

## JOHN WATKINS

Born: 1834 England

Age: 22

Martin Handcart Company



John and Margaret Watkins

“I was born in Maidstone, England, in the county of Kent, on the 13th day of April, 1834,” wrote John Watkins as he began his life history. John became acquainted with Margaret Ackhurst of the neighboring town of Faversham. They fell in love at an early age, to which John’s parents were very much opposed. John was seventeen and Margaret was nineteen when they eloped and were married at Sheppy, Kent, England, May 4, 1851. They lived in Maidstone until after their first child, Elizabeth, was born in 1852. The family then moved to London where work was more plentiful for John. In London, a friend invited John to a meeting of the Latter-day Saint Elders. In 1852, Margaret and John were baptized. Two years later Margaret gave birth to a son, John Thomas.

John Thomas  
Watkins

Margaret and John, with their two small children, left Liverpool, England, on May 25, 1856, on the sailing ship *Horizon* bound for Boston. Elizabeth was age 4 and John Thomas was just 17 months. They entered Boston Harbor on June 28, 1856. They rode from Boston to Iowa City in box cars, arriving there on July 8, 1856. They had to walk the last four miles carrying their children and their belongings to the camp where they were to stay until their handcarts and preparations for the journey across the Plains were completed. An electric storm came up with heavy rain that drenched their clothes and made the road muddy and slippery, making walking very difficult.

John Watkins wrote of their experience: “We had a few yoke of oxen and wagons to carry the provisions and tents. On our carts we loaded our bedding, clothing, cooking utensils and children. I was bugler for the company. It was my duty to call the people to prayers. I also signaled them to march, to pitch tents, and to go to bed. We were under the presidency and leadership of Edward Martin and Daniel Tyler, veterans of the Mormon Battalion.

*The Bugler*

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“While traveling through the state of Iowa with six hundred emigrants and with the dust of harvest weather upon us and the sun’s rays pouring down on our heads, we were tantalized by the people who came out of their homes saying, ‘That is a hard way to serve the Lord!’ Young hoodlums would go ahead of the company to the next river or creek to ridicule our wives and daughters who had to raise their dresses out of the water to wade the streams, as there were few bridges in those days. The roads were very heavy, sometimes with sand, mud or dust. Progress much slower than had been calculated, was made, and consequently when we got out on the prairies our food ran short and our rations were cut down one-half. Rations were cut more than ever and people grew very weak with starvation as the cold weather of winter approached. We were all frightened and council was called, at which they decided to lighten the loads to a few pounds each. This was weighed out to them with a pair of scales. By the side of the trail we left our quilts, blankets, overcoats, cooking utensils and everything that later we needed so badly. The night after we crossed the last crossing of the Platte river, the snow started to fall and winter set in. The cold and hunger was so intense that we stopped a day or two in camp, and before we moved camp we buried fourteen people in one grave who died from cold and hunger. Up to this time a great number had been buried along the way.”

John said that one of their trials was the hardship experienced in burying their dead: “The ground was frozen hard and the only implements they had to dig the graves were a short-handled shovel, an ax that had become so dull from cutting the frozen ground that the edge was nearly as dull as the back, and a short-handled hatchet. The men were so weak they could only dig a short time and then let someone else take a turn. The graves were so shallow that scarcely enough dirt was obtainable to cover the bodies. The men realized that the wolves, howling nearby, would soon dig them up. The people were so weak that only courage kept them alive.”

After safely arriving in the Valley, the Watkins family stayed a short time in Salt Lake, then moved to Provo where they pioneered that city. Margaret became a midwife to many in the area and John worked in house building, helping to build the tabernacle. He organized a brass band, choirs and many other musical organizations. John also served as a Bishop for seventeen years.

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By 1865, John and Margaret had six children. With his two other wives, Harriet and Mary Ann, and their children, they moved to the Midway, Utah. John made the first bricks there, and built a beautiful brick house which is listed on the National Register of Historical Homes. Each of John's three wives had a large room in this house with a built-in fireplace and mantel, built-in cupboards and deep windows. A large room ran along one side of the house which served as a joint kitchen and dining room for the whole family. Their descendants later wrote, "Margaret helped to pioneer the new area in helping to aid the sick and all who were in need of her help. Many of those she healed were too poor to pay for her services. No night was too dark nor storm too severe for her to brave going to a home in order to give relief to someone in distress. On one occasion, an Indian by the name of Fisherman came for Margaret in the middle of the night. His wife was very ill in their wickiup on the Provo River Bottoms near Utah Lake. The Indian thought his squaw was going to die. Margaret went with him and was able to save his squaw and the little papoose."

