

JOHN OBORN



Born: 1844 England

Age: 12

Willie Handcart Company

John came to Zion with his parents, Joseph and Maria Stradling Oborn. His father died on October 30 on the Green River. He was just 10 days short of the end of his journey. John and his mother, bereft of father and husband, continued on to the Valley with their company and the rescue teams. John later said that his father “had given his life cheerfully for the cause that he espoused.”

John wrote about his family and their trek: “I was born November 17, 1843, in Bath, Somersetshire, England, and was the youngest son of Joseph Oborn and Maria Stradling of Wellington, England. My father’s family belonged to the Plymouth Brethren Church, but joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints about the year 1843. Our family soon afterward received the spirit of gathering with the Saints in the valleys of Utah. In the year 1856 all of our possessions were sold for cash and this money turned over to the Church Emigration Fund. Father, mother and I said goodbye to Sister Eliza and Brother Henry and other relatives and friends and took a last farewell look about the old home, realizing we would never again see that always-to-be-remembered “Home, Sweet Home.” We had now cast our lot with the Saints of God and were on our way westward, little realizing and never fearing the terrible hardships between us and the valleys of Utah.

“We traveled by train to Geverfod, where we met other Saints and on Sunday, the 4th of May, 1856, set sail in the good ship “Thornton” under the command of Captain Collins. It was a sailing vessel with very few conveniences. There was one cook stove for each deck and our family was allowed to use it for an hour each week. The ship’s diet was largely bean biscuit soaked overnight. This would still be dry in the center in the morning. But we were happy and after a voyage of forty-one days we landed in New York, Saturday evening, June 4, 1856. Our journey from New York to Iowa was by train and boat. It was comparatively easy without excitement of any kind.

“In Iowa we were assigned to travel with a handcart company under the command of James G. Willie. Our one hundred was under the supervision of Millen Atwood. We left Iowa City, July 15, 1856. The train consisted of one hundred twenty handcarts, six wagons, and six hundred souls. We arrived at Florence, August 11th, and a week later, after repairs to our handcarts, we started. It was very apparent that the handcarts were poorly constructed. We left Florence, following closely along the Missouri [N. Platte] River, going about 10 miles a day. Father would usually pull and mother and I would push. At the end of the day’s journey we would pull our carts into a circle, a meeting would be held and instructions given. I was but a boy of 13 years, but I never shall forget the testimony and the wonderful spirit of sincerity and loyalty of all members of our company.

“Our guides kept us pretty well supplied with buffalo meat, which at that time was plentiful. There were thousands. On August 29 we encountered a tribe of Indians. They were friendly to us and told us of a murder that had been committed by another tribe of Indians a few days previous to this in which a lady and her child were the victims. Our train passed the scene of the murder and we buried the remains.

“We passed through Fort Laramie on September 30, where a few supplies were bought. We soon began to realize that we had started our journey too late in the year. There were no more buffalo to be found, and our rations were getting low. We were reaching the foothills near Rock Springs [Rocky Ridge]. We had already had some snow and the weather conditions looked unfavorable. Our scant rations had reached the point where the amount ordinarily consumed for one meal now had to suffice for a full day. From here on it is beyond my power of description to write. God only can understand and realize the torture and privation, exposure, and starvation we went through. Now word reached us that we must hasten or winter would soon come upon us. Instead of speeding up, the weakened condition of our older members slowed us down.

“Each day one or more would die. A few more days, and then came the most terrible experience of my life. This was October 20th. Winter had come, snow fell continuously. Movement in any direction had practically stopped. Our scant rations were now gone. Ten or twelve of our members, faithful to the last, were buried in a single grave. Starvation was taking its toll. A day or two later my own father closed his eyes, never to wake again. He, too, had given his life cheerfully for the cause that he espoused. We buried him in a lonely grave, its spot unmarked. This was not far from the [Green] River, Wyoming [October 30].¹ During these terrible times it seemed only a matter of days before all would perish.

