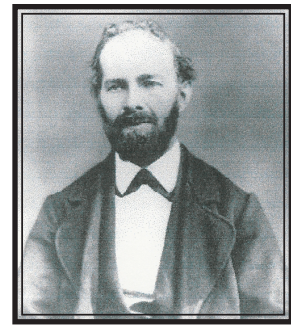


JOSEPH B. ELDER

Born: 7 March 1835 Indiana

Age: 21

Willie Handcart Company and Rescuer



Joseph Elder made a promise in April of 1856 as he received the Melchezidek Priesthood, and was ordained to the office of an Elder. His spoken words to his brethren in St. Louis, Missouri, at this time were recorded in his diary: “Brethren of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I am willing to receive all the honor that God is willing to bestow on me through His Holy Priesthood and I esteem it as a high and holy privilege to be an Elder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and I am determined by the help of God to perform every duty and bear every burden that God through his Holy Priesthood is willing to lay on my shoulders and I know that the Spirit has manifested itself through me in various conditions and that the signs by faith has followed me in numerous instances and by faith in God and through His grace I shall be able to perform all that he may require at my hands and now these are my feelings brothers and it needs not many words to testify for I speak in the honesty of my heart and I pray God that he will bless me in so doing. Amen”

Joseph had been attending school at nearby McKendry College. He sought the counsel of the Elders and was advised to quit school in favor of helping with the immigration, and then completing his schooling in Salt Lake City. He wrote, “This seemed to be my just duty and I accordingly determined to set about it in good faith.” After standing up to much persecution and mocking by fellow students, professors and townspeople, Joseph said, “By the aid of the Holy Spirit I was able to put them to shame and silence them one after another as fast as they was pleased to come. It was indeed a day of triumph over the craftiness of the evil one and I was blessed with the power to do it as you may find in the 4th chapter of Ephesians.” Joseph was true to his word and kept the promises made. He recorded: “I bade adieu to my sisters and mother and oh, how my heart did almost break to leave them, when they with tears and sobs and entreaties pled to the last for me to stay. But God had use for me in other places and I must go. So I spoke a few kind words to them and embraced them and parted not knowing when we should see each other again and I took up my line of march for the Valleys of Ephraim 2,000 miles distant.”

For nearly four months Joseph worked tirelessly with George D. Grant and others in purchasing and driving cattle from Missouri to Florence, Nebraska, where the handcart companies would need some of the cattle. He cheerfully endured much hardship and persecution during this time: “Today I had a severe tour after some of the worst stock I ever undertook to drive. ... We had an awful days work today of branding cattle. They tried often to kill us but we eluded their efforts. There was about forty we could not brand any way or how. ... Today we crossed the Missouri River. We swam some – ferried some – and drowned some. They fought us like tigers, etc. ... One got contrary. I larieted it and fastened the rope to my saddle and on we went. In going up a slippery hill, the heiffer that I was dragging ran around me and drew the rope with such violence across my watch that it bursted it. On we went . . . traveled hard. The meanest cattle to drive that I ever had anything to do with. Sold one of our cows that tried to kill us so often for \$25.00. ... Long and tedious days.”

Joseph recorded the Willie company’s arrival in Nebraska: “The handcarts arrived true enough. There was about a hundred of them and about five hundred persons. I was agreeably surprised at the health and good feelings and cheerfulness of the camp. ... The Spirit of the Lord was with them. The greater portion of them was in better health than when they left Iowa City. ... That night a few of the Devils that walk in gents Boots who reside in Bluff City came over to fulfill their mission and do all they could against the handcart emigration - quite a muss.”

Although Joseph had planned to travel to Utah with the returning European missionaries, he was asked on “short notice” to join with the Willie Handcart Company, which he accepted. It was his job to hunt and provide meat and drive a wagon which carried the extra flour, the lame and the sick: “Got all together and rolled out. ... We took up our line of march for the valleys of Ephraim or G.S.L. City distance over one thousand miles. It was quite an interesting sight to see the carts roll out in their several divisions and to see the people in such good faith although the Plains had never been crossed by handcarts. Yet they believed they could accomplish it. ... It truly was a pleasant scene to see the camp of Israel moving through the wilderness.”

