that covered them.

George's little sister, Elizabeth, almost died due to lack of food, shelter and warm clothing. She was left behind for a time, as she was thought to be dead, but when her mother remembered the promise given to them earlier, she and Elizabeth's father went back to her. They built a fire, wrapped her in blankets and rubbed her body patiently. When some hot water spilled on one of Elizabeth's feet, her eyelids began to flicker and her feet twitched. Her parents worked on her until she revived. (See Elizabeth Cunningham biography in *Tell My Story, Too*.)

While near the 5th crossing of the Sweetwater, George had a dream. He wrote:

While laboring under those trials and afflictions I lay down one night and fell asleep. I dreamed a dream, that morning had come, the storm had subsided some and that we had started out on the road. I thought that I saw two men coming toward us on horseback. They were riding very swiftly and soon came up to us. They said that they had volunteered to come to our rescue and that they would go on further east to meet a company which was still behind us and that on the morrow, we could meet a number of wagons loaded with provisions for us. They were dressed in blue soldier overcoats and had Spanish saddles on their horses. I examined them, particularly the saddles, as they were new to me. I also could discern every expression of their countenance. They seemed to rejoice and be exceedingly glad that they had come to our relief and saved us. At last morning came, it had cleared somewhat and I think that the snow was 18 inches deep on the level where we were. The weather was very cold. We made some very large fires with willows which were abundant at this place. Everybody stood around the fires with gloomy faces, as if in a death trap, when all at once flashed into my mind my dream of the previous night.

George shared his dream with other members of the Willie company while they were around this fire. He said:

How joyfully I related my last night's dream in detail. My mother told them that she knew it would come true, as I was promised that gift in my blessing. And to our great pleasure every word was literally fulfilled. I can recollect that I was in the lead of the crowd, feeling quite inspired by my dream. At [the] approach [of the rescuers] I roared out, "See! See them coming over that hill!" They told me I was a true dreamer, and we all felt that we should thank God. We soon met the wagons with provisions and were very kindly treated and all felt to thank God. ... Now the great difficulty was by eating too much. [The two men in blue soldier's overcoats were Joseph A. Young and Stephen Taylor. See their stories in rescuer section of *Tell My Story, Too*.]

Although a young man, George was also mature enough to appreciate what the captains of his company had done for them. He wrote:

Our Captain showed us a noble example. He was furnished a mule to ride on but he said, "I will never get on its back. I will set the example - you follow it." And thus our captains set the example. They would crowd ahead and be the first in the streams to help others across and they were the last out. They waded every stream, I might say, a dozen times between Iowa City and Green River with the exception of the Missouri River. Their feet were worn and bleeding, they became exhausted and had to be hauled the balance of the way, some of them not being able to stand. Among these heroic leaders were: James Willie, our captain; Milan [Millen] Atwood, Levi Savage, William Woodard [Woodward] and another Danish brother whose name I have forgotten.

After being helped to the Valley by the rescuers, George said: "At our arrival at Salt Lake City our company was kindly cared for and when we had rested up a bit we were sent to various settlements. We were sent to American Fork where my home has been ever since. Here we met with many old acquaintances and soon made friends with others who helped us. 'Ere long I found employment and thus we were removed from our very straightened circumstances."

At the age of 22, George married Mary Wrigley. They became the parents of 13 children. The youngest child, Lillie May (Roberts), lived until 1972.