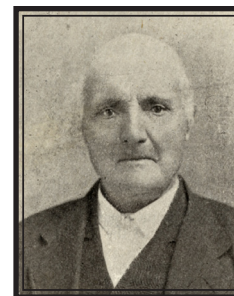


JAMES G. WILLIE



Born: November 1, 1814 in England

Age: 42

Captain of the Willie Handcart Company

James Willie came to America when he was 21 years old. He first heard the gospel preached in Connecticut. He was baptized in 1842 and served his first mission in 1843, traveling and teaching in Vermont, Connecticut and New York. He was gone during the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, and joined the exiled Saints at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, in 1846. In 1852 he returned to England, again as a missionary.¹ In 1856, after four years away from his wife and three children, President Franklin D. Richards of the European Mission appointed James to be the president of the group of Saints on the ship *Thornton*.

Brother Erastus Snow had been at Florence, Nebraska, assisting the returning missionaries and the late handcart companies. An excerpt from a letter Elder Snow wrote to President John Taylor tells a little of what it was like for Elder Willie and his handcart company: “Notwithstanding the hurry and bustle of starting off the last companies and closing up the complicated business of the season, it was a joyful termination of the laborous summer work, and a happy meeting with those faithful men of God, who after long years of separation from home and kindred dear, and of faithful toil and labor in foreign lands, are now about to be released from their labors and rest themselves while they journey across the Plains.” The returning Elder Willie surely did not have a restful journey ahead of him! Continuing, Brother Snow wrote of Elder Willie and the other returning missionaries: “May the choice blessings of Israel’s God, whom they serve, abide upon them, and speed them on their way to the embrace of their anxious and loving families and friends. May they ever live in the affection of the Saints of God, and the memory of their noble deeds never perish.”

James then became the Captain of the Fourth Handcart Company, consisting of about 500 people when they left Iowa City. They had 120 handcarts, five wagons, 24 oxen and 45 beef cattle and cows. About 100 people dropped out before they left Florence, Nebraska, on August 18. James Willie had been over the plains and experienced the road. He was a fluent speaker and was well liked by the people. Near Grand Island, Nebraska, they lost about 30 head of cattle during a severe storm. Not only did the people lose beef rations and milk cows, they didn’t have enough oxen left to pull all of the provisions. The flour had to be divided and each handcart had to carry another 100 pounds of flour. When they reached Fort Laramie, provisions were not waiting as expected. James called a meeting to decide what could be done as they were still many miles from Salt Lake, and at their present rate of consumption, all the food would be gone before they reached their destination. The flour allowance was cut from one pound to 3/4 of a pound per day and every effort was made to travel faster. At Independence Rock it became necessary to reduce the rations even further. Another meeting was called “to take into consideration our provisions & the time it was considered we should have to make it last before we could depend upon supplies. It was unanimously agreed to reduce the rations of flour one fourth.” On October 19, express riders met the company with the good news that supply wagons were close behind and they should meet them the next day. On October 20, the Willie Company came to a grinding halt due to a severe snowstorm. The last of the meager rations had been given out the night before. James Willie knew that he must go ahead to find the relief wagons. He was weak and half-starved, but knew he must save his company. He chose Joseph B. Elder to go with him.

Joseph Elder wrote: “We started ahead in search of our brethren. We rode 12 miles [to the base of Rocky Ridge] where we expected to find them, but they were not there.”

Andrew Olsen pondered these questions: *Imagine what went through James Willie’s mind when he didn’t find them there—the dilemma he faced: Should he turn back, both for his own safety and to provide leadership to his company in their dire circumstances? Or should he take an enormous chance and continue forward searching for the rescuers? As he considered whether to go forward, surely he thought of all these things: If the rescuers weren’t at the base of Rocky Ridge, they wouldn’t be anywhere close.*

