

Robert Clifton Family:  
Saints of the  
Martin Handcart Company

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In my 30 plus visits to Martin's Cove and the surrounding region that stands as a historical witness to the faith and fortitude of the Martin and Willie Handcart Companies along with the Hunt and Hodgett Wagon Companies, not a trip goes by that I do not think about my responsibility to write what I have come to understand about my ancestors who were participants in the Martin Handcart Company. Although there is not a lot written by or about the Robert Clifton family I believe that there is more information out there yet to be discovered and hope this will be the beginning of a much larger story to be written at a later time.

Robert Clifton was born 3 March 1805 in Attleborough, Norfolk, England and married on 16 July 1832 to Mary Matilda Blanchard who was born 30 November 1811 in London, Middlesex, England.

The complete story of the number of children Robert and Mary had is not fully accounted for, as the family records are incomplete with this information. For our purposes we will focus on the three children that we know traveled with them in the Martin Handcart Company, Rebecca (21), Sophia (12) and Ann (turned 7 on the trail).<sup>1</sup>

Although the details are minimal and the sources in family search need to be verified, Robert and Mary accepted baptism into the restored church between the years 1841 and 1844. The individual reported to have baptized Robert was a man by the name James Albion and the person reported to have baptized Mary was none other than Lorenzo Snow.<sup>2</sup>

One note of interest shows that in May of 1851, Queen Victoria opened the Grand Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park where a number of General Authorities of the Church made their appearance. This historic occasion was a gathering of over 14,000

exhibitors in London to showcase the many inventions and technological advancements made during the industrial revolution.<sup>3</sup>

During this time, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was holding the London Conference. With speakers such as Franklin D. Richards, Lorenzo Snow, Erastus Snow and John Taylor, this must have been a special time for those in attendance to be lifted and edified by their Apostolic leaders. In the “Half Yearly Report of the London Conference” held May 31 and June 1 in the city of London, we take special note of Robert Clifton who is on record as the Branch President of the Tottenham Branch.<sup>4</sup> It is also suggested by Lynne Watkins Jorgensen that Robert was a Branch President of the Hackney and Haggstone Branches as well. She notes that he was released to emigrate to Utah on 13 April 1856.<sup>5</sup>

Because we do not have a written record of Robert and Mary Clifton’s history, we can only conjecture that the following tributes to the London Branch Presidents would have included Robert. Because he was serving in the capacity of a Branch President up to the time the Saints were being gathered for the great handcart experiment, Robert could very well have been in a similar situation as fellow Branch President and handcart partner, James Bleak.

In a paper written by Lynne Watkins Jorgensen we gain some very interesting insights into Robert Clifton although some of the information and dates are in conflict with other sources we have. But the sources cited from the Church History Library are a great wealth of actual records on Robert Clifton’s family.

From Lynne’s paper we read: “[O]n 31 December 1855, James Godson Bleak, Whitechapel Branch president, was appointed conference secretary. His careful minutes

summarize continued discussions of emigration funding, and handcart companies.

Special emphasis was laid on how important it was that the "presidents" emigrate.....

Bleak, writing under the pen name of "Scribo" in the *Juvenile Instructor* in 1902, described how he had sent funds to purchase "an ox-team outfit" for himself, his wife, and their four children before the handcart policy was announced. He said that going by handcarts was presented as a matter of "faith," so that the money saved could be used "to emigrate other faithful Saints." Writing in third person, he explained, "The writer confesses, that, in view of his wife being unused to travel, and that the four children were of tender years, ranging from six years, the oldest, to eleven months, the youngest, he hesitated, indeed made up his mind not to adopt the suggestion requiring a journey of thirteen hundred miles on foot, from Iowa City to Salt Lake, by handcart."

But when "co-laborers" and members of his branch "declared they were going in the same company, and in the same way that he was going," Bleak yielded:

“Realizing that he had always striven to set a becoming example in temporal and spiritual matters to the brethren and sisters entrusted to his care, he hesitated no longer, but at once wrote to President Franklin D. Richards, asking to be numbered on the handcart list; and to hold the balance of funds subject to his order, "to be used for emigration purposes only."

