

CHRISTINA MC NEIL (IN CHARACTER)

And I too would like to join your family party. I am Christina McNeil. I was born the 22nd of September, 1832 in Methul, Perth, Scotland. I am here tonight to tell you, my descendants, of the things that I would not talk about when I could still live over the horrors of that trek across the plains. This is not a pretty story, it is not even entertaining, but it is a story you should know and remember all the days of your life, and when you think you have hardships, just close your eyes and live over one day alone with me on the Sweetwater.

I was driven from my home by my own mother because I embraced the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ, and I never regretted the step I took, although I grieved a great deal about leaving her. When I heard the Mormon missionaries for the first time, it was as though I was living in a new world something I had been waiting for all my life had come into it and I eagerly accepted it and was ready to leave for Zion at the first opportunity. That opportunity came and I, along with several hundred others, left England to cross the mighty waters. The Church was growing very rapidly and thousands were flocking to Zion. President Brigham Young had conceived the idea of forming handcart companies to take care of this overflow. He said "Let them gird up their loins and walk through and nothing shall hinder or stay them."

Between two and three thousand people composed the five great caravans which during the spring and summer of 1856 pushed and pulled handcarts across the Plains. Our faith was strong and our advisers told us that without oxen to stray or to be driven off by Indians we could travel faster and more safely than by wagon train. The first three groups left early in the summer. They too suffered untold hardships. Brother Archer Walters of Sheffield, England, spent practically all his time building coffins in which to bury their dead. But they were well on their way to Salt Lake City by the time we arrived in Iowa City. When we arrived in Iowa City all the available handcarts and all the seasoned lumber with which to make them had been used and it was necessary for us to wait until

more carts could be made, and they had to be made from green wood. Finally 260 carts were ready and it was on July 15th that 500 left with Captain Willie and on July 26th the remaining 576, under the leadership of Captain Martin and in which group I was to travel, left Iowa City.

We got along fairly well until we got to the Missouri, where we caught up with Captain Willie's company who had had to wait for their carts to be repaired. We held a mass meeting there to decide whether or not to take the chance of starting across so late in the season, but because of our anxiety to get to Zion we gambled on the weather and decided to take the risk. That, of course, turned out to be our grave mistake. On each cart we put an extra hundred pounds of flour and our human draft animals pulled the extra load without a complaint.

We pushed and pulled the handcarts <sup>which</sup> ~~with~~ bore up well until we crossed that invisible line that divides the humid midwest from the arid west. <sup>n</sup> Then our <sub>r</sub> green carts began to warp and disintegrate and collapse. The shrieking wooden axles were worn down under the grinding of the sand. We had to spend each night patching, greasing the axles with soap or bacon rind, but still we hurried on, knowing that we were dangerously late.

Then something more serious happened. A stampeding herd of buffalo came right through our camp, and when we finally crawled out from under the confusion, we found thirty head of our cattle missing. This was disaster, because this was our beef insurance for the rest of the journey, as well as draft animals to pull our heavy loads of flour. Now the flour had to be put on the already weakened handcarts.

By now it was September and the nights were cold. There were deaths. The older and weaker members drooped and failed under the grind, stumbled into camp with faces drawn and set with exhaustion, and sometimes would <sup>lie</sup> ~~lie~~ down for a moment's rest and die without ever knowing how completely worn out they were. Life went out as smoothly as a lamp ceases to burn when the oil is gone. At first the deaths occurred slowly and irregularly, but in a few days they happened

at more frequent intervals, and we soon thought it unusual to leave a campground without burying one or more persons. Many a father pulled his cart with his little children on it until the day preceding his death.

*When* We arrived at Fort Laramie <sup>*we*</sup> and were able to buy a hundred buffalo robes, <sup>*but*</sup> ~~but~~ These proved to be <sup>*both*</sup> a blessing and a curse, for while they <sup>*kept*</sup> ~~might keep~~ us warm at night, we could not carry them in the daytime and many threw theirs away.

When we reached Red Buttes we had to once more cross the Platte River. It was now slushy with ice. Dismay filled our hearts for there was no ferry and no way to get across except to walk through. Grimly the fathers picked up their children and waded out into the river; the women picked up their skirts and followed after them. By the time we got to the other side we were blue, shivering and starving. We camped for the night and when we woke up the next morning there was a foot of snow on the ground and we had to stay there. For three days we waited, we could do nothing else. So many died that a burial squad was appointed. I sat looking at another young girl by the fire one evening and saw her die in the act of raising a cracker to her mouth. A day or two later I watched while eighteen of the company were buried in one snow grave. It was impossible to dig graves in the frozen ground.

