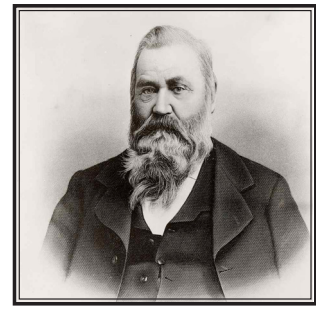


MILLEN ATWOOD

Born: 24 May 1817 Connecticut
 Age: 39
 Willie Handcart Company



Millen Atwood grew up with much responsibility, as his father had poor health and required almost constant assistance with the family farm. In 1840, Millen heard a Mormon missionary, Elder Joseph T. Ball, preach at the home of a neighbor. He instantly became a believer in the principles of the gospel as taught by the elder, saying, “Something got down into me that has never gone out since.” He was baptized at Nauvoo in the Mississippi River on August 2, 1841. He served his first mission in April 1842. Upon returning he worked on the temple and the Nauvoo House, and made wagons for the exodus of the Saints.

From 1846 through 1848, Millen fulfilled many assignments in helping the first group of pioneers across the plains, going back and forth between Nauvoo and camps along the trail. He made one of these trips in February 1847 from Winter Quarters to Mount Pisgah and described it years after the handcart immigration as “the hardest journey [he] ever undertook.”

Millen was one of the large contingent of missionaries called to serve in England and other foreign countries in 1852. Millen served in Scotland and England. He left behind his wife, Relief, and toddler, Abby Angenett, and the grave of his oldest daughter, Relief Ellinora, age 3.

Millen served as a counselor to James Willie on their return to Utah in 1856, presiding over one hundred people in the company. He was a hard-working, dedicated and well-liked leader. Millen helped calm the Saints when they reached Florence, Nebraska, in mid-August, and realized that they had a serious decision to make—whether to continue on the last 1,000 miles so late in the season, or try to winter over somewhere. After Levi Savage, another sub-captain over a hundred, spoke to the company and recommended not continuing that year, he was severely chastised for lack of faith. According to Savage, Millen Atwood then arose and “spoke mildly, and to the purpos[e]. Said that he [Atwood] had been edified in what had been said, &c. he exhorted the Saints to pray to God and get a revilation, and know for themselves whether [they] should go or stay, &c for it was their privilige to know for themselves. The meeting dismissed, all manifesting a good feeling and Spirit.”

Two nights previous to this meeting, Levi had already confided his concerns to Millen, and recorded his response in his diary: “Brother Atwood said to me last night, that since he had been a member of this Church, with all of his experience, he had never been placed in a position where things appear so dark to him, as it does to undertake to take this company through at this late season of the year.”

Millen Atwood’s leadership and encouragement later helped save the life of Andrew Smith. On the 23rd of October, the Saints were crossing Rocky Ridge in a blizzard. Andrew had gone up and down the steep slopes so many times carrying others on his back and assisting with their handcarts that Millen finally cried out to him, “Hold on there, Andrew boy, hold on there. You’ve done enough, my boy. The Lord knows you’ve done enough!” Descendants of Andrew Smith today treasure the photograph of Millen featured in this story, and provided it to the author. Millen arrived in Salt Lake on November 9, 1856, and spoke at the Tabernacle one week later. Excerpts from this talk are quite exuberant in their positive tones:

I never enjoyed myself better than in crossing the plains in a hand cart company. The Spirit of the Lord did accompany us and the brethren and sisters enlivened the journey by singing the songs of Zion. They would travel 16, 18, 20, 23, or 24 miles a day and come into camp rejoicing, build their fires, get their suppers, rest, and rise fresh and invigorated in the morning. I have seen some so tired in England, after traveling only 5 or 6 miles to a conference, that they would have to go to bed and be nursed for a week. We stimulated the hand cart companies with the words of Brother Brigham [Young], which went through me like lightning. He said, “If they would rise up in the name of the Lord, nothing doubting, no power should stop them in their progress to reach this place.” It was in his words that they trusted to perform the journey, and they were determined to see his words fulfilled.