After receiving the approval of President Richards, this change was announced in public meeting; and, to the credit of those who emigrated from that branch that season, all adopted the same method of gathering.” (Scribo [James Godson Bleak], “An Item of Handcart Experience,” *Juvenile Instructor* 37 (15 June 1902): 365-367)

Richards's 1 March 1856 editorial confirmed Bleak's message by praising the "several presidents... who have been blessed with means to purchase teams, have concluded to cast their lot with the Lord's poor, and share with their brethren in the handcart companies. We wish all . . . to feel that the work is the Lord's."

In March and April, the branch presidents were released so they could emigrate.”<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the financial circumstance of the Clifton family one thing is certain – they boarded the ship Horizon to sail from England on May 25, 1856 to join the hundreds of others who would eventually comprise the Martin Handcart Company.<sup>7</sup>

For whatever reason we see that the Clifton Family was reduced from three daughters to two for the completion of the journey as we have the following family history note about the oldest daughter Rebecca: “Rebecca the eldest having remained in Missouri; she declared she had had enough of trials and hardships and would go no further. She left the church and remained in Missouri all her life.” (Family Reminiscence Record in my possession) What lay ahead truly tested the faith of the rest of the Clifton family and has become a story of ultimate sacrifice that strengthened their commitment to the Lord and His kingdom on earth.

In light of the promise of Malachi that the hearts of the children will turn to the fathers, it is important that the descendants of the Clifton family hear this story and continually repeat it so they will know of the foundation of faith that was laid for them.

To appreciate the desperate circumstances this company faced we must realize that one of the major difficulties they confronted was the decision to leave so late in the season. This proved to be devastating due to the early winter storm that marched into the high plains of Wyoming. Another issue arose when miscommunication caused the expected resupply of flour not to be at the designated locations on the trail and it wasn't until messengers notify Salt Lake Officials that the Martin Company was approaching that they sent out a number of wagons laden with supplies to rescue this late coming

group.

From this point in the story we have no written records or reminiscences that are first hand experiences of the Clifton family in their journey across the trail, therefore, we must piece together what may have been their experience through the collected thoughts of others in the company.

For example, as the Martin Handcart Company approached modern day Casper, Wyoming, we do not know which side of the Platte River the Clifton family was on when the winter storm hit them at noon on October 19, 1856 - but whether they were in the process of crossing or they were complete with the crossing, we can only imagine the physical and emotional trauma the family faced as a 12 year old, Sophia, and 7 year old, Ann, under the direction of their parents had to determine what to do next under the following circumstance; their clothes were wet, the storm was still raging and they still had more distance to travel before setting up camp in the freshly fallen snow. What a horrific night that must have been.

The following description from Charlotte Elizabeth Mellor (14 years old) describes what it was like to cross the river that day: "On entering the water, our first impulse was to turn back and not wade across. The water was so cold that it sent pains right to the bone and the muscles cramped. We steadied ourselves as we held on to the cart and pushed. Father pulled. By the time we got across, our limbs were so numb that we could hardly keep from falling as we trudged along. The north wind cut like a sharp knife."<sup>8</sup>

Even though they would be out of the direct route of the rescuers from Salt Lake, the Martin Handcart Company still determined to find a place of shelter that was off the normal route of the trail. It required a number of days to travel 10 miles of trail that normally was covered in one day. They eventually gathered at a location known in many of the journals as Red Buttes (modern day Bessemer Bend). We do not know what day the Clifton Family finally made it to this resting place but records suggest that it was by October 23 that the remainder of the scattered company finally arrived and was completely gathered at this location.

Robert, Mary, Sophia and Ann spent the next five days hoping for rescue from Salt Lake City as the camp lowered flour rations to 8 oz. for adults and 4 oz. for children. On one particular morning at the Bessemer Bend Camp the Clifton's awoke to the news that 18 of their fellow company were to be buried that day.