When the storm blew out we plodded on; foot after tired foot we trudged. We could not stop but had to keep on our patient plodding, but before we reached the Sweetwater another three-day storm came and there we stayed. Nobody in the group had strength enough left even to pitch a tent. We were waiting for the end. Five more corpses to be buried, and we could only put them in the snowdrift. Sister Elizabeth Kingsford, alarmed because her husband did not eat his supper, wrapped him in their blankets and lay down beside him with all her clothes on. About midnight, terribly cold, she rolled closer to him and when she put her hand on him she knew he was dead. She cried out but her cries brought no-one. The rest of the night she lay grim and dry-eyed beside her husband's corpse; left to struggle on with her three children, without hope, almost without thought, nothing

left except the indomitable spark that would not quite flicker out. Since we had crossed the Platte River only nine days before, 56 of our company had died.

Then, almost too late, came the rescue party.

The rescue party--what a wonderful blessing, and if it had come one day later there probably would have been none of us left. How did it happen that a rescue party found us? Missionaries bearing news of our plight had arrived in Salt Lake City during the October Conference. They went right in while Conference was in session and reported to President Young of the terrible condition of the Willie and Martin companies. President Young promptly adjourned Conference and called for wagons, supplies and volunteers. There was no hesitancy as to what should be done, and twenty-seven young men took off with wagonloads of food, warm clothing and bedding. This was not an easy task for them, for they had a forced drive across three or four hundred miles of wintry mountains. They crowded their teams recklessly day after day, looking ahead for the vanguard of walkers. By the time they reached Fort Bridger they were seriously alarmed and would have pushed on faster but a new storm stopped them. That was the night of October 20th. That same night Captain Willie and one companion, frostbitten and exhausted and riding two worn-out animals, appeared out of the blizzard to tell them that if they didn't come at once there was no use to come at all. They broke camp and started again and did not stop until they reached the Willie Company, and the night before they had reached them, nine more had died and the rest had had nothing to eat for 48 hours.

The rescuers built up great fires, distributed clothing and bedding and handed out food. The company had lost a sixth of its original number but there were still more than 400 people, far more than they could feed or clothe, and there was still our company, the Martin company, as bad off or worse. The rescuers divided, one-half staying with the Willie company and the others continuing on to find the Martin party. They found us, camped and waiting for the end, too exhausted to do more. We had no food except a little stringy beef from draft animals that had worn themselves out in the harness and that food had made us all sick.

How at least things looked better. The deaths continued, however, because of the weakened condition of our people. Then more rescue wagons came along with more supplies and as quickly as possible they loaded up the weakest and started them for Salt Lake City. The stronger of us came along on our own power but it was easier because there now was a broken trail to follow and someone there to help when help was needed.

It is hard to imagine the emotions of rescue, the dazed joy of being snatched from the brink of the grave; hard to imagine that hope that has been crushed little by little until it is apparently dead, can come back like life itself returning. When we got to Echo Canyon a child was born in one of the wagons. One wonders how the mother survived long enough to bring him to life but she lived to arrive in Salt Lake City. They wrapped him in the garments of one of the young rescuers and named him Echo.

It was November by the time we reached Salt Lake City. How wonderful it was to look over the valley and know that we were at last at home. When we got to the mouth of Emigration Canyon, Margaret Dalglish, a Scotch friend of mine, who had come through with grim determination--stopped and pulled her cart to the edge of the road and gave it a push. Then she watched it go tumbling, crashing down the ravine, breaking apart as it went and scattering the last things she owned on earth. Then she walked into Salt Lake City with nothing but her gaunt bones, her empty hands, and a mighty stout heart.

After arriving in the valley I met and married Warren Ford Reynolds, your ancestor, and I know that he, as well as Edna Merrill his wife, is as proud of his progenitors as I am to see that you are remaining steadfast and true to the principles which we espoused and suffered for.

Now, my beloved progeny, and those of you who are descended from Edna Merrill Reynolds as well, <sup>one</sup> /who endured hardships of a different nature-- Do you ever feel to complain? Do you ever feel that you are being imposed upon? Do you ever object to the food that is placed before you? If you do,

just think back for one moment to the horrors of this journey, back to the hardships endured by all those who gave their all for the Gospel's sake, and Thank God every day of your life for the blessings you enjoy.