



*“Oh, how did we stand it?”*

## Mary Goble: Walking to Zion

The West, 1856

*In the years after gold was discovered in California in 1848, it seemed as if the whole weight of the country shifted west. Wagon wheels dug deep grooves in trails that went over the Rocky Mountains all the way to the Pacific. In 1862, the Homestead Act promised 160 free acres of land to anyone who would work it for five years. Tens of thousands left Europe and headed to the American West, where they made houses out of the earth itself and tried to survive. Thousands of former slaves, called “exodusters,” left the South and sought their future in the prairie states. One group went west as an entire people. Like the Pilgrims before them, they called themselves Saints, but most people called them something else: Mormons. Between 1847 and 1869, more*

than seventy thousand Mormon pioneers crossed the Great Plains, struggled over the Wasatch Mountains, and skidded their belongings down into the Great Salt Lake valley in what is now called Utah. They called it Zion. Driven by faith, they walked a thousand miles at two miles per hour, hiking beside covered wagons or pushing two-wheeled handcarts. Older children carried their smaller brothers and sisters on their backs. And like the Pilgrims before them, many, including thirteen-year-old Mary Goble, buried their parents on the trail to Zion.

It all happened so fast. Mary Goble was growing up in Sussex, England, when her parents went to a meeting one night and joined the Mormon Church. Soon she, too, was baptized. The next spring they sold everything they owned and hurried off to Liverpool. Before she knew it, Mary was on a steamship with nine hundred other new Mormons bound for America. “I well remember how we watched old England fade from sight,” Mary wrote. “We sang ‘Farewell Our Native Land, Farewell.’”

She watched from the rail as a giant shark trailed after the ship for days, disappearing only after a passenger who had died on the ship was buried at sea. Near Newfoundland they almost slammed into an iceberg hidden in the fog. After six weeks at sea, they reached Boston, gathered their belongings, and dashed to the train station. There wasn’t an hour to lose. It was nearly July and they still had to get all the way to Iowa City to meet their wagon company. Everyone said that if they started across the Great Plains too late, cold weather in the West would overtake them and they might freeze to death.

In Iowa City, they bought a wagon and a team of oxen. But before they could depart, the sky suddenly darkened and the heavens opened. Violent winds tore apart their shelter, and sheets of rain drenched them all. Mary’s infant sister, Fanny, already weakened with measles, was soaked through and through. “The day we started our journey,” wrote Mary, “we visited her grave. We felt very bad to leave our little sister there.”

On August 1, they finally started to move. “Our ox teams were unbroken and we did not know a thing about driving oxen . . . We travelled fifteen to twenty-five miles a day. We stopped one day in the week to wash. On Sunday we would hold our prayer meetings and rest.”

September 1 found them still in western Iowa. Nights were cold now and fear of Indians made them keep their camp dark at night. When they came to the Platte River in Nebraska, some hikers were already weak and ill. Mary watched one group try to

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Atchison, Mo., May 1867. [4] Lead Commissioner C. B. U. P. R. R. CO.

Ads like this one in 1867 encouraged settlers to emigrate west. Some of the land offered here by the Union Pacific Railroad was part of the Kickapoo Indian Reservation.



Some Mormon families loaded their belongings on two-wheeled handcarts and pulled them all the way to Salt Lake. Others, like Mary Goble's family and this one, went in ox-drawn covered wagons.

## WHY MORMONS WENT TO SALT LAKE

In 1820, fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith had visions of "two person-ages whose brightness and glory defy all description." He said an angel then led him to a set of golden tablets, with religious messages written in an ancient language. He translated them into *The Book of Mormon*. In 1830, he started a new religion, which he called Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At first there were only six followers. Soon there were thousands.

Opposition formed. Some resented the church's rapid growth and feared that their own church members might become Mormons. Others objected to the accepted Mormon practice of polygamy—husbands having more than one wife. Anti-Mormon mobs formed and Mormons fought them with their own armed men. Smith moved his followers to Ohio and Missouri, and finally to Nauvoo, Illinois, where they quickly built a city that grew even bigger than Chicago. Joseph Smith even campaigned for president.

But in 1844, Smith and his brother were jailed and then shot to death by a mob. Brigham Young, Smith's successor, sent men west to find a safer home for Mormons. They chose the Great Salt Lake valley, then outside the United States and known only to mountain men and Ute Indians.



drag their belongings through the icy current. "There were great lumps of ice floating down the river . . . The next morning there were fourteen dead. We went back to camp and went to prayers."

They prayed harder and walked on. On September 23, Mary took the last walk she would ever take with her mother. Later that day Mary's mother gave birth to a baby girl. They named her Edith and saw her as a sign of hope, but the labor left Mary's mother too exhausted to walk. From then on she rode in the wagon.

By October, they were out of water and were drinking melted snow. Each hiker was allowed only a quarter pound of a thin gruel called skilly each day. When Mary heard of a spring of fresh water a short distance away, she and a friend trudged off through the snow to try to fill up a vessel for Mary's mother. They came upon an old man who had fallen in the snow and couldn't get up. Mary started back alone to get help but was soon lost. "I



began to think of the Indians and . . . I became confused. I waded around in the snow up to my knees . . . When I did not return to camp, the men started out after me. It was eleven o'clock before they found me . . . They carried me to camp and rubbed me with snow. They put my feet in a bucket of water. The pain was terrible. The frost came out of my legs and feet but not out of my toes."

