
The Pioneers

D&C 136: Introduction

On January 14, 1847, at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, Brigham Young met in council with a number of leading brethren to discuss organizing pioneer companies for the trek to the western Zion. During their discussion, Brigham Young received “the Word and Will of the Lord concerning the Camp of Israel in their journeying to the West” (D&C 136:1). Dictation and discussion of this revelation took most of the afternoon and evening of January 14. The following day, “though the temperatures ranged to below zero, men mounted buckboards and horses, taking copies [of the revelation] to be read to their assigned camps” in Nebraska and Iowa. It was reported that the revelation was received with gladness in the encampments of the Saints.

In this revelation, the Saints were instructed to make “covenant[s] and promise[s] to keep all the commandments and statutes of the Lord” (D&C 136:2). They were to organize companies under the direction of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles “with a president and his two counselors” and with captains of hundreds, fifties, and tens (v. 3). Each company was to “provide themselves with all ... they can,” including food, provisions and other supplies as prescribed by the Twelve (v. 5). Companies were to “prepare for those who are to tarry” so that all would be blessed (v. 6).

The organizational pattern of companies in “the Word and Will of the Lord” mirrored a pattern used by Moses, wherein there were “rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens” — “able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness” (Exodus 18:21, 25). Joseph Smith used a similar pattern in organizing Zion’s Camp in 1834, calling leaders of companies “captains.”

Once on the journey to the Rockies, “the Word and Will of the Lord” directed the Saints to “keep [themselves] from evil” and to not “take the name of the Lord in vain” (D&C 136:21). “Cease to contend one with another; cease to speak evil one of another. ... Let your words tend to edifying one another” (vv. 23–24). The Latter-day Saint exodus from

Iowa to the Salt Lake Valley was the most carefully orchestrated and deliberately planned pioneer movement in American history. Brigham Young led the Latter-day Saints on one of the greatest, faith-driven mass migrations in history. Nearly 80,000 Latter-day Saint pioneers journeyed on the Mormon Pioneer Trail to reach their westward Zion.

Elder Steven E. Snow, in his General Conference address in April 2011, spoke of pioneer Mary Murray Murdoch:

In 1851, Mary Murray Murdoch joined the Church in Scotland as a widow at age 67. A small woman at four feet seven inches (1.2 m) tall and barely 90 pounds (41 kg), she bore eight children, six of whom lived to maturity. Because of her size, her children and grandchildren affectionately called her “Wee Granny.”

Her son John Murdoch and his wife joined the Church and left for Utah in 1852 with their two small children. In spite of his family’s own hardships, four years later John sent his mother the necessary funds so she might join the family in Salt Lake City. With a hope much greater than her small size, Mary began the arduous journey west to Utah at age 73.

After a safe passage across the Atlantic, she ultimately joined the ill-fated Martin handcart company. On July 28 these handcart pioneers began the journey west. The suffering of this company is well known. Of the 576 members of the party, almost one-fourth died before they reached Utah. More would have perished if not for the rescue effort organized by President Brigham Young, who sent wagons and supplies to find the stranded, snowbound Saints.

Mary Murdoch died on October 2, 1856, near Chimney Rock, Nebraska. Here she succumbed to fatigue, exposure, and the hardships of the journey. Her frail body simply gave out under the physical hardships the Saints encountered. As she lay clinging to life, her thoughts were of her family in Utah. The last words of this faithful pioneer woman were “Tell John I died with my face toward Zion.”¹

Mary Murray Murdoch exemplifies the hope and faith of so many of the early pioneers who made the courageous journey west. The spiritual journeys of today require no less

¹ Kenneth W. Merrell, *Scottish Shepherd: The Life and Times of John Murray Murdoch, Utah Pioneer* [2006], 34, 39, 54, 77, 94–97, 103, 112–113, 115.

hope or faith than those of the early pioneers. Our challenges may be different, but the struggles are just as great.²

The answer to life's struggles and challenges is suggested in the lyrics of "Faith in Every Footstep":

Those marvelous Saints who embraced this great work and shared it in
lands far and near;
Who gave all their heart, mind, and strength to the Lord with wisdom
and vision so clear;
Now stand as examples of virtue and faith, of souls prepared to hear,
Of knowledge sure, born of humble heart, and love that banished fear.

If we now desire to assist in this work and thrust in our sickle with
might;

If we will embark in the service of God and harvest in fields that are
white;

Our souls may receive the salvation of God—the fulness of his light,
That we may stand, free of sin and blame, God's glory in our sight.

Chorus

With faith in every footstep, we follow Christ, the Lord;
And filled with hope through his pure love, we sing with one accord.³

² Steven E. Snow, "Hope," *Ensign*, May 2011.

³ K. Newell Dayley, "Faith in Every Footstep," 1996.

<https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/1997/04/faith-in-every-footstep?lang=eng>.