

NIELS ANDERSON

Born: 1815 Denmark (Died October 24, 1856, buried in the common grave at Rock Creek)

Age: 41

Willie Handcart Company

Niels was a sturdy farmer from Denmark, traveling with his wife, Mette, age 49, and his fourteen-year-old step-daughter, Anna Olsen. After pulling their handcart nearly 1,000 miles from Iowa City, the Andersons and the stranded Willie company were finally met by rescue wagons on October 21, 1856. We learn of Niels' service to his family from the history of Johan Ahmanson, who was a teamster and translator for the Scandinavian Saints in the Willie company:

“There was a Dane named Niels Andersen, who had shown himself during almost the entire trip to be one of the strongest and bravest in the entire train. He had often loaded his fourteen-year-old daughter on his cart when she was tired, and yet he still drove ahead just as happily with her. But more recently he had been attacked by dysentery, which had begun to spread to an alarming extent. By this day it had befallen [Niels], and his wife had to pull their cart by herself. Naturally she had fallen behind, and I therefore gave her a helping hand until we reached our camp location. It went pretty well that way, but we could not overtake the caravan. It was just about noon however, when we came up to her husband, who was tottering along the road and seemed as helpless as a child. He broke out with heartrending lamentation when he saw us. His wife comforted him as well as she could and gave him some food, which he ate ravenously. We stopped in order to wait for some wagons that were still farther behind, to have them pick him up as they drove by. Finally [Levi] Savage came, the captain of the [rear] wagons, with a[n] ox-drawn wagon; but he refused to take Niels Andersen up because the wagon, as he said, was already overloaded. [Savage wrote of the wagons: “They being perfectly loaded down with the sick and children, so thickly stacked I was fearful some would smother.”] After a serious discussion with me, and after he had become convinced by personal examination of him that the man could walk no farther, he brought himself after all to pick him up. This day of forced marching also came to an end, but not until two hours after it had become dark, did we arrive, in company with one of the Utah wagons with which we had caught up. We came to the campsite where the earlier arrivals had already kindled a fire and set up their tents. By midnight the last Utah wagon came in; but since several of the handcarts were still missing, some of the wagons were sent off to help them, and it was 4:30 a.m. when the last of them returned. The next morning, which was therefore October twenty-fourth, fourteen emigrants were found frozen dead in our camp, among whom was Niels Andersen. Two more died later on in the day. They were all buried in a large rectangular grave, which because of the cold had to be dug out in the ground by oxen.”¹

Robert Reeder of the Willie Company described this common grave this way: “All the able-bodied men dug one large grave, but not too deep. ... They were laid away in the clothes they wore, in a circle with feet to center and heads out. We covered them with willows and then earth and slid rocks down the hill to keep the wolves from disturbing them. Two of the men who helped dig the grave died and were buried in another nearby.”

The circular grave may indicate the likelihood of a tent being set up or a fire on the site the previous evening. In that way, the ground would not be so frozen, and easier to dig.

Niels' heartbroken wife and daughter continued on with their friends and rescuers and arrived safely in the Valley.

Sources: Ahmanson, *Secret History*, (1876), Archer translation, 1984, pgs. 33-34; Levi Savage Diary, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU, Provo, Utah; Autobiography of Robert Reeder, Daughters of Utah Pioneers history files, Salt Lake City, Utah.

¹There are discrepancies in the various accounts as to the number of people buried in the large common grave at Rock Creek Hollow. The official Willie company journal records 13. Like Ahmanson, several others record 14. Descriptions of the grave also vary widely.