

# More About The Three Men of the Sweetwater Rescue

Bry COX (August 2010)

There is an oft-repeated story in Mormon culture of three rescuers sent to help the stranded members of the Martin Handcart Company in 1856. Though there was a valiant and inspiring historic rescue of stranded saints on the Sweetwater River, historians have for decades discredited this particular and most popular account, because it doesn't hold up to scrutiny.

We all know this story, which makes five major points:

(1) That 3 rescuers, (2) who were 18 years old, (3) carried *everyone* across the river, and (4) *died* because of the extreme exposure to the water, and (5) upon hearing the news, Brigham Young "wept like a child" and granted them unconditional and everlasting exaltation.

The problem is that ALL FIVE of these details are easily proven incorrect. The harm in telling a myth or even an exaggeration of truth is that over time the actual account is destroyed and incalculable damage may be done.

This controversy was mostly academic to me, but became quite personal a year ago when I found myself faced with a moral dilemma. As a Gospel Doctrine teacher, I opened my lesson manual to see that I was to teach this very tale. But not wanting to spread a falsehood, I decided to search out the particulars for myself.

Not knowing where to start, I began with the easiest info – the men's names. I searched their genealogical records with the Church, and found that they don't match the story. None of the three boys were 18 at the time, and none of them died in 1856...or a year later...or a few years later...or five years later...or ten years later...or even 15 years later! They actually all lived very normal life spans. This put me on a path of studying, and uncovering some incredible information that is more fascinating and much more faith promoting than the legend!

In 2006, the LDS Church had the Sesquicentennial Celebration for the 150<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the rescue and it caused everyone to finally talk to historians, read journals, and compare more accurate accounts. New research went into the Lee Groberg produced documentary for PBS as well as an accompanying book of the same name called *Sweetwater Rescue, The Willie & Martin Handcart Story*. They needed to know once and for all, that all sources had been checked and that no myths were being perpetuated. They went to Chad M. Orton,

Church Historian and Archivist in the LDS Church History Department. Orton became the PBS Historical Consultant for the project.

In a KBYU radio interview of Lee Groberg and Chad Orton, it was discussed how the PBS show and accompanying book was written for a national audience because the Willie and Martin story is one of the great stories of the West. But because they didn't write it particularly for a Utah/Mormon audience, they only briefly debunked the myth of the three rescuers.

However, in the DVD's special features, they did specifically go into every detail about how the long-standing story of three rescuers was not true. At the end of *that* special feature was a reference to Historian Chad Orton's article, *BYU Studies, Volume 45, No. 3*, and it was *this* article that I found by far the most detailed, documented, and accurate information on the three rescuers. I highly recommend it and have linked it below.

So where does this particular tale of The Three Rescuers come from? Too many people quote it; but what is its source?

It originates with a seemingly well-meaning man named Solomon Kimball. The problem is that Solomon Kimball seems to be an exaggerator, and his story got bigger and more inflated as time went on. A larger problem is that Solomon Kimball wasn't a pioneer at the Sweetwater, nor was he a rescuer, nor was he anywhere near the location at the time, nor was he old enough to accurately remember other people's versions of the story.

During the rescue, Solomon Kimball lived safely in Salt Lake City, and was therefore hundreds of miles away from the rescue. He was also a child of 9 years old in 1856, and his infamous story came in 1914, almost 60 years later. I believe that Solomon was well intentioned, that he wanted to take what was a tragedy and what many in the Church then saw as a failure, and to portray it as something positive and uplifting.

During the 1850s there were 10 handcart companies that came across the plains, but out of the ten only two, the Willie and Martin groups, were hit with dire catastrophe due to a long list of mistakes made along the way. Understandably, people didn't want to talk about it, and I think Solomon Kimball wanted to help change the way this event was portrayed, and in *that* it seems he has succeeded.

However, the problem here is that he was a gross exaggerator and his embellishments have made many people today completely refuse to believe and even refute the real and even more inspiring true account!

