



FRANCIS WEBSTER HANDCART STORY

I heard a testimony once that made me tingle to the roots of my hair. It was in an adult Sunday School class of over fifty men and women. Nathan T. Porter, then Principal of the Branch Normal School, was the teacher and the subject under discussion was the ill fated hand cart company that suffered so terribly in the snow in 1856. Some sharp criticism of the church and its leaders was being indulged in for permitting any company of converts to venture across the Plains with no more supplies or protection than a handcart caravan afforded.

One old man in the corner sat silent and listened as long as he could stand it then he arose and said things that no person who heard him will ever forget. His face was white with emotion, yet he spoke calmly, deliberately, but with great earnestness and sincerity.

He said in substance, "I ask you to stop this criticism. You are discussing a matter you know nothing about. Cold historic facts mean nothing here for they give no proper interpretation of the questions involved. Mistake to send the Hand Cart Company out so late in the season? Yes. But I was in that Company and my wife was in it and Sister Nellie Unthank whom you have sited was there too. We suffered beyond anything you can imagine and many died of exposure and starvation, but did you ever hear a survivor of that company utter a word of criticism? Not one of that company ever apostatized or left the church because everyone of us came through with

the absolute knowledge that God lives for we became acquainted with him in our extremities.

“I have pulled my handcart when I was so weak and weary from illness and lack of food that I could hardly put one foot ahead of the other. I have looked ahead and seen a patch of sand or a hill slope and I have said I can go only that far and there I must give up for I cannot pull the load through it. I have gone on to that sand and when I reached it the cart began pushing me. I have looked back many times to see who was pushing my cart but my eyes saw no one. I knew then that the Angels of God were there.

“Was I sorry that I chose to come by hand cart? No. Neither then nor any minute of my life since. The price we paid to become acquainted with God was a privilege to pay and I am thankful that I was privileged to come in the Martin Hand Cart Company.”

The speaker was Francis Webster and when he sat down there was not a dry eye in the room. We were a subdued and chastened lot. Charles R. Mabey who later became Governor of Utah, arose and voiced the sentiment of all when he said, “I would gladly pay the same price for the same assurance of the eternal verities that Brother Webster has.” Francis Webster, perhaps, more than any other man had reason to thank the Almighty for his protecting care.

(Sources: William R. Palmer, “Francis Webster,” radio address, 1-2; William R. Palmer, “Francis Webster,” *Instructor*, 217-18; McKay, “Pioneer Women,” 8; emphasis added. Chad M. Orton, “Francis Webster”, BYU Studies.)

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