

WILLIAM SPICER

Born: 23 April 1827 Duxford, Cambridge, England

Age: 29

Hunt Wagon Company

William and his wife, Elizabeth Mary (age 30), sailed to America on the *Horizon* with fellow Saints under the direction of Edward Martin. The majority of these immigrants went on with Captain Martin from Iowa City with the Martin handcart company. Others, like William and his wife, came with the Hodgett or Hunt wagon companies as the last of the 1856 immigration. These wagon companies were hauling the last freight of the season and were instructed to stay close to the Martin handcart company and help them as much as possible.

When these three companies came to the last crossing of the N. Platte River (near present day Casper, Wyoming), they were greeted with the evidence that winter had come early to the mountains they would soon be obliged to cross. The rude river welcomed them with what the pioneers referred to as “ice cakes” - chunks of ice hidden under the surface of the water, with snow on them above the surface. Many of the pioneers had their legs cut by these ice cakes as they struggled across the river. Some were swept downstream and rescued only with great difficulty. The weather was pitiless as the first winter storm beat down upon them at this crossing. Already weak from shortened rations, this new exposure and exertion brought death to some. It would be another nine days before the express team of riders sent out from the advance rescue party would find these stranded Saints.

Mary Goble (13) of the Hunt company wrote about this crossing: “We traveled on till we got to the Platte River. That was the last walk I ever had with my mother. We caught up with the [Martin] handcart companies that day. We watched them cross the river. There were great lumps of ice floating down the river. It was bitter cold. The next morning there were fourteen dead in camp through the cold. We went back to camp and went to prayers. They sang, ‘Come, Come, Ye Saints, No Toil Nor Labor Fear.’ I wondered what made my mother cry.”

Two weeks after this crossing, these pioneers and some of their rescuers were obliged to seek shelter in a nearby ravine, now known as Martin’s Cove. In order to reach the cove, they first had to cross the Sweetwater River. Remembering the recent tragedy of the Platte crossing, some just sat down and wept. It was here that the more widely-known story of four young men from the rescue party occurred. They spent much of that day in the Sweetwater River, carrying men, women and children across, bearing the brunt of the exposure and sparing the immigrants.

Not so well known are the rescuers within the ranks of these companies who sacrificed in the same manner at the North Platte River crossing of October 19, 1856. Sarah Ann Haigh (19) of the Martin company reportedly carried 16 people across the river on her back. Elizabeth White (18) of the Hunt company wrote: “Some of our men went through the river seventy-five times. ... Our company assisted them all they could, but there does not seem to be any account of our assistance in their history.”

John Bond (12) of the Hodgett Wagon Co. also recorded: “The water was waist deep and running very swiftly, taking even the strong ones off their feet, making them look quite wretched. ... The air was piercing cold and the sleet still fell thick and fast as the Saints pulled the carts into the river. The weaker ones [fell] into the river as they [were] carried off their feet. But with manly courage, John Latey, T. J. Franklin, George H. Dove, George Haines [Ainge] and others [carried] the weak ones to the opposite side of the river and set them down, giving them every care as all were brought from the icy river. They made several trips, carrying the aged and weak on their backs, exhausting themselves. ... Their clothing was like icicles.”

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Robert McBride of the Martin Company, in an already weakened condition, worked all day pulling, pushing, wading through the icy water, and he reportedly made extra trips across the river helping to get all the people and carts across. His son, Heber, wrote: "The next morning there was about 6 inches of snow on the ground. What we had to suffer can never be told. Father was very bad that morning; he could hardly sit up in the tent. We had to travel that day through the snow and I managed to get Father into one of the wagons that morning. That was the last we saw of him alive."

William Spicer was one of the "other" heroes of that fateful day. William Binder of the Martin Company wrote: "Sunday Oct. 19th: We travelled along the South side of the Platte for a number of miles, and Captain Hunt's company immediately behind ours. About noon we commenced to cross the Platte River, at the point known as the 'Upper Crossing' in the Emigrant's guide. Bro. William Spicer an acquaintance of some years standing came up to us from Hunt's company, to the crossing and very kindly assisted a number of women and children by carrying them across the river on his back and among the number was my dear wife Lizzie and for which token of respect and friendship we were very grateful. On this occasion I drew the handcart through the stream by myself, heretofore Lizzie had invariably been by my side and assisted. I experienced the water was very cold and the "Black Hills" presented a threatening appearance with black storm clouds."

In his own account, William Spicer stated: "At the last crossing of the Platte, we were overtaken by a severe snow storm, which necessitated the suspension of travel for four days. There we lost many head of stock. We were glad to make beef of the dead animals, on account of the scarcity of provisions. At this place we overtook the last handcart company, (Martin's) and assisted in getting the company across the river. I carried many on my back, and assisted others with their carts, making about sixty trips across the water. We contended with severe frost and snow from this point until our arrival at Devil's Gate, where we encountered another severe storm. During our stay at Pacific Springs we lost the best of our remaining cattle, four head of which returned to Devil's Gate, a distance of about eighty miles, and furnished beef to the guard remaining there in charge of the emigrant property, who became almost destitute of provisions. [See Dan Jones, rescuer section of *Tell My Story, Too*.] From Pacific Springs west our company, being short of teams, had great difficulty in traveling. At Sandy we received cattle from Fort Supply, which brought us to Fort Bridger, and there we remained until teams and supplies came from Salt Lake City. We reached our journey's end on the 15th of December."

Ten days later it was Christmas day and exactly seven months from the time the *Horizon* left Liverpool, England. William and Elizabeth survived and went on to live long lives in the Zion of their dreams. William died at age 85 and Elizabeth just short of age 72. It appears that they did not have any children of their own. Some members of Elizabeth's family, the Cripps, also emigrated to Utah later. A 1910 census shows children living with the Spicers. These grandchildren of Elizabeth's brother were apparently brought to Utah after their mother died. According to descendant, Mary Munk Chaston, the Spicers raised the children.

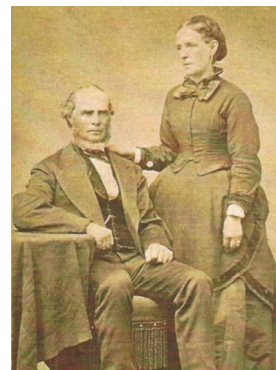
In 1906, William wrote a letter to Samuel S. Jones, who was organizing a reunion of the handcart veterans:

606 2nd North St. Salt Lake City

Dear Bro. S.S. Jones,

Seeing the notice of Martin's handcart company, and as I traversed with that company from Liverpool to Iowa City and more or less of the rest of the journey, I take the liberty to drop you a line or two.

Having come into your camp at Florence, Laramie, again 50 miles farther west, then again, carryings and other ways helping 20 people to cross the Platte River, there again coming and looking in at your tent door just as your family was about starting to eat your scanty meal. And your noble mother getting another cup and taking a little out of each one of yours, then handed it to me. Not many mothers could or would do that. This was at Martin's Ravine. I was hungry and am ever thankful.



William and Elizabeth Mary Cripps Spicer