

JOHAN AUGUST AHMANSON

Born: 7 Nov 1827 Sweden

Age: 28

Willie Handcart Co.

Johan Ahmanson served as a counselor to President James Willie aboard the ship *Thornton* as it sailed from Liverpool to New York with most members of the soon-to-be Willie handcart company aboard. His specific responsibility was for approximately one hundred Danish Saints. Upon reaching Iowa City, he was also assigned to assist them in the handcart company:¹

Upon our arrival in Iowa City a team of Mormons was found busily engaged in constructing a kind of two-wheeled vehicle ... Emigrants of larger means naturally preferred to travel in the customary way, and that is what I did as well. But F[ranklin] D. Richards [European mission president] had requested me to escort the indigent Danes² with their train of handcarts, since I was the only one of them who had any competence in English. After I had arranged for my wife to go with a conventional train of vehicles with which a portion of the Danish emigrants had joined,³ I also fulfilled that request of his, even though it was obvious that that journey would prove extremely difficult. ... The honor connected with this post was slight, and the advantages even less than that. That is, it led to my having to drive the [provision] wagon myself with the three yoke of oxen, none of the others seemed able to drive it,⁴ and that is also a difficult piece of work besides, when one has no reins to guide the animals with, but only a long whip and certain stereotyped expressions in ox-language.

After the Willie company reached Florence, Nebraska Territory, in mid-August, a meeting was held to determine the wisdom of continuing the next 1,000 miles to Salt Lake that season. Several of the leaders addressed the issue, and the people voted to continue. Ahmanson wrote that one of the emigration leaders, “George Kimball,” promised he would “stuff into his mouth all the snow they would ever get to see on their journey to the valleys!”⁵ Shortly after this meeting at Florence, the Willie company suffered their first major setback. Ahmanson wrote:

Our journey went quite well until the third of September, but on that day an unhappy event took place there which later on caused us much suffering and the death of many men. It was already evening when we made camp, and the darkness was intensified still more by a fearful storm which raged on through the whole night. Shortly before the storm broke loose, many of us heard a strange noise which seemed like the sound of wagons driving swiftly by; but since nothing like that showed itself, we assumed that it originated from a passing herd of buffalo, and we went to sleep. The next morning it appeared that in the meantime twenty-two oxen, the majority of our draught animals, had disappeared, and their very tracks had been obliterated by the rain. It often happens in these extensive plains, where the animals seem to recall something of their original wildness, that oxen, mules, and horses when frightened suddenly dash off as if possessed.⁶ If one can follow after them immediately on a good horse until they come to a halt through exhaustion, then he may sometimes get them back; but it is impossible to halt them before that. Such a flight of animals is called a “stampede.” We never saw the oxen again, even though we waited three days to look for them. There were now only twelve oxen left, except for the slaughter cattle previously mentioned, which consisted of cows and calves. We were now forced to try, even though it did little good, to employ these as draught animals. The end result was that some of the provisions had to be loaded on the handcarts and in that fashion we resumed our journey; but progress was slow, very slow indeed.

The first winter storm came to the Willie company on October 19, the same day they received word from express riders that rescue wagons were close at hand. Those 14 or 16 wagons reached the Willie company two days later, but ten of them had to push on to locate the Martin, Hodgett and Hunt companies. The Willie people had to wait a little longer to meet more wagons.

On the 23rd of October, the Willie company crossed the Rocky Ridge to the next camp at Rock Creek in a storm. Johan wrote that this day “came to an end, but not until two hours after it had become dark, did we [the Danish hundred] arrive. ... 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 ... fourteen emigrants were found frozen dead in our camp. ... Two more died later on in the day.

Johan went on to write about his resentment toward “George Kimball” and how he

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threatened to present a complaint against him to Brigham Young. He also wrote that more lives would have been saved “if from Salt Lake City, where our sorrowful condition was well known, Brigham Young had sent the one relief train after the other in order to bring us in.”