One of the first versions of Solomon Kimball's story that I can find was in 1888, about 32 years after the rescue, where he helped Orson Ferguson Whitney on the details of his book, *The Life of Heber C. Kimball*. This telling of the rescue is still grandiose, but much smaller in scope than later narratives.

The three rescuers listed by name are said to have

*“carried upwards of five hundred of these emigrants on their backs across the Sweetwater, breaking the thin ice of the frozen river before them, as they waded from shore to shore.”*

Later, in 1908 Solomon wrote an article that he sent into the *New Improvement Era*. He also included this newer version in his own book in 1909, interestingly titled, *The Thrilling Experiences of Solomon Kimball*. Again he mentions all three boys by name, but his new variation expands, saying that the boys caught colds that killed them all, as well as adding a new reaction by Brigham Young.

*“Three of our brave young men, under twenty years of age, carried on their backs upwards of five hundred of these freezing people across the Sweetwater, breaking the ice before them as they waded from shore to shore. At that time they contracted colds that finally terminated in their deaths. When President Brigham Young heard of this heroic act, he wept like a child and declared that this act alone would immortalize them.”*

Though this earlier version was narrower, it was still a dramatic amplification – only three boys carried all five hundred, *and* they caught colds and died! Nevertheless, I think Solomon’s early stories began to feed into the believability of his later and grander versions.

Historians have shown that the Sweetwater River was 30-40 feet wide at the point of crossing. Forging a river requires crossing it on an angle, making it easier to fight the current as well as getting in and out at the banks – this angle makes the Sweetwater crossing 100 feet across, or 200 feet round trip. 500 pioneers, 3 boy rescuers, 200 feet round trip to carry one person... and assuming incredible strength, speed, stamina, and the ability for each boy to carry a whopping 20 people per hour, without a single break ... is still 8 hours! But they started to cross just before dark and everyone was completely across before the sun set (which happens very early in winter). There is no way that story can add up.

Brigham Young is portrayed to have wept like a child, saying of those three rescuers, that this act alone “would immortalize them.” This reaction is at least somewhat believable, but in the next edition of Solomon’s story, Brigham’s promise mushrooms from the boys being immortalized (given recognition) to receiving immortality (or gaining eternal life).

So then in 1914, almost **60 years after the rescue**, Solomon wrote by far the loftiest version of the story. This he again sent in to the *New Improvement Era*. It is apparent that the *New Improvement Era* again, did not check his facts, but simply printed it as submitted. This is THE version that we all hear quoted today. It reads:

*“After they [Martin Company] had given up in despair, after all hopes had vanished, after every apparent avenue of escape seemed closed, three eighteen-year old boys*

*belonging to the relief party came to the rescue, and to the astonishment of all who saw, carried nearly every member of the illfated handcart company across the snowbound stream. The strain was so terrible, and the exposure was so great that in later years all the boys died from the effects of it. When President Brigham Young heard of this heroic act, he wept like a child, and later declared publicly, 'that act alone will ensure C. Allen Huntington, George W. Grant and David P. Kimball an everlasting salvation in the Celestial Kingdom of God, worlds without end.'"*

Many people when reading or quoting this will leave out the phrase, "...that in later years," because doing so helps the story match Solomon's earlier 1908 narrative that the boys died, it's more tenable, and it is also more doctrinally sound.

Reading it as, "*The strain was so terrible and the exposure so great that ...all the boys died from the effects of it,*" makes it a lot more plausible when you then continue on to read President Brigham Young's incredible reaction and very lengthy Celestial promise – a promise that apparently expanded over time.

The idea that Brigham Young is portrayed to be so sad by the news that he weeps like a child and grants them everlasting salvation, implies that the three boy rescuers must have died almost immediately following the rescue, if not right soon after. It suggests that they all died soon and even at the same time. That's the only way the news makes sense when contrasted with Young's supposed reaction.