In a camp that continuously battled the paradox of fear and faith, company member Josiah Rogerson shared with us an experience that took place at prayer meeting on Sunday morning, October 26. In this meeting a man named John Rodwell told of a dream he had in which he knew they would be rescued in a coming day. Rogerson recounts Rodwells dream: "I saw a mule, packed with blankets and cooking utensils, come right in the middle of our camp, as we are now, followed by three Californians, wear[ing] blue soldier overcoats, riding mules or horses. They stopped and told us of teams and relief from the valley, after which we started again on our journey."<sup>9</sup>

We can only imagine the excitement the Clifton family experienced when into camp, around the noon hour of October 28<sup>th</sup>, came a mule laden with blankets and

cooking utensils along with the three express rescue riders from the Salt Lake Valley – Joseph A. Young, Dan W. Jones, and Abel Garr. They had no supplies to give provide to this beleaguered people but they brought hope! The hope they brought to the Clifton family was that supplies were to be found up the road and that they would have to press forward in the morning in order to reach them.

On the 29th, the small family packed their meager belongings into their handcart and traveled through horrible road conditions as the sun began to come out and turned the frozen road into thawed slick mud. Dan Jones recorded the efforts of this day in the following way:

“We continued on, overtaking the handcart company ascending a long, muddy hill. A condition of distress here met my eyes that I never saw before or since. The train was strung out for three or four miles. There were old men pulling and tugging their carts, sometimes loaded with a sick wife or children—women pulling along sick husbands— little children six to eight years old struggling through the mud and snow. As night came on the mud would freeze on their clothes and feet. There were two of us and hundreds needing help. What could we do? We gathered on to some of the most helpless with our riatas [lariats] tied to the carts and helped as many as we could into camp on Avenue Hill. This was a bitter, cold night and we had no fuel except very small sagebrush. Several died that night.”<sup>10</sup>

They then traveled 8 or 9 more miles on the 30<sup>th</sup> and camped at a location known as Willow Springs and the next day on the 31<sup>st</sup>, they experienced a sight that must have melted their hearts with joy. As they approached a place called Greasewood Creek they saw a dozen roaring fires along with 6 relief wagons full of much needed flour, coats, socks, shoes and other winter necessities donated so graciously from the saints in the valley. Here Robert and Mary received an increase of their meal ration of flour to 1 whole pound and Sophia and Ann received a half-pound even though the next day the rations were reduced once more.

The Clifton's struggled through another stormy day as they approached and camped near Independence Rock on November 1. On November 2<sup>nd</sup> the company arrived at Fort Seminoe, an abandoned trading post near Devil's gate and encamped in this vicinity until the notorious day of November 4<sup>th</sup>, or the crossing of the Sweetwater River, in order to find protection from the relentless storm. The sacred place of refuge was found in what is now called Martin's Cove. In all of the death records we find on Robert Clifton we continually find one phrase used to describe his place of death - "Plains of Wyoming". But many of the records also acknowledge that family tradition holds that he probably died in Martin's Cove. The following excerpt from a reminiscence helps support this tradition. It records the experience of the Maxfield family who will bring the surviving Clifton family members to their home as they enter the valley. From the eyes of one of the daughters Sarah Maxfield we get the following: "When they [Sarah's father and brother] returned, in the welcomed warmth and comfort of the family sleigh was a mother, widowed by her husband dying from that awful ordeal at that last campsite, and her two daughters. There were: Mary Matilda (Blanchard) Clifton, widow of Robert Clifton, and their two daughters; Sophia, age 12, and Ann, age 7."<sup>11</sup>

The stories of crossing the Sweetwater River on the 4<sup>th</sup> and finding shelter in the ravine until the 9<sup>th</sup> are numerous. They are touching illustrations of sacrifice, faith and service that stand as a monumental witness that we become acquainted with God in our extremities. I am positive that the Clifton family, although we do not have their first hand account, would be able to bear strong witness to this truth.