In reality, Brigham Young did continue to send one relief train after another to bring the people in. Beginning on October 5, and continuing for nine weeks, Brigham made many public and private calls for rescue, before the weather was bad out on the plains, and before he knew the emigrants’ whereabouts. When the first group of rescuers left the Salt Lake Valley, they hoped to meet the latecomers near Green River, but the last trains were more than twice that distance away. Most members of the first rescue party were gone at least 2 ½ months; others remained at Devil’s Gate the entire winter, guarding the property left behind there in order to get the emigrants to the Valley more quickly. Ahmanson’s account continued to speak of much bitterness and sarcasm toward Brigham Young and other Church leaders. Ahmanson and his family left the Church and Utah only five months after their arrival. They returned to Florence where the 1880 census lists Johan’s occupation as “doctor.” Johan concluded his narrative of the emigration with an account of his wife’s arrival with the Hodgett wagon company as follows:

[The] Company to which my wife belonged arrived at Salt Lake City ... in a condition (if possible) even worse than our own. ... It was one of the severest winters ever known. The snow lay a foot deep in the valleys and about two or three feet on the mountains. I had been very anxious about my wife and little son and tried in every way to get myself sent out with a departing relief train to meet them, but in vain. I only succeeded in sending a buffalo hide and a little coffee and sugar with the wagons which were supposed to bring them to them. The buffalo hide she received, but nothing else. On the seventeenth of December I went personally to meet the wagon company and reached them at the base of Little Mountains. Who could describe my joy at finding both of my dear ones in the best of health? Forgotten were the hardships of the journey and the long separation, and joyfully we drove in to Zion.

As hundreds of rescuers continued to go to the mountains for six weeks after Johan arrived, it is difficult to understand how he was unable to go with them. Johan did not leave a legacy in “Zion” to remember his name, but it is hoped that his service in the Willie handcart company was appreciated by many of his Danish associates.

Sources: Ahmanson, John, *Secret History*, 1876, 27-36, translated by Gleason L. Archer, 1984; Lyman, Paul D., *The Willie Handcart Company*, 2006; “Journal of Peter Madsen,” Tove Holden Jorgensen Johnson translation, 2006 publication and copyright by Paul D. Lyman, original journal in Church archives.

¹Johan continued to serve his group of Danish Saints as an interpreter. Because he was still recognized as a missionary or “Elder,” he also gave counsel at some of the meetings. However, Neils Lars Christiansen, had been appointed to oversee the 1856 Danish emigration and was the actual Elder in charge. Neils had been with the camp at Iowa City until June 2, then left to gather up the remaining Danes at St. Louis, Mormon Grove, and other outfitting points along the Missouri River. He returned to the Willie company on August 18 to resume his leadership role. The Willie company journal records: Aug. 19, “Prest. Willie appointed Bro. Niels Lars Christiansen, interpreter and Counsellor to the Danish Saints and obtained a unanimous vote from the Camp.”; Sept. 4, “Captain Christianson”; Sept. 5, “Captain Christianson.” Brigham Young had called Christiansen earlier in the year to go to Missouri to replace Jens C. Nielsen, who had been the presiding Elder over the Danish Saints in that area. Nielsen’s diary is currently (2012) being transcribed for publication at tellmystorytoo.com.

²The handcart method of travel was far less expensive than outfitting with a wagon train. However, all of the Danish emigrants in the Willie handcart company were not “indigent.” There were several wealthy families in this group that paid for their own and others’ emigration, then gave the rest of their wealth to the Church emigration fund.

³Grethe Sophie Ahmanson, and son, Jacob, traveled with the Hodgett wagon company. They left Iowa City on July 30, two weeks after Johan.

⁴There was a shortage of teamsters in 1856. Other families were also split between the companies for this reason.

⁵Johan appears to be referring to William H. Kimball, although he could have meant George D. Grant. Kimball had been away from his family on a mission in England since 1853, and returned to the United States in March 1856. He did not go directly to Utah, but had been working tirelessly on behalf of the emigrants until this August meeting. On October 7, three days after William reached Salt Lake that year, he turned around and went back on the trail with the first group of rescuers called by Brigham Young. These men were led by George D. Grant, another newly returned missionary and emigration agent. Kimball subsequently captained the Willie company into the Valley and assisted them in every way. Johan Ahmanson critically referred to Kimball as “the snow prophet.” (See Grant and Kimball in rescuer section of *Tell My Story, Too*.)

⁶Pioneer accounts are replete with evidences of this stated difficulty of handling teams, the dangers of unruly animals, and stampedes caused by buffalo or other reasons. One woman in the Hunt Wagon Company died as a result of an oxen stampede brought about by a broken yoke. (See Adelaide Walters in Hunt wagon section of *Tell My Story, Too*.) Many other wagon company journals also indicate injury and deaths due to problems with the animals. In the “Thirteenth General Epistle” Brigham Young outlined the purpose of the handcart plan: “The expense, risk, loss, and perplexity of teams will be obviated, and the Saints will more effectually escape the scenes of distress, anguish, and death which have often laid so many of our brethren and sisters in the dust.”