But if these boys were to perhaps die years later, and all at different times throughout their lives, even years between their deaths, then Brigham Young's reaction would have been very odd indeed. We only have to look at King David in the Old Testament who, while young, risked his life against Goliath to save his people, but then later transgressed and lost his exaltation (D&C 132:39). How can one good deed in youth earn someone automatic exaltation, no matter what they do later in life?

It would be more believable if Brigham Young made variations of this statement at each one of these boy's passing, all years apart, and Solomon simply grouped the quotes together into one quote for ease in communication. But Brigham Young passed away in 1877, literally decades before two of the three rescuers even died themselves.

It is obvious that Brigham Young never said this, and these boys did not die from exposure or a cold. Some have since added the idea that the boys must have died later due to complications from the rescue event, but this is also untrue. Their lives are very well documented.

Of the three boys named, the first to pass away was **George W. Grant, who died at the age of 32, which was 16 years after the rescue!** *He caught tuberculosis*, a very common disease at the time. Tuberculosis was so common, it was responsible for 25% of all deaths in the United States and 30% of the deaths in Paris in the 1800s. Because of diseases like this

and the lack of medical knowledge in the 1800s, George Grant's age matches the average life expectancy for people born in the 1800s. Remember that people married very young back then because the life expectancy was very short.

Looking at the US Government life expectancy chart for instance, shows that for white males living in 1850, the life expectancy was about 30-34 years old, depending on their age. All three of these men either met or exceeded that age, despite being in cold water in their youth.

**David P. Kimball died at the age of 44 in 1883, which was 27 years after the crossing.** He married, had children, fulfilled a mission to England, and again lived a good life for people at that time. He finally caught pneumonia after being in a snowstorm "clad in light clothing," according to his family and saw a vision of his father, promising him 2 more years of life. Nearly two years later he bid family members goodbye and passed away.

**C. Allen Huntington died in 1896, at almost 65 years old – a good life for that era.** This was now 40 years after the rescue and almost 20 years *after* Brigham Young died himself. Huntington spent a lot of time in and out of jail, including the Utah State Penitentiary. Though some papers I've read say he was jailed for murder, I've yet to find actual documentation on that, so that accusation as far as I know, is still hearsay and only as reliable as Solomon's grand hearsay story of the rescue. However, Historian Chad Orton does reference an 1860 letter of the Probate Court showing that Huntington was a convicted horse and cattle thief.

Huntington obviously chose a different path for his life than the others, which also debunks Brigham Young's supposed quote of guaranteed exaltation, as the Gospel is clear that we all must endure to the end to receive exaltation.

There were also two other men that Solomon Kimball mentions by name in a various accounts as carrying people across the river. They too lived long lives, Ira Nebeker died at 65 years old, and Stephen Taylor died at 84 years old.

Despite all of the facts being erroneous in Solomon's account, the *New Improvement Era* published it. Once they did, Solomon's version of the story spread like wildfire.

In 1918, Solomon's story was printed in the *Children's Friend*. It's been quoted in Church talks by everyone imaginable, far and wide. It's even printed in Church lesson manuals, including the *D&C Gospel Doctrine Manual* and the *Primary Lesson Manual #5*.

Interestingly, the *D&C Gospel Doctrine* lesson manual credits the quote and research to a 1960's book, *Handcarts to Zion* by Hafen and Hafen. But inspection of the quote in Hafen and Hafen's book shows that *their* source of the story is still the 1914 *New Improvement Era* account by Solomon Kimball. Even Wikipedia's version in the article, *Mormon Handcart Pioneers*, credits a later 1981 printing of the same Hafen and Hafen book, rather than the

original 1914 quote by Solomon Kimball.

So this has been the big problem; everyone has just been quoting everyone else, and just assuming that others must have checked the facts. But despite all the talks, lessons, and quotes from well-meaning people, the story is still *not* true.

There were about 1200 pioneers total in both the Willie and Martin companies and about 500 in the Martin group that made the infamous crossing that night in 1856. The Martin group started with about 625 people, but some died and others quit along the way. By the time they reached the Sweetwater River, they were left with about 500 afflicted people.