The remainder of the journey into the valley is wrought with a host of touching stories of rescue and perseverance until their arrival in the Salt Lake Valley on November the 30<sup>th</sup>, 1856. We now have the opportunity to reflect on the reasons the Lord allowed the Clifton family to go through such difficulty.

In my personal reflection of this moving saga of my own heritage I am left to consider the following two quotes for our application today:

“The Lord often teaches using extreme circumstances to illustrate a principle. The story of the widow of Zarephath is an example of extreme poverty used to teach the doctrine that mercy cannot rob sacrifice any more than it can rob justice. In fact, the truer measure of sacrifice isn’t so much what one gives to sacrifice as what one sacrifices to give (see Mark 12:43). Faith isn’t tested so much when the cupboard is full as when it is bare. In these defining moments, the crisis doesn’t create one’s character—it reveals it. The crisis is the test.... One reason the Lord illustrates doctrines with the most extreme circumstances is to eliminate excuses. If the Lord expects even the poorest widow to pay her mite, where does that leave all others who find that it is not convenient or easy to sacrifice?”<sup>12</sup>

“Moreover, Latter-day Saints need to remember that we who live now are being called upon to work out our salvation in a special time of intense and immense challenges—the last portion of the dispensation of the fullness of times during which great tribulation and temptation will occur . . . Therefore, though we have rightly applauded our ancestors for their spiritual achievements (and do not and must not discount them now), those of us who prevail today will have done no small thing. The special spirits who have been reserved to live in this time of challenges and who overcome will one day be praised for their stamina by those who pulled handcarts. Those who were righteous in other ages, when the gospel light was snuffed out, will one day commend the current members of the Church . . . [and] thus the contemporary righteous will earn the esteem of their admired predecessors. Finally, if we are faithful, even the righteous of the city of Enoch will fall upon our necks and kiss us, and we will mingle our tears with their tears (Moses 7:63.)!”<sup>13</sup>

I will forever be grateful for the pioneer heritage I have and the eternal principles of truth that they have illustrated for me. I long for the day that I will be able to express my gratitude in person to the Clifton family for their sacrifice and

perseverance of which I have benefited greatly. Along with the Clifton family in the Martin Handcart Company I must also pay tribute to Margery Bain Smith and her 17 year old daughter Jane in the Willie Company as well as Robert Wilson of the Rescue Company who are also my Great Grandparents. Not much is written by them nor about them but what knowledge I have has been a source of strength and encouragement to walk with faith in every footstep and to find joy in the journey despite the difficulties placed before me.

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<sup>1</sup> Leroy and Ann Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856-1860*, University of Nebraska Press, 1960, p.296

<sup>2</sup> Lynne Watkins Jorgensen, *Journal of Mormon History* Vol. 21, No. 2, 1995, p.179

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Crystal\\_Palace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Crystal_Palace)

<sup>4</sup> Half-yearly report of the London conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, held in the city of London, Saturday and Sunday, May 31st and June 1st, 1851. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Church History Library, *Call Number: M204.6 L847*

<sup>5</sup> Watkins, p.179

<sup>6</sup> Watkins, p.186-187

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Olson, *The Price We Paid*, Deseret Book, 2006, p.219

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd Bartholemew, "Brief Sketches from the Life of James Mellor," DUP archives, Salt Lake City, Utah, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Josiah Rogerson, "Martin's Handcart Company, 1856," *Salt Lake Herald*, Nov. 17, 1907, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Dan Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians*, Cedar Fort, 45-46.

<sup>11</sup> (<http://heartsofthechildren.blogspot.com/2010/05/aunt-sarah-maxfield-lemon-remimices.html>)

<sup>12</sup> Lynn G. Robbins, "Tithing - A Commandment Even For the Destitute", *Ensign*, May 2005, 34.

<sup>13</sup> Elder Neal A. Maxwell, *Notwithstanding My Weakness*, Deseret Book, 1981, p.17-18