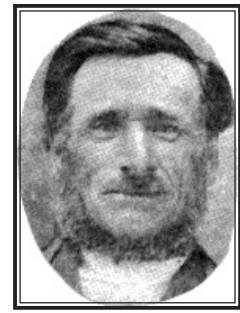


## JAMES LAIRD



Born: December 25, 1825 Ireland

Age: 30

Willie Handcart Company

The Laird family in 1856 consisted of the father, James (age 30), mother, Mary Rennie (29) and children, Joseph Smith (6), Edward (4), and Elizabeth (1). When James was a boy he and some friends had trouble with their teacher at school one day and were sent home. James knew that he would be severely disciplined so he ran off and joined the Navy with his friends. He was very disappointed to find much more severe discipline than he'd had at home and after a few years obtained a furlough. James wanted very much to reconcile with his father, but arrived at home to find that his father had died. James and his mother cried together and James determined to leave the Navy to care for his mother. James grieved throughout his life that he had not been able to obtain forgiveness from his father. James's biography states: "Weeks passed before James was accosted by an officer calling him John Laird. 'I am James Laird,' he answered. The officer took him to the office to be checked. They had him registered as John Laird and all marks of identification were recorded on the opposite side from which they were on his body. He was released. . . . the hand of God manifested in his behalf. James had work to do. He must redeem his father's family. God was protecting him."

James went to Scotland one summer to work in the coal mines, where he met Michael Rennie, a new convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Michael taught the gospel to James and invited him to meet the Elders. Although James's father had read to his family from the Bible daily, James began his own Bible study more earnestly after meeting with the Mormon Elders. After much study and prayer, James converted and went to Ireland to share with his family. They were opposed to James's newfound religion, and James returned to Scotland.

Michael Rennie's sister, Mary, was employed at an eating house where James took his meals. One day after eating, James fell asleep and Mary came to his table and filled his open mouth with salt. This odd beginning of a friendship developed and James and Mary were married in 1847. Mary had also joined the Church at age 16 and been among Scotland's first converts. James and Mary had two little boys before James left to serve a full-time mission in 1853. During his mission, James was blessed with a new pair of shoes in his path one day, and the gift of healing in behalf of a crippled child. While James was gone, little Joseph was out for a walk with his Aunt Elizabeth one day. A strange man stopped and said, "What a fine looking little man! What is your name?" Five-year-old Joseph replied, "I am Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet."

Mary Rennie's family had a severe test to their faith about this time. Michael Rennie had sold everything he owned and made plans to travel to America when an American Elder stole his money. The Rennie's were all heartsick. One year later, Michael died, having never reached his goal to be in Zion. However, on his death bed, Michael said to his family: "Please stay by the Church for I know Joseph Smith was and is a Prophet of God. Our Elder was weak." Michael's daughter, Joan, asked James and Mary to find this Elder when they reached Utah, and have him tried before Brigham Young. After their arrival in Utah, James did find the Elder and reported, "O my! The poor creature was going through the torture of Hell." James told the man, "I was going to make a report to Brigham Young and pay that money back to my family ... Michael is dead [and] God is punishing you. I leave you to God." The man answered, "If I could undo what I did to Michael Rennie, I would be willing to be skinned from head to feet." He never did pay back the money, but James and Mary decided never to divulge his name to friends or family, allowing God to be the judge. A granddaughter later wrote: "Thanks, Grandfather and Grandmother, for your courage and faith. You could have been weaklings and lost your birthright. We thank you for saving the family and giving us an opportunity to be raised in the Church."