It seems that the handcart pioneers of the 1850s weren't as good at journal keeping as the earlier 1840s pioneers that came across in wagons. But still, 500 people left a lot of first-hand versions, and of those that were written, all contradict Solomon Kimball's very late hearsay versions. Nevertheless, the fiction of Solomon Kimball seems to be the one many prefer over the truth.

I actually think that the truth is more interesting and more doctrinally inspiring as a lesson. While the myth perpetuates the idea that the ill prepared body of the Church will be saved by the brave and sacrificial few, the truth says that we all must sacrifice and do our part, everyone according to his or her own abilities. "*We all have work, let no one shirk.*" We all pull our own weight, plus a bit more to help others. This is much more reassuring as an example to us.

The myth perpetuates the idea that salvation comes to the brave few by one good deed in life, no matter when you die, and despite all choices afterwards. When in fact, the actual truth is that we must always stay on the straight and narrow path and endure to the end. We work with and within the main body of Christ, striving to do better and helping each other.

In the Sweetwater crossing, everyone helped and did their part. Brigham Young stood in meeting and announced that Saints were trapped in the snows, and he asked for help. *There were hundreds that responded, hundreds of rescuers* – women who made food and created temporary sleeping arrangements in their homes for the incoming pioneers. There were teams of men who loaded up supplies and wagons, and even others who walked and rode into the cold mountain passes over the long snowy path, stomping it down so that it would be easier to walk on by the tired and cold feet of the Martin pioneers.

Some men prepared and set up camp across the river, getting the tents and fires going so that it would be ready, warm, and waiting. And almost everyone in that company crossed the water on their own, and did so many times over – which is the only way to ford a river and get everyone and all the wagons and supplies across. The pioneers had at least 6 wagons and the rescuers came with at least 10 more, not to mention a fourth of all the remaining handcarts. All of these were used to ferry the elderly, the children, and the frozen infirm. However, the wagons and handcarts required people on all sides pushing and helping, and all

were required to help.

Yes, some people were carried across, but everyone was doing everything they could, rescuers and pioneers included. There were at least 27 rescuers known to have been there that night at the river, not to mention the hundreds of other rescuers that continued to help over a 2-month period. Everyone helped in every way possible.

In terms of being in the river, the vast majority crossed on their own two feet, right in the freezing cold water, and crossed many times back and forth, helping everyone around them. It was a tremendous achievement!

The myth says that the boys died from exposure to the water, earning them everlasting salvation in the Celestial Kingdom of God, worlds without end. But when Solomon's version of the story was published, some people who were actually at the rescue were still alive and their feelings were deeply hurt.

Where was *their guaranteed salvation*? What about all the work they did in the river that night? Why, out of the 27 rescuers, and of the additional hundreds of rescuers from Salt Lake that helped continuously for 2 entire months – why were only 3 men mentioned and given unconditional salvation?

*“We did all we possibly could to help and cheer the people. Some writers have endeavored to make individual heroes of some of our company. I have no remembrance of anyone shirking his duty. Each and everyone did all they possibly could and justice would give to each his due credit.”* (Daniel W. Jones.)

Hopefully we see the problem in repeating the falsehood and refusing to acknowledge the countless acts of heroism performed by so many. It was hurtful to those in the past and it's hurtful to many today, even causing outright anger to those who love the myth. Last year, when I was to give this lesson, I explained the truth to one of the Bishop's counselors. Instead of being pleased, he, responded, “Sometimes Bry, it's better not to know so much.”

On the same occasion, so many others were overwhelmingly grateful and thanked me over and over to finally hear the actual account. Even more sent me positive emails of appreciation afterwards.

I feel we need to do a better job of not mixing up the feelings of sentimentality with promptings from the Holy Ghost. When we help perpetuate myths or refuse truth, we are not building a true testimony of Christ on the rock of truth, but on the soft sands of sentiment.

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