Joseph wrote about how much he enjoyed hunting the buffalo for the company. He gave a rather humorous and vivid description of an otherwise distressing time:

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“Here the buffalo began to be numerous all around us. ... A large herd of buffalo started from below the road and ran directly across towards the north just as the carts were passing. They ran helter skelter right through the company. The company was pretty hungry for meat and to see the buffalo come right to them seemed to them as a great blessing of kind providence. The scene that followed would have made a hunter laugh - to see them shoot some with shot - others with little fizees that would hardly have upset a June bug come tearing along and up and pop pop they would go. But some of them had muskets and amongst the whole they managed to kill two. I was too far behind to help any, being with the wagons, but I could see the performance and then of all the bragging about who killed them. Some declared they hit him after he fell, etc. ... Well my time was mostly employed in furnishing the camp in meat, most of which was buffalo. Many were the interesting hunts which I had for hunting buffalo is the greatest sport for me of any sport that I ever participated in.”

Nights began to be much colder shortly after this time and the buffalo were now scarce, but Joseph focused his attention on helping the company in other ways. He must have been a most faithful helper as Captain Willie chose Joseph to go with him on his most difficult two-day trip to locate the rescue wagons. (Oct. 20-21) Joseph continued: “We reached Fort Laramie about the first of October. Quite a fussing in camp - some grunted - some lied - and some apostatized. Some followed us after we was gone and begged the captain to receive them again into the company. We moved on better than anticipated under the circumstances for we had fine weather - only one storm all the way up the Platte and I do not believe we would have had that had it not been for some of the mean conduct of some of the company. After we got onto the Sweetwater River I mostly gave up hunting for game got scarce. It was at the commencement of the 16 mile drive without water that we gave out the last of the flour. We was then 28 miles below Rocky Ridge. ... We had not yet heard whether there was any help coming to meet us or not but we were determined to do all we could. That day about noon there came up a snowstorm. I was driving the foremost wagon. It was severe for the people was weak having been on short rations. I determined to keep ahead until I overtook the carts anyhow but by the time we caught up with the carts the clouds dispersed and the sun shone out and as we looked ahead, Lo and behold, we saw a wagon coming and it was close. Such a shout as was raised in camp I never before heard. It came from the hearts of faithful Saints who felt that their lives was in the hands of their God. But what made them shout? Was it merely the sight of a wagon? For we had met wagons before. No, but it was that the Spirit of the Lord bore testimony that they were Saviors coming to their relief and it truly was. It was Brothers [Cyrus] Wheelock, [Joseph] Young, and 2 others. They brought us glorious news. They had been to Zion and were returning with many of their brethren with teams and provisions to help us through.

The next morning when we got up we found the snow about 6 or 8 inches deep. The camp was hungry, naked and cold. To rush them into the snow would be certain death to a great many of them for we had not yet met the relief company, only one wagon which passed us and went on to the other company behind us. Brother Willie ... left the charge of the camp in the hands of Broth. Atwood and we started ahead in search of our brethren. We rode twelve miles where we expected to find them but they was not there. We ascended the Rocky Ridge. The snow and an awful cold wind blew in our faces all day. We crossed the Rocky Ridge and 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 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.

The next day they hitched up and went over to our camp and the second day afterwards we crossed over the Rocky Ridge again, the whole company except those who went on to the next company behind. That was an awful day. Many can never forget the scenes they witnessed that day. Men, women and children weakened down by cold and hunger, weeping, crying and some even dying by the roadside. It was very late before we all got into camp. Oh, how my heart did quake and shudder at the awful scenes which surrounded me. The next morning we buried [them] all in one deep and wide grave. We rested one day and then again pursued our journey. The health of the camp gradually increased and the people revived as we moved towards Zion and in a few days (for the weather moderated a little) the camp gradually grew more cheerful and many were the pleasant evenings we enjoyed ourselves seated around our campfires. Though it snowed and blew the storms in the mountains, yet still we was able to pursue our journey. Though we suffered a great deal yet the Saints endured it very well. ... Many more met us to help us in. We continued a steady march and at last to our great desire we arrived. ... on the ninth of November, 1856. ... We emerged from amongst the mountains and the beautiful valley with all of its loveliness spread itself out before our view. My heart was filled with joy and gratitude. ... The journey was o're at last and the people were soon distributed amongst the several wards and I put up with my old friend Wm. Kimball. After I had washed and put on some clean clothes and got my supper I felt first rate.