John Watkins told of a rather dramatic event during the handcart trek:

"We had been traveling many days in the snow and the cattle had nothing to eat. They became so poor and weak that they would lie down and no persuasion or beating would induce them to go on. On one occasion I noticed an ox that was left to perish and I conceived the idea that if I went back in the night I might kill it and thus get something that would help to sustain life. I told my plan to William L. Binder, who occupied the same tent with me, and I invited him to help me kill the ox and bring in some of the meat. But Binder's feet were so badly frozen that he could not go, so his wife [Eliza] offered to go in his place. I did not like the idea of going alone, miles out on the plains, with another man's wife so I invited a man by the name of James Hunter to help us share the beef.

"We waited until after nightfall, when all the camp had retired to their beds, then we three, with a handcart, crept quietly and secretly from the camp. If we had been discovered we would not have been allowed to go out to risk our lives on such an expedition. We were all highly elated to get from camp without being discovered and began our tramp back across the prairie in the direction we had come during the day. It was a bright moonlight night, the frost and snow sparkled and gleamed, throwing back to the moonbeams reflections like the purest diamonds. The wind was blowing bitter cold; it was freezing the snow which was about eighteen inches deep. No one can realize the intense cold of a night like this unless he has spent one in a similar place in midwinter.

"We were all thinly clad and armed with all the implements of destruction we could get. These were a small rifle of about twenty-two caliber, with one load; an old case knife with both sides of the handle broken off; and a small shingling hatchet with a handle seven inches long and one corner broken off.

"We traveled back hunting for the ox, and came upon it about five miles from camp. It was standing, chilling and freezing. We stopped a few minutes to council, knowing it was impossible to kill it where it stood, the cold was so intense and the distance too great to haul the meat. In coming out I had noticed a deep ravine a mile and a half from camp. I thought if we could get the ox there, we would be a little sheltered from the wind and that much nearer to camp to haul the meat, so we decided to drive the ox there.

"By this time the woman was so cold that suddenly she gave up and was determined to go no farther. She began pleading and begging to lie down. I told Mr. Hunter that Mrs. Binder was dying and that if she did die we would be hung for murder, for it was really no more or less than murder to bring a woman so thinly clad out on such a night, and if we let her have her own way she would certainly die, for the death sleep that precedes freezing was upon her. We didn't like to leave the ox, so we decided to place the woman in the shafts of the handcart and let her lean against the brace that was built there for placing the breast against when pulling the cart. Then I got in the shafts with the woman, placed an arm on the cart and supported her with the other arm, making her walk in spite of her cries and entreaties.



Eliza Camp Binder

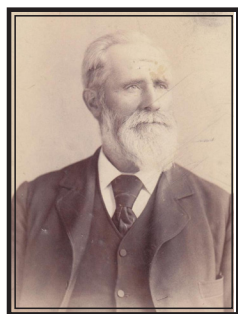
"Mr. Hunter took the hatchet and drove the ox, for the only way to make him move was by striking his backbone with the hatchet, and that sounded like striking a board. When I became tired in the shafts, Mr. Hunter would take my place and I would take his. Thus we changed places at short intervals until, at last, we managed to reach the ravine. It was, as we expected, a little sheltered from the wind.

"The woman by this time was a little revived from her walk, so we set the handcart up on end and placed her in it to protect her from the cold. Then we made ready for the ox. I was not a very good marksman, so I knew that I must take good aim. I pointed my gun straight at the forehead of the animal and fired, but just as I fired he moved his head, and the last load I had in the world went from its mark.