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I have walked day by day by the side of the hand carts as they were rolling, and when the people would get weary I have seen them by dozens on their knees by the road side crying to the Lord for strength, and there are scores now in this city who walked from Iowa City to Fort Bridger, and some who were weak and feeble at the start grew stronger every day. So long as you kept the bundle on the hand cart and stimulated them to lay hold of it, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and it seemed as though angels nerved them with strength; we could out-travel the cattle and might have camped 15 miles ahead of them every night if we had had the provisions with us. I told Brother Brigham that I believed we could beat ox, horse, or mule teams. The gentiles prophesied as we came along that we should never see the Valleys of the Mountains, and laughed us to scorn, and ridiculed the idea of men and women's traversing 1200 miles with hand carts, and they marveled to see the Saints travel on so cheerfully. I said to them, "I defy you and your rulers, with all your gold, to gather up a set of men, women and children that will travel with hand carts. You have not the influence to do that, but when Brother Brigham speaks the word, see how they go."

They were astonished, and wanted to know what kind of a doctrine we preached to them to make them willing to undertake such a task. I told them that we administered the same kind of medicine to all, and it united them together. ... Some that met us would gaze on us, and tears would run down their cheeks, while we were smiling, laughing and singing, and wondered what they were crying for; but after they had been two or three days with us, they would tell us that they had altered their notions. I am in for hand carts, any way; and if I had a father or mother in old Babylon I would like to see them roll a hand cart across the plains.

I am glad that I went on my mission, and that I have done as I was told. ... The majority of the people that have come with us have done about as we have told them, and in that they have prospered. We have been united. ... I was surprised when I saw the relief wagons loaded with garments, stockings, shoes, blankets and quilts that had been liberally contributed ... to minister to us. I never saw the like, and I marveled and wondered where it all came from.

Millen served in many positions of sacrifice and trust throughout his life in the Church and community, including Bishop of the Salt Lake City Thirteenth Ward. In *History of Utah*, Orson Whitney's concluding remarks about Millen Atwood indicate that "Bishop Atwood [had] a rich vein of humor which expressed itself in quaintest forms on all occasions. It was the manner as much as the matter of his sayings that made them humorous, and the former, of course, cannot be reproduced. Steadfast as a rock in his convictions, he once remarked in the hearing of the writer, 'You can't kick some people out of the Church; they won't go; but others you can feed on pies, plum puddings and pigs, and they'll apostatize.'"

The necessity of Millen's early years to support his family precluded him from receiving much education. When Church President Heber J. Grant was about 18 years old, he heard "Bishop Millen Atwood preach a sermon." As Grant was studying grammar at the time, he wrote down Millen's first sentence, smiled and said to himself: "I am going to get here tonight, during the thirty minutes that Brother Atwood speaks, enough material [to correct] to last me for the entire winter in my night school grammar class." Grant then said: "But I did not write anything more after that first sentence—not a word; and when Millen Atwood stopped preaching, tears were rolling down my cheeks, tears of gratitude and thanksgiving that welled up in my eyes because of the marvelous testimony which that man bore of the divine mission of Joseph Smith, the prophet of God, and of the wonderful inspiration that attended the prophet in all his labors. Although it is now more than sixty-five years since I listened to that sermon, it is just as vivid today, and the sensations and feelings that I had are just as fixed with me as they were the day I heard it. Do you know, I would no more have thought of using those sentences in which he had made grammatical mistakes than I would think of standing up in a class and profaning the name of God. That testimony made the first profound impression that was ever made upon my heart and soul of the divine mission of the prophet. I had heard many testimonies that had pleased me and made their impression, but this was the first testimony that had melted me to tears under the inspiration of the Spirit of God to that man."

In Orson Whitney's biography, he wrote about Millen's service in the Willie company: "His splendid courage, rare endurance, and fatherly kindness to his fellow travelers during that terrible experience is still remembered and eulogized by survivors of the same."

Sources: Heber J. Grant, 2004 Priesthood/Relief Society Manual, pages 1-3, as quoted at www.livingprophet.info; Kimball, Solomon F., "The Hero of Linister," *Improvement Era*, Jan. 1913; Levi Savage diary; *History of Utah* by Orson F. Whitney, 55-57; familysearch.org; Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website; See biographies of Andrew Smith, Betsy Smith (not related to Andrew), and Emily Hill in Willie section of *Tell My Story, Too*.