

## MICHAEL JENSEN

Born: February 5, 1845 in Denmark

Age: 11

Willie Handcart Company



Michael and his brother, Anton (8), came to America with their parents Anders (47) and Anne Christensen (47) Jensen. The following are excerpts from Michael's own account:

We pulled the carts by hand. My mother and father and I took turns pulling and pushing and my little brother, Anthony, walked, except when he was too tired, and then Mother would set him on the handcart to rest a little. We had a tent and a tent pole we could put over the cart to camp in when it rained. We camped by the side of the road at night and were able to get water from the creeks and streams and could buy milk from the farms along the way so it was quite a lark for me and my brother . . . we left Iowa City in high spirits for the land of "Zion." We had a few mules and some oxen and wagons to haul the main supplies and provisions but each family carried its own camp supplies and clothing and 100 pounds of flour and as much food as they could carry on their own handcarts. All walked except small children or sick and they rode in the wagons.

We arrived in Omaha [Florence, Nebraska] with good luck still with us and after a few days rest and repairs to our carts and supplies, we left Omaha on the 19th of August and started across the plains. We soon saw we had left civilization behind us and were out in the open country. Our handcarts had been made of rough unseasoned lumber and we had to stop many times to make repairs. It was late in the year to make such a journey in such country, but our people were anxious to press on and felt that they could make it before winter set in.

After many dreary days travel we arrived at Laramie, Wyoming. Still 500 miles away from Utah and with the first frosts of winter already upon us, our leaders decided to hurry on as our handcarts and supplies were holding out quite well and with good luck we could have made it. After passing through Laramie and only a short distance away, we camped one night on a grassy spot with lots of trees and a creek running by. They turned the oxen out to graze on the grass and a herd of buffalo came by and stampeded our oxen and they ran off with the buffalo. Our captain went after them but could not find them and so they decided to take our wagons and heavy provisions we could not haul without the oxen back to Laramie. The men at Laramie who had charge of the emigrants promised to get some oxen and send them on to us. We went on and left the wagons and everything we had except the barest necessities. These we put on our handcarts and each cart took another 100 pounds of flour. That made a lot to haul over new roads or no roads and through creeks and over sand piles so we could not go far in a day.

For some reason we never did know, the men at Laramie did not send our wagons on to us and left us to get through the best we could. Our supplies began to run low and food was very scarce in that country. We ate roots, bark, cactus, and anything we could find that had any food value in it. We were finally forced to cook hides we had and even to take some of the leather strips from our handcarts to get some nourishment.

The way we made our fire was to take some sagebrush chips, a little cloth and then a flint and rubbed it on steel until it made a spark which we caught on the cloth and finally we could coax it into a fire. We could and did burn buffalo chips for fuel after we got it started. There were plenty of buffalo chips in that country and plenty of buffalo, but how could we get to them? Our men tried many ways but never were able to get any game as we had no guns or bullets. The way we ate cactus or "prickly pears," as we called them, was to put them in the fire with the buffalo chips to burn off the stickers. Then we would peel the skin off and cut them into little pieces and boil them with the roots, hides, or whatever we had, and plenty of water thickened with a little flour. It made a mush or soup which was not so bad to eat when you were so very hungry. The men gave most of the food to the children and the women and I can remember yet seeing my father and the other men go away so they could not smell the food cooking and so they would not be so hungry.

Winter was coming on fast and the days became shorter and colder and we began to suffer greatly as our clothes were all in rags and we had very little bedding. Many of our people became sick and began to die. The men more than the women as they had gone without food more and I remember so well seeing some men dig a large grave and I saw 13 . . . all buried in this one long grave. . . .

