

SARAH ELLEN ASHTON



Born: 24 Dec. 1848 England

Age: 7

Martin Handcart Company

After Sarah Ellen's family was converted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints they made plans to sail for America and join the Saints in Zion. Sarah's parents, William (age 34) and Sarah Ann Barlow Ashton (33), and their children, Betsy (11), Sarah Ellen (7), Mary (4), and Elizabeth Ann (2), left Liverpool, England, in May 1856 on the ship *Horizon*. The family left behind in England the grave of another little daughter, Esther, who had died in infancy.

Sorrow found this family again on July 2, 1856, as the *Horizon* was docked at Boston and little Elizabeth died. Heartbroken, the Ashton's left behind another daughter's grave and traveled to Iowa City, Iowa, mostly by rail. Here they spent three weeks, finishing handcarts and tents. The Martin company arrived at their final outfitting camp in Florence, Nebraska Territory, on the 22nd of August, and spent three days there gathering supplies and cattle and preparing to cross the 1,000 miles of plains and mountains between there and the Salt Lake Valley. Sarah's family had successfully walked and pulled their handcart about 300 miles already.

On the 26th of August, the day after the Martin company left Florence, another baby girl was born to the Ashton family. They named her Sarah Ann, after her mother. The mother died in childbirth and 16 days later on September 11, the new baby Sarah Ann also died.

William cared for his three motherless girls as best he could. When the company reached Fort Laramie on October 9, William enlisted in Company G of the 6th U.S. Infantry and left his little girls with others, possibly with the Barlow family. Expected provisions at Fort Laramie were in short supply and so food rations were cut, the captains not knowing when promised help from Salt Lake would reach them. Enlisting may have been an opportunity for William to supplement his children's diet and possibly obtain blankets by drawing on the commissary and sutler's store against future pay. The Martin company would also have an extra adult ration without him there. William completed his enlistment and received an honorable release. During his five-year enlistment, he marched all the way east to Kansas and west to California.¹ He returned to England on an unknown date, apparently believing rumors that the entire handcart company had perished.

The Saints cared for the little girls as well as they could. They all suffered greatly from food shortages and the lack of warm clothing. The severe weather began at the last crossing of the North Platte River (near present day Casper, Wyoming) on October 19. The Martin company became stranded near there for over a week before they were finally located by the rescue party from Salt Lake. Sarah Ellen's oldest sister, Betsy, was only 11 years old, but surely must have felt great responsibility toward her younger sisters. It finally proved too much for her and she joined her mother and other sisters in death on an unknown date. This left Sarah Ellen and her sister, Mary, to continue on to the Salt Lake Valley. Sarah Ellen lost her sight in one eye during this journey. The company finally arrived in the Valley on November 30. They were met by Saints who took them to their various homes and cared for them. At some point Mary and Sarah Ellen found a home with the Hatfield family in Farmington, Utah. At the age of 12, Sarah Ellen was living with the Joseph Carlisle family and working for them as a domestic.

Sarah Ellen married Thomas W. Beckstead when she was 15. She and Thomas had 10 children, four of whom died as infants. Mary was possibly living with them in South Jordan, Utah, as she later married Isaac Wardle who had lived with and worked for Thomas Beckstead's father, Alex Beckstead, Sr.

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Isaac Wardle had also been with the Martin handcart company. He was much older than Mary, but may have come to know the Ashton family on their journey. (See Isaac Wardle story in *Tell My Story, Too*.) Mary and Isaac had one son who they named William Ashton Wardle, perhaps after Mary's father. Mary only lived for four hours after her son was born. The baby survived and has a large posterity in the Church today.

Sarah Ellen devoted her life to her children, her husband, and her church. In 1887, the Beckstead family moved to Whitney, Idaho, to settle that area. Sarah Ellen did not let her handicap stand in her way. She churned butter and sold eggs and also worked as a midwife. She insisted that her children receive a good education. It was during these first years in Idaho that a man by the name of Clark came to Sarah Ellen's home with a copy of the *Millennial Star*, a Church publication in England. It contained this ad: "WANTED. - Elder William Ashton is very anxious to learn the address of any one, or all of his daughters, Betsey, Sarah, and Mary who emigrated from Stockport, England, on the 18th of May, 1856. They crossed the plains in one of the "Handcart Companies." Brother Ashton's address is Charlesworth, near Broadbottom, Derbyshire, England. - *Utah papers please copy.*" Thomas and Sarah responded by sending her father the means to come to Idaho where he was well loved and cared for until his death in 1891. Grandpa Ashton participated with several of his grandchildren in a community program on July 4, 1889, by giving a patriotic speech.

Sarah Ellen reportedly spent much time helping the sick and needy. She lived to be 92 years old. One of her granddaughters wrote of her: "[She made] a tremendous impression on me when I was a little girl. I used to stay with her. She was so clean, neat and orderly—always had her windows filled with blooming plants, even in the winter time, and carefully covered them with paper each night so they would not freeze. She was a wonderful cook and I can still remember the good bread, butter and jam she made. Her cellar smelled wonderful, where she stored everything and kept pans of milk to be skimmed of thick heavy cream used to make butter. ... I've often wondered what happened to the exquisite samplers grandmother made as a girl. Her aprons always had handwork across the bottoms. ... I stayed with her many times while I attended the Whitney school. This is where she had all the family together to a dinner a few weeks before her death. Her flower garden on the old place was so lovely to me. I well remember the Sweet Williams, pansies and old-fashioned flowers she had growing there. She would send me with a cooked chicken and flowers to our mother when she was in bed with the birth of a child. She has always stayed in my memory for her fine qualities and goodness."

Sources: "William Ashton: Handcart Pioneer and Five-Year Foot Soldier," by Curtis R. Allen, in files of Jolene Allphin, courtesy Curtis Allen; *The Latter-day Saints Millennial Star*, December 31, 1888, No. 53, Vol. I, p. 839; Daughters of Utah Pioneers history files; *Life history and writings of John Jaques including a diary of the Martin Handcart Company*, by Stella Jaques Bell, 1978, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

¹ The regiment was not called upon to participate in any arduous campaigns that winter, but in the spring of 1857, the Cheyenne were upset about encroachments on their land by settlers and the army, and they began raiding immigrant trains and settlements. Company G of the 6th calvary served under Colonel Edwin Sumner in settling these difficulties. "During this expedition, the infantry suffered not only great fatigue but deprivation of food and shelter, as the expedition commander, Colonel Sumner chased the Indians with his cavalry, requiring exhausting forced marches by the foot soldiers in an attempt to keep up. The marches took them into what is now Southeastern Colorado, into central Kansas and on to Fort Leavenworth in northeastern Kansas. In Kansas, Company G was involved in the battle of Solomon's Fork where numerous Cheyenne were killed or wounded. ... Food ran short and the soldiers subsisted on scrawny beef and went days without nourishing food. At one point, the men were reduced to eating coyotes, skunks and buzzards. ... As the campaign ended, Company G was in the vicinity of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas." From here they were ordered to Utah Territory to reinforce Johnston's Army. Company G arrived at Ft. Bridger July 31, 1858. William was within 130 miles of his two surviving daughters, but probably unaware of their survival. While at Bridger, General Johnston was ordered to select a regiment to be sent to Benicia, California. William's regiment was chosen. (Curtis Allen)