(James Laird - Page 2)

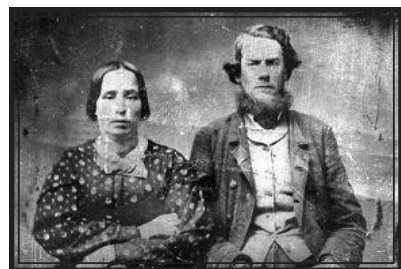
James gave much service to others during his 1300-mile handcart trek. After carrying his family over streams, he returned to carry many others. He always used good judgement in rolling up his pant legs and removing his socks and shoes. One of his assignments was to help with the burials. One morning the captain said, “Brother Laird, we have more to lay away this morning.” James had never refused before, but by this time, he was very weak and replied, “I am afraid to use the shovel this morning.” James was given a handful of corn and told, “Eat this [and] do come and help.” James looked at his starving family with whom he had often shared his rations. Mary encouraged him, saying, “Eat that corn, James, to save your strength. I can never make the trip [without you] with the baby nursing.” Remembering how the baby’s mouth after nursing would often be streaked with blood, James walked over to Mary and put the corn in her lap, picked up his shovel and went to fulfill his assignment. He testified that strength was then given to him that remained the rest of the journey.

One day young Joseph found a piece of buffalo hide and gave a piece to his mother saying, “Eat this. It is good.” Mary couldn’t bear the thoughts of eating “such a dirty thing.” Mary was a “proud little soul” who brought three special articles with her from Scotland; a pretty set of baby clothes, a new suit for James, and her new green silk dress. Mary never discarded these special things. At Fort Laramie, Mary found a captain’s wife with a new baby. Mary traded her special set of baby clothes for a quart of sugar and made sugar water for her own baby, Elizabeth, to live on until help came. Her green dress later provided fabric for some temple clothes.

James was the leader of the twenty people in his tent.<sup>1</sup> The Laird family biography also mentions a Scottish friend by the name of Brother Booth. One night after seeing his family safe in camp, James went a mile back on the trail to find Brother Booth and some others with wolves howling nearby, ready to give up. The thought came to James to box their ears in order to rouse them. He then carried Brother Booth on his back most of the way to camp. James said, “I deprived [the wolves] of a meal that night.” Brother Booth lived to come to Utah and often told the Laird children how their father had saved his life. The identity of Brother Booth is unknown.

The Laird family pioneered in Spanish Fork, Heber City, and Mountain Dell. Here they farmed and provided overnight lodging as well as many meals in their home for freighters traveling between Park City and Salt Lake City. Mary served as a Relief Society President and in the YWMIA. The Lairds had ten children, six of whom preceded them in death. Elizabeth Laird, the baby who traveled across the plains strapped to her mother’s back, had a daughter, Valeria Sarah Winmill, who wrote a history from which much of this biography is taken. She said: “Just prior to Mother’s death, she spent much time retelling stories and experiences of pioneer life. I said, ‘I wonder, Mother, what I would do if called to endure such hardships for the Gospel as you did?’ ‘Oh, you will never have plains to cross as we did,’ she said. Mother at that time was blind. She meditated for a few minutes, then raised her head quickly and said, ‘Oh, you will have plains to cross, yes, but in a different way. Will you come through as we did? I will give you a key. No matter what comes to try your faith, stand by the President of the Church. God will never allow a fallen Prophet to lead his Church. All will be well with you if you remember.’ I pass this key to all who may read this.”

Sources: “History of James Laird,” by Valeria Sarah Winmill; [www.lairdfamily.org](http://www.lairdfamily.org); various Laird family histories in files of Jolene Allphin; [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org); Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website; tent lists from William Woodward’s hundred in *History of William Woodward 1833-1908*, 2nd edition with addendum, 2005.



Mary Rennie and James Laird

“Praise be their names. May we, their descendants, honor our heritage. We are proud of them and only hope they will have cause to be proud of us when we meet again.” -Valeria Sarah Winmill, granddaughter

<sup>1</sup>The 20 occupants of the Laird’s tent, besides his own family, included the six members of the Cunningham family, four members of the John Stewart family, James and Mary Gibb, Isabella Wilkey, Elizabeth Forbes, and Christine Brown, ranging in age from 4 months to 67 years. (See Cunningham, Stewart, and Gibb stories in *Tell My Story, Too*.)