[One] evening a large band of Indians all in their war paint came suddenly and soon had us surrounded. Some later said there were 1,000 in the band. They demanded food and silver. It looked bad for us, we were all scared and tried to hide but there was no place to hide. Our brave Captain Willie with an interpreter talked to the leader and told them we had so little to eat we were nearly starving and we did not want to do them any harm but were only going to Utah where Brigham Young was. "Brigham good friend," said their chief and after looking us over and seeing that

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we spoke the truth and we were very poor they all rode away and did not take a thing we had or harm any of us. We were all very glad and fell to our knees and thanked the Lord for His protection. We had heard how the Indians had killed a lot of people who were going to California and Oregon. We had never been molested and we felt it was because we always went to the tent of our Captain each morning and evening for prayer and we would sing and pray and talk and the captain always told us to be careful not to go far away from the company for, if we should get lost, the Indians would be sure to get us. You can bet this was enough to keep all the boys and girls close to the camp at all times.

It was bitter cold camped there in the snow [Oct. 19] and we all began to fear and felt help would never reach us at all. The sky was dark with snow clouds and we could see a storm was coming and things looked as though the end was near when, to our joy, we saw two men in a light wagon approaching us from the West. They were from Salt Lake City and had been sent to tell us help was on the way and to help us into the valley. How we laughed and cried, sang and praised the Lord! After telling us to be of good cheer as a supply train had left Salt Lake City and would soon reach us, they hurried on east to the company of Captain Martin, who had left Omaha two weeks after our company. We all felt very thankful and happy that night and rejoiced as we felt we should soon have food. A snowstorm came up in the night and we waited in vain all the next day for the men to come from the West with some food, as we had none. The next morning at dawn our brave Captain Willie took a mule and went alone [with Joseph Elder] to the West to find the supply train. We waited there hungry and cold for [1 1/2] days before he again returned bringing the first supplies to us himself. He had found the supply train snowbound and they had camped to await a chance to get through, not realizing our terrible plight. Words cannot express our thankfulness and joy at the sight of our brave Captain bringing food and the scant supplies. Many of our people were sick and could not digest the food very well. After a short rest to give the people time to gain a little strength and repack the few things we had left, we again started on to "Zion."

My father was very weak from lack of food and so the men in charge of the wagons fastened our handcart to one of the wagons and told father to hang onto the wagon. He was walking between our handcart and the wagon when he slipped and fell, and before anyone could reach him, the handcart had passed over him as he lay on the ground. They picked him up and put him into the wagon and we went on until dark and then camped for the night. Sometime during that night my father died and next morning they buried him beside the road. I can remember well how sad we were. I was just 11 years old and my brother, Anthony, was only 9 and we could not say much to help our mother in her sorrow.

Mother sat on a large kettle turned upside down weeping bitterly. I and Anthony stood beside her not knowing what to do. One of the men who was helping to manage the company came along just then and he had a walking stick in his hand. He struck Mother across the back with his stick and said in a sharp voice, "Get up and go on. You cannot sit here crying. We have to go at once or we will all die." Oh, how I wished I were a man so I could fight for my mother! I never forgave this man and years later he was put up for an office in the Church and I refused to sustain him and held up my hand that I would not do it and they asked me what my objection was. I told them why I could not sustain that man in any office. The Bishop talked to me and I decided to let it go and the man took the office. Now in my late years as I look back, I see things more clearly and I see that sternness was our only salvation and the only thing we could stand as it roused us from our misery and had the leaders allowed us to grieve we could not have endured the hardships left to us when we had to go on alone. Father died on the 29th of October, and we did not reach Salt Lake City until November 11 [9th], 1856, which made us more than seven months from the time we had left Copenhagen.

Michael's father had brought his carpenter tools with him from Denmark. He used these tools to build his family's handcart and also helped some of the others to build their handcarts. He carried these tools in his handcart until the oxen began to give out and some things had to be left at Ft. Laramie. Michael said he believed his father's tools eventually reached Salt Lake City, but that his father was left on the plains.

Michael's family went on to Manti to settle. Here his mother married John Williams. Michael went by the name of Michael Williams after this. At one time, Michael's life was saved from the Indians because his stepfather was a friend of the Indians.

Michael married Anna Petersen on January 1, 1868. They had 11 children, including twins. Michael and Anna moved to nearby Gunnison where they raised sheep. Michael was active in the church and community all his life. He died on July 27, 1942, at the age of 97.

Source: "The Story of My Life," by Michael Jensen, available at Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website; familysearch.org.