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Joseph had successfully completed his journey with the Willie handcart company. However, the companies still on the plains needed more assistance and Joseph answered the call for more rescuers two weeks later: “I again went to the Tabernacle. [Nov. 23] After preaching was over, the President made a call for volunteers to go out to help the last handcart company into the valley. I volunteered to go. I started in company with several others. ... It snowed awfully. ... We ... pursued our journey though the snow was 2 feet deep and sometimes more. ... [It] sometimes would almost blind us and our teams. We went to work to prepare for the company chopping wood, etc. I helped to build a wickiup. ... The company arrived. ... We made them pretty comfortable. It was a hard looking sight to see so many old and young men and women so far in the snow. Some were frozen very bad. ... We reached the city again and truly we were glad for some of the boys had been gone nearly two months in the snow and mountains and sometimes without feed for their animals. The company was soon comfortably provided for and I returned home feeling first rate glad that I had gone.”

Joseph was ordained to the office of Seventy in the Priesthood about a month after his return. Brother William H. Kimball spoke of Joseph’s faithfulness at this time: “He said that I had not only been a talker but an actor. That I had imparted freely of all that I had - both money, property, time and talent to the emigration and that every word and action proved that I was determined to do the will of God and do all that I was able to help build up the Kingdom of God in these last days.”

Joseph was employed in teaching school as well as other lines of work. The school did not work out very well and Joseph reports that the “scholars did not like school on Saturday” and were “troublesome.”

Joseph served several missions in the United States as well as one in Europe. On his European mission in 1878, it took him two days by train to cover the same distance it had taken three months to cover in 1856. He also served as a teamster for Brigham Young, whose company he enjoyed very much, saying, “As I sat beside him in the carriage, I could scarce believe that I was in company with the man that God delighted to honor most of anyone upon the earth, for he seemed so sociable and spoke so free - genteel and cheerful.” He reported once that Brigham Young had said “he was resting from preaching this winter. He said he had preached enough in these valleys to have saved the whole world if they only had hearkened to it.”

Joseph had promised his mother and other relatives that he would return to visit them, but did not get this opportunity until December of 1871 when he was called to serve a mission. His brother, William G. Elder, who lived near Fort Scott, Kansas, received him with “kindness and true kindred affection” after seeing in vision their deceased father James Elder approaching the house in company with Joseph. He spent an enjoyable week with them, but on Sunday, William was unwilling to publicly accept him and Joseph lamented: “I pray God that I may never again hear from the lips of one so near and dear to me that one pronounced in my hearing today ... but that God who knows the secrets of all hearts can heal all the wounds tho ever so deep that has this day been made and with that God I am perfectly willing to trust my cause and that of others.”

A few days later Joseph arrived in Kinmundy, Illinois, the “land of [his] birth and childhood.” He said, “I directed my steps toward the dwelling of her who holds one of the dearest names that mortal beings ever learn to name, after an absence of over fifteen years. ... Tho I had absented myself from her so long yet she received me with that sweet heavenly smile of Christian forgiveness and embraced me with that true motherly love. ... Went to the M.E. Church with my good old mother, as good and kind a mother as ever a boy had. ... And I must say for the people of Illinois, tho publicly they would not receive me, yet privately they did kindly and hospitably receive me and requested me to talk Mormonism to them without reserve.”

Joseph’s legacy continues in his posterity today. His great-grandson, Henry T. Elder, has served a mission at the Mormon Historic Handcart Sites, thus honoring his heritage and helping to “build up the Kingdom of God in these last days” as his grandfather did almost 150 years ago.