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Perhaps the closest they'd be was on the other side of Rocky Ridge, at least 13 miles away. Going another 13 miles in those conditions was extremely risky, and the thought of it surely gave James Willie pause. If he decided to continue, that meant he wouldn't get back to the camp with help that day, as expected—and needed. He had to wonder how many would survive, not just the one day they thought he'd be gone, but at least two days without food in those conditions. He had to wonder where the rescuers really were; maybe they were farther behind than the express riders had said. ... He had to wonder that even if he made it to the other side of Rocky Ridge, would he possibly miss the rescuers? How would he know, in that wide open country, where they were? And if he passed by their camp unknowingly, what would be the consequences for him personally—and his company? How far would he keep riding? Would he continue another day if he didn't find them that day? That would mean his company would be four days without food—and suffer catastrophic loss of life. He had to worry about losing his way, getting off the trail. Although he knew the trail, he hadn't traveled it in four years and had never traveled it in these conditions, when it was covered in snow and in a disorienting whiteout.

[Joseph Elder wrote:] “We ascended the Rocky Ridge. The snow and an awful cold wind blew in our faces all day. ... Upon the west bank of the North Fork of the Sweetwater we found a friendly guide post which pointed us to their camp down upon the Sweetwater in amongst the willows. When they saw us, they raised a shout and ran out to meet us. Great was their joy to hear from us for they had long been in search of us. They could scarcely give us time to tell our story they were so anxious to hear all about us, their camp being 27 miles from ours.”

Willie and Elder retraced those 27 miles to the Willie Company's camp, the rescuers with them. Rescuer Harvey Cluff [who had placed the “friendly guide post”] called it an “extremely difficult” all-day journey. ... [Captain Willie] had traveled 54 miles in those two days—almost every hour of daylight both days.

Captain Willie then had the awesome task of traveling back over the 27 miles he had just come to bring relief to his beloved company. Somewhat revived, the Willie company pushed on, after sending the majority of the rescue wagons further east to find the Martin, Hodgett and Hunt companies. On October 23, 1856, the company had their greatest trial, the crossing of Rocky Ridge. It took all day and into the night to get the last persons to Rock Creek, a distance of about 16 miles from where they started that day, traveling through yet another storm. At about 11:00 p.m., it was reported that there were many people that had still not arrived into camp, and Captain Willie was on his way back alone to look for them, traversing the trail for the fourth time on that dreadful day. The very last of his company was not brought in until 5:00 a.m. Fifteen people were buried before the company left Rock Creek two days later.

Captain James Willie was truly a great leader who showed genuine concern for his fellow travelers. George Cunningham wrote the following as a tribute to James Willie, “Our Captain showed us all a noble example. He was furnished a mule to ride on our start from Iowa City, but he said, ‘I will never get on its back, I will show the example, you follow it.’ He did so and the Captains of hundreds followed him. They would crowd on ahead to be the first into the streams to help the women and children across. They waded every stream, I might say, a dozen times between Iowa City and Green 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 on their feet.”

On November 2, near Fort Bridger, the company journal recorded: “Brother Willie's feet were in such a bad condition from frost that he was unable to walk to the Camp; a wagon was sent for him.” The reason? Again, he had been late getting to camp, having “stayed behind to bring up the sick. ... We had not teams enough to haul the feeble that were left behind.” The company continued on, and with the help of the rescuers, arrived in the Valley on November 9, 1856. A doctor recommended amputation of James's feet, but his wife skillfully nursed him and he was blessed to keep his limbs. In 1859 James moved to Mendon, Cache Valley, Utah, where he was active in the community. He died in 1895 at the age of 85.



James Willie home in Mendon

Sources: Willie Company Journal in *The Willie Handcart Company*, by Paul D. Lyman, 2006; italicized words from May 2012 fireside talk by Andrew D. Olsen to the missionaries at Martin's Cove, used by permission; *Journals of Joseph B. Elder*; Missionary diaries of James G. Willie; *A Collection of Last Will and Testament of Willie Ancestral Families in England*; “Autobiography of George Cunningham,” March 29, 1876; photo courtesy Alan Willie. See *Follow Me To Zion* by Andrew Olsen and Jolene Alphin, *Deseret Book*, 2013, for artwork and more on James Willie.

¹James inherited a large sum of money while on his mission, due to the death of his brother, John. He used a small amount of this to defray his mission expenses and gave the rest (about £200) to the Perpetual Emigrating Fund in order to pay passage for many of these emigrants.