

Church News

Gather to Zion: 'This I have done for Him'

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"We find in the New Testament that Jesus said (that) unless we forsake fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, houses and lands for His and the gospel's sake, we cannot be worthy of Him or to enter into the kingdom of heaven. This I have done for Him." With these words, handcart pioneer Alice Walsh described some of the sacrifices she made to gather to Zion. Little did Alice know when she left her homeland that she would be called on to make even greater sacrifices.



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At Rocky Ridge, in painting by Glen Hawkins, pioneers had to pull their carts uphill over the rocky terrain while suffering from the snow and cold. The Rocky Ridge trial was another example of their sacrifice to reach Zion.

Born near Liverpool, England, Alice was the only member of her parents' family to accept the gospel, joining the Church in 1845 when she was 16 years old. Alice married William Walsh a few years later, and they were finally able to emigrate when the handcart plan was introduced in 1856. At the time, they had three small children: Robert (nearly 5), John (nearly 4), and Sarah (6 months).

The Walsh family sailed from England with more than 800 other converts. After arriving in Boston, they made an eight-day, 1,000-mile journey by train to Iowa City, Iowa, the outfitting site for the handcart companies. Here they were delayed for three weeks while handcarts were built. They finally left Iowa City in late July as part of the Martin handcart company.

This journey that began with so much promise turned tragic in September, when Alice's oldest son died along the trail in Nebraska. A few weeks later, tragedy struck again when Alice's husband died in the area of Devil's Gate, Wyo. "The ground was frozen so hard that the men had a difficult task digging the grave deep enough in which to inter him," Alice wrote in her autobiographical sketch. "Here I was left a widow with two young children."

Due to weakness and severe weather, the Martin company spent two nights at Devil's Gate and then sought shelter in a nearby ravine that was later named Martin's Cove. During this time, food rations were reduced to four ounces of flour a day, temperatures dropped as low as 11 degrees below freezing, and the wind raged.

Recalling these conditions, one member of the company wrote, "The ravine was like an overcrowded tomb. No mortal pen could describe the suffering" (John Kirkman, Sketch of the Life of Mary Lawson Kirkman).

The Martin company endured five frigid days and nights in Martin's Cove. On Sunday, Nov. 9, the weather improved enough for them to begin the final 325 miles to the Salt Lake Valley. By this time only about one-third of the people could walk, so some wagons were emptied to make room for as many as possible to ride. Alice Walsh watched as the wagons filled with people —and no one seemed to be taking notice of her. With two children so young, would she be expected walk? Her account paints a picture of quiet desperation:

"I was sitting in the snow with my children on my lap, and it seemed that there was no chance for me to ride, but before the last teams had left the camp I was assigned to ride in the commissary wagon, and did so until our arrival in Salt Lake City."

After leaving England so full of hope, Alice ached with loneliness at the journey's end. Describing her situation, she wrote, "Arriving in Salt Lake Nov. 30th 1856, with two children and the clothes I stood up in, were all of my earthly possessions in a strange land, without kin or relatives."

Despite this bleak picture, many of Alice's hopes for her life in Zion were fulfilled, though not in the ways she originally expected. At the request of Brigham Young, the bishops in the city found people to take in the handcart saints who did not have family or friends to care for them. Alice Walsh and her two children were placed in the home of Jacob Strong, and soon afterward Alice and Jacob were married. Eventually they had three children of their own.

Jacob Strong died in 1872, leaving Alice a widow for the second time at age 43. She remained a widow the rest of her life — another 52 years — before dying in 1924 at age 95. Given the difficulties and disappointments she faced, did Alice think the sacrifices of coming to Zion were worth it? Toward the end of her life, she attested that they were:

"I have always been proud to know that I had the individual courage to accept and embrace the faith and join the Church, to which I have ever been steadfast from that day to this.

"Though the sufferings were terrible I passed (through) in the handcart journey across the plains, I am still thankful that the Lord preserved my life and made it possible for me to reach Zion....

"After all that I have endured and passed through,... my testimony is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is true."

Although Alice did not have a life of ease in Zion, she felt gratitude for the spiritual blessings she received. The blessings resulting from her sacrifice also extended to her posterity — and far beyond. During her lifetime, 14 of her children and grandchildren served missions, further sowing the seeds of her faith. Her son John, who served two missions, also served as a patriarch and was one of the early mayors of Farmington, Utah.

What are the parallels of the sacrifices of Alice Walsh Strong and other handcart pioneers in our day? Although we are not called to leave our homelands and gather physically to Zion, sacrifice continues to be an essential part of discipleship. The sacrifices we make in building the Lord's kingdom — whether in joining the Church, strengthening our families, serving missions, serving in temples, or magnifying Church callings — are just as important as those made by the handcart pioneers. The lives of Alice Walsh Strong and others who made the handcart journey are a testament that the Lord will bless us even when these sacrifices are most difficult to make. — Andrew D. Olsen of the Eastridge 3rd Ward, Draper Utah Eastridge Stake, serves as the deacons quorum adviser. He wrote the book, "The Price We Paid: the Extraordinary Story of the Willie and Martin Handcart Pioneers," published by Deseret Book.