¹ The Willie company journal recorded: “Thursday, 30th Rolled from Big Sandy [near present-day Farson, Wyoming] to Green River, 11 miles, forded the river and camped on its banks. Many persons were sick & it was late before they were in camp. Bros. Atwood, Woodward & Christiansen staid behind the main body of the camp to urge on the sick & see that none were left behind. Mary Gurdlestone . . . died in the morning. Joseph Oborn from Bath, Somersetshire, England, aged 43 years died in the evening. A large fire was kindled in the evening, a meeting was held & several of the Brethren addressed the audience.”

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“We resorted to eating anything that could be chewed; even bark and leaves of trees. We youngsters ate the rawhide from our boots. This seemed to sustain life. Then when it seemed all would be lost, already 66 of our members dead, like a thunderbolt out of the clear sky, God answered our prayers. A rescue party, bringing food and supplies from Great Salt Lake City, sent by President Brigham Young, came in sight. Those of you who have never had this experience cannot realize its intensity. I shoveled snow out of our tent with a tin plate belonging to my mother’s mother. We were cared for by a dear brother who was very kind to us. He seemed like an angel from heaven. We left our handcars and rode in his wagon and slowly, but safely, he brought us to Zion. We passed through Fort Bridger on November 2, and arrived in Great Salt Lake City, November 9, 1856.

“We lived a short time in the Fifth Ward, then we moved to Union Fort. We soon went to live by ourselves. I worked at farming, sheep raising and mining. We didn’t have a stove, so all our cooking was done over a fireplace. Once our fire failed to keep overnight. I walked to Dry Creek, called Draper, to get live coals. More than once, on my way home, I would fan the coals into a blaze and get fresh coals and continue home. It was several years after this before I saw matches. During the construction of the Salt Lake Temple I hauled granite from Little Cottonwood Canyon. I have been active in church work all my life. For thirty years I acted as ward clerk.”

In 1906, John wrote the following in a letter to the Handcart Veterans Association:

“Union, Utah 3 / Sep 1906 / SS Jones Esq / Chairman of the handcart committee Provo, Utah / Dear Brother, I am one, and the only one now living that came with the Hand Carts in 1856 in this ward. Also, those who went-out-to assist us and bring us in—are dead. I came in JG Willies Company —We arrived in Salt Lake City —to the best of my memory on the 31 Oct² —My father died at Green River, from the want of food —I was 13 years old at the time.

My experience was about the same as Albert Jones who was 15 years old —I was rather big for my age and performed a man’s part in standing guard —putting up tents & etc.

I well remember that snow storm you brethren referred to. And I shoveled the snow away with a tin plate at the 3 crossing of the Sweet Water—I also remember the arrival of Joseph A Young—with his Blue Over Coat—And his Glad tiding of the Relief wagons Soon to meet us.

We were most of us was out of anything to eat for 2 days—And before this we were 2 or 3 weeks on 4 ounces of flour a day—But I had a good appetite and good teeth so I ate rawhide that was used to mend the Carts when they broke down—and also Rawhide the Women converted in to soup when their other shoes gave out. You know they was well flavored and went good—In fact, the demand was greater than the Supply and I quite enjoyed them at the time —but I think the poor Woman Mourned the loss of [her] shoes. But I hope they have forgave me by this time—if they are yet alive.

Now I am going to say what I ought to have said first—I approve of you and the balance of your Committee’s work—in trying to effect a reunion of the remnant that is yet alive of the Hand Cart People.

Included find a Check for \$2.50 in your favor to help the cause along. If it is not enough, write me. / Respectfully / John Oborn / PO Address Sandy R 3 Utah / But Union Utah will find me / Say, Please excuse this long letter—But your Call in the Deseret News—set me to thinking of the long past With tears in my eyes / So please forgive me.

[Light editing for readability by Jolene Allphin]

² The Willie company arrived in the Salt Lake Valley on November 9, 1856. They had camped at Green River on October 30, where John’s father died.

Sources: “Autobiography of John Oborn,” available at mormonmigration.com and Mormon Overland Travel website; letter from John Oborn to SS Jones, 3 Sept 1906, Handcart Veterans Association, Scrapbook 1906-1916 Fd. 2 page 4; Willie company journal.



Joseph Oborn, father of John Oborn