

# Writer on the Range

As a writer, two days with the wagons and the handcarts of the modern-day wagon train on the Mormon trail in Wyoming was a chance for a story—but I feel like I was written on in the process.

I chose to do the crossing of the Continental Divide at Rocky Ridge, because that is the highest and most difficult portion of the trail. That is where many in the Willie & Martin handcart companies perished in an early snow in 1856. One of my ancestors was in the rescue party sent from Salt Lake, so that seemed like the best place to see and experience some of their story. The elevation is about 7,000 feet. It is steep, rocky, windy, and in late June, hot.

I spent the first day in 4-wheel drive vehicles scouting Rocky Ridge for photo sites with several other photographers and the "former Mormon" rancher who runs cattle on that part of the range. From the top, we spotted the wagons toiling in a dust cloud in the distance. My new rancher friend called it "quite impressive." He said his own people had settled the area, "and to see that group working that hard for something that pays no money is really something."

## POSITIVE SPIN

WITH MY PLANS WELL-LAID, I MET THE TRAIL GROUP for dinner, a chance to get to know everyone and a reminder of the 4:30 a.m. wake-up call—the first wheels would roll at 6 a.m. Brian Hill, president of the wagon train and CEO of Mormon Trail Wagon Train, 150 Years, Inc., the corporation that put it together, was eager that writers put a positive spin on the enterprise.

"It is important to tell what has gone right on

the trail," Hill said. "About 25% of the people [on the trail] are not members of the LDS Church. There have been eight baptisms since we started and several miraculous healings." (Hill sees the historic, modern counterpart of

the early Mormon trek as a missionary opportunity.) "This must be an important part of the Lord's work, because there has been so much opposition."

There is no lack of media coverage. TV, film and print crews from Germany, Japan, Italy, the Phillipines, the Odyssey Channel and a full-time crew from the BBC were with the train the two days I was there. Odyssey is doing a multi-part series on the crossing (Hill does not like to call it a re-enactment since the group is dealing with many of the same trials and hardships as the original pioneers—following the same trail and over 1,000 miles on foot or horseback is tough anytime.) Sygma Photo News of New York and Paris sent a photo-journalist especially to cover the Rocky Ridge crossing.

Anticipating the tough day ahead and the early wake-up call, everyone headed for their sleeping accommodations. For some, that meant a blanket under a handcart, or a bedroll in the sagebrush. For others, a camper or motor home.

## REROUTING ROCKY

WHEN EQUIPMENT HAD BEEN PACKED NEXT morning and we gathered in the growing light for the wagon train's daily morning prayer, we were told for the first time that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) had put a rock in our shoe that only the organizers were aware of. The bureau had declined months ago to let wagons

cross Rocky Ridge, and had now decided not to allow handcarts either. Some surprised grumbling about mountain bikes, trucks and even Boy Scouts being allowed to pass the day before didn't seem to sway the authorities. Soon we were off on another route that took us several miles out of our way.

I wanted to get a real feel for the carts, so I offered to help pull the first eight miles until the lunch break. There were smiles as we started out—even after the bitter disappointment—and appreciation for the beautiful sunrise over the land to our backs—and thoughts of how much the pioneers must have enjoyed this experience. The second surprise of the day came when I found how quickly I adapted to the rhythm of the wheels and of



*New West woman: Nancy Adams prefers pantaloons to Levis on the Mormon trail.*

my partners (2-5 people per cart, depending on the grade).

En route West, the Mormon pioneers sang all sorts of songs. The modern pioneers devised variations on the chants of military formations, including:

*BLM is just B.S.*

*Fed'r'l Gov'ment what a mess  
Came to pull the ridge of rock  
That turned out to be a crock.*

## MISSING MUSTER

TWO OF THE WOMEN WHO BROUGHT THEIR laptop computers the whole distance to uplink their daily diaries to their website were asked to add our little ditty to their cyber space missives. While the wagon train's official choir was later scheduled to sing with the Utah Symphony, and the children's choir was to sing for the president of the LDS Church, I doubt if our marching

songs made muster.

One of our group, Rhonda Robertson had an ancestor, Bodil Mortensen, who died in the snows of Rocky Ridge with the handcart companies. She brought a replica of Bodil's rag doll in her handcart to complete the doll's journey into the Salt Lake Valley. Rumors floated among the "cart people" that a subversive someone with a friendly pickup truck might leave camp that night with a cart to make a moonlight crossing of Rocky Ridge as a symbolic completion of the journey for everyone.

Hyrum Smith, co-founder of Franklin Quest, had been travelling with the train on horseback for two weeks with his wife, son and daughter-in-law. (Smith's ancestors arrived by wagon train and his wife's by handcart). "You know," he said, "this experience is about 80% authentic. When the potty trailer and the water truck roll up, everyone cheers, but the rest of the time it's a lot of hard work...When the train is not eating or sleeping, it's moving. It's hard for me on a horse. I don't know how they do it."

The handcart women have an especially earthy fire about them. "I've found I prefer the old pantaloons to the Levis I started with," said Emergency Medical Technician Nancy Adams. "They are cooler, and pulling a 200-pound cart all these miles has given me a smaller waist and a set of thighs that weren't made for pants. When the sagebrush gets high, I just tuck an inch or two of my skirt hem into one side of my waistband and go for it. No problem."

After the lunch break, there were four miles left in the day's travel schedule. Having passed onto the Pacific side of the Continental Divide, we could feel the pull of home, although still over 400 miles away. I found I agreed with Hyrum Smith. I don't know how they do it. ☺

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