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“We were in a dilemma, for we did not like to leave our ox after all our trouble, so we decided to do our best to kill him with what we had, so we tried to cut his throat. The snow was so deep we could not find a rock with which to sharpen our case knife. I held the ox by the horns while Hunter took hold of the loose skin of the throat with one hand. With the other he held the knife and began sawing. When Hunter got tired of sawing, we would change places, he would hold the ox while I sawed awhile. The ox would stand still until his throat began to hurt, then he would run off and we had to catch him again and bring him back to repeat the operation. The knife was so dull that we could never tell where we sawed last.

“We continued this mock butchery for nearly an hour without making any impression, so we gave up that scheme in despair. We then decided to try the hatchet, but it had one corner broken off, so we could not hurt the ox much with that. Hunter would hold him by the horns while I hit him on the head with the hatchet and after each blow the ox would break away and we had to catch him again. Then Hunter would think he could strike harder than I and he would try. Then I would get out of patience with Hunter and I told him that he did not half hit the ox and he told me to try myself if I thought I could do better. We kept changing places until we had a place in the ox’s head nearly the size of a hand where the hide was hacked up like mincemeat. Hunter at last gave the final blow and the ox staggered and fell to the ground, taking me with him. I fell underneath his head and shoulders, hurting me terribly and pinning me to the ground so that I could not move.



James Hunter

“I told Hunter to blaze away at him while I was down, for I was afraid that he would get up and run off again and we remembered that we could get only one lick at him when he was on his feet. He did not get up again, for Hunter had killed him.

“When we were sure that he was dead and I was liberated from beneath him, we made ready to skin him. We tried to saw through the hide, but not being experienced butchers, we could not get through the thick hair and hide. We tried to get a start at the eyes, and then at the mouth, thinking the skin would be thinner in those places. Finally, we got the ox on his back and got through the skin. We then found that it was much easier to saw on the edge of the hide after it was once started.

“At last we got him cut open and brought the woman to the side of it and she was glad to put her hands in the warm blood to keep them from freezing. By this little warmth she seemed to get so much better that we all felt happy. The knife and hatchet would freeze to our hands and we had to thaw them in the warm blood and entrails; but we thought we were doing a good job and would get something to eat, so we worked away until the ox was cut up and loaded on our handcart. Mr. Hunter did not like to leave the head; he thought that would make good soup. Then he wanted the feet so we loaded them on, but they proved too heavy and we were all too weak to pull the load, so we had to throw the head away.

“We then started on our way back to camp. All at once Mr. Hunter gave out, as the woman had previously done. He begged pitiously for us to let him lie down and sleep, but I knew that he was freezing to death and that the only hope of saving him was to make him walk. We put him in between us, the woman on one side and I on the other, and we pulled the handcart and him as well, for he just let his legs drag. He kept begging us to let him sleep. It was by very hard toil that we managed to get him and the beef to camp.

“When we arrived, Mr. Binder was waiting up for us. He was sitting by a few sagebrush coals with a tin cup and bone stewing in it. When we reached the few smoldering coals, we let go of Hunter and he fell prostrate towards the fire. Freezing and starving, he seized the tin cup and immediately swallowed its contents. We managed to get him and his share of the beef into his tent just as day was breaking. We had been out the whole of that bitter night.

“Drinking that boiling soup made Mr. Hunter so sick that he was not able to help himself and could not hide his meat. Consequently, when people began moving around they discovered the meat and notified Captain Edward Martin. As I was the bugler for the camp, the captain sent for me and told me to call the people together. The captain told them he understood there was meat in the camp and that poor meat was better than none and that it must be divided among the people. After risking his life to obtain the meat, Mr. Hunter lost it and it was divided. I slipped away from the crowd and hid my meat and that belonging to Mrs. Binder. I wrapped it in our clothing and hid it in every available place. When they questioned Mr. Hunter, he was too sick to give information as to where he had obtained the meat. From that time on he had to be hauled in a wagon to Salt Lake.

“Years have passed since that night and Mrs. Binder and Mr. Hunter have passed to the great beyond. I am getting on in years, children and grandchildren play around my door, but I have never, for one single moment, regretted what I have passed through for the cause I believe in.”

Elizabeth Watkins  
(Allan)

Sources: *John Watkins: A Brief History of the Pioneer*, a 336-page book by his daughter, Mary A. Schaer, not dated; Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website.