The oxen labored to drag the wagons through deep snow. One day Mary's baby sister, Edith, died of starvation, and a few days later her brother James was gone, too. The cattle looked like walking skeletons. The Gobles abandoned their wagon and joined teams with another family in Wyoming. They were all stumbling through the snow when a horseman galloped into camp with good news: Food and teams of fresh horses from Salt Lake City would arrive the next day. "There was rejoicing that night. We sang songs, some danced, and some cried."



#### A FOUR-LEGGED LIFELINE

Children on the trail to Zion—as they called Salt Lake—grew to love and need the animals they walked beside. A cow could be a lifeline. "Our cow was a Jersey and had a long tail," wrote thirteen-year-old Margaret McNeil. "When it was necessary to cross a river, I would wind the end of the cow's tail around my hand and swim across with her . . . Had it not been for her milk we would have starved . . . Every morning I would rise early and get breakfast for the family and milk my cow so that I could hurry and drive her on ahead of the company. Then I would let her eat in all the grassy places until the company had passed on ahead, when I would hurry and catch up with them . . . It was important to see that she was well fed."

*The white-topped covered wagon was a kitchen, living room, and bedroom all in one.*



*After 1877, when Federal troops left the South, harsh new laws were passed in Southern states to restrict the freedom of blacks. Thousands moved north and west. Those who went to Kansas and other Great Plains states were called exodusters. Though food was scarce and winter snows deep, few returned to the South.*



### MEETING WESTERN WILDLIFE

Young Mormon travelers met new animals in interesting ways. One barefooted girl wandered off the trail and felt something soft beneath her feet. "I was standing on a bed of snakes, large ones and small ones . . . All I could think of to do was pray, and in some way I jumped out of them." Ohio-born Rachel Wooley spent the night of her twelfth birthday peeping out of her wagon at a pack of wolves. "Some of them would put their feet right on the wagon tongue and sniff in," she wrote.

They arrived in Salt Lake City at night on December 11, 1856. Six months before, Mary had been part of a big English family. Now everything had changed. "Three out of the four that were living were frozen," she wrote. "And my mother was dead in the wagon."

Mary had problems of her own. She was badly frostbitten. Early the next morning Mormon president Brigham Young came to inspect the survivors, accompanied by a doctor. He took one look at Mary's feet and burst into tears. The doctor prepared to amputate, but Young stopped him. "President Young said no, just cut off the toes and I promise you, you will never have to take them off any farther." Months after the operation, Mary's legs were still bent from the frost, but her father came up with an idea to straighten them: " 'I will nail a shelf on the wall,' he said, 'and while I am away to work you try to reach it.' I tried all day and for several days until at last I could reach it. Then he would put the shelf a little

higher and in three months my legs were straight and then I had to learn to walk again . . .  
[When I did] the doctor said that surely was a miracle.”

### WHAT HAPPENED TO MARY GOBLE?

She and her husband, Richard Pay, ran a ranch in Nephi, Utah. She learned Native American languages and was known for her ability to get along well with the Pagwat and Ute Indians who lived nearby. She was the mother of ten sons and three daughters and died at the age of seventy in 1913.



Reading #2: William G. Johnston accompanies the first wagon train into California.

On Sunday, March 11th, 1849, we left St. Louis and were soon steaming up the great Missouri. Four days later we reached Independence. It soon became evident that it would be several weeks before we could proceed on the long journey westward. We had yet to purchase mules and numerous things needed on the plains, and time would be required for the grass to grow upon which the animals must live.

April 28th. At ten o'clock the first two wagons of our train took the lead, and we got started about an hour later. Our mules bothered us greatly. A short distance from the camp they came to a dead halt. Neither mild persuasion nor severe drubbing had the effect of making them pull together, but when our patience had oozed out and our strength was about gone, they started off as though nothing had happened. At six o'clock we reached the frontier line of Missouri, which marks the separation of civilized from uncivilized life. Beyond us are the vast plains as yet but little known to the white man.

May 14th. A word as to our meals. All are alike, or at least there is scarce any variety, and we rarely have more than two in a day. The dishes comprise oatmeal mush, bacon sides with pilot bread fried in the fat, and coffee. We had for a brief time sugar and molasses but these were luxuries of which but a limited supply could be carried and we soon ran out.

June 21st. The real troubles of mountain climbing began with this day.

June 23rd. Shortly after sunrise we made camp a mile from Salt Lake, where, in addition to having much needed repairs done to our wagons, both men and mules were to enjoy two days of relaxation from our recent severe toils and to recruit strength for others yet in store.

July 16th. At four we were moving along nicely. The early air was pleasant but by nine o'clock the sun blazed fiercely upon us. Salty as it was, we drank water gratefully from our canteens. At every step we sank in the deep sand and were compelled often to seek rest by sitting down on the desolate wayside.

July 20th. Entering a valley between high mountains we began the ascent of the Sierras. The road was frightfully steep, quite narrow and beset with rocks. Within this gap the sun never enters and the air had the chill of an ice house. Grass for the mules was scarce.

July 21st. We continued climbing upwards. Some large trees, uprooted by storms, lay across the path which we had to go over, lifting the wheels of the wagons, for the doing of which all our energies were pressed into service. To make the climb with loaded wagons was not to be thought of. It was difficult enough by the doubling of teams in addition to the use of ropes, to lift empty wagons. Packs had to be made for the backs of the mules to carry up the contents of the wagons.

July 23rd. A succession of mountain ridges. Again we passed over beds of hard packed snow whose surfaces, sheltered from the sun, never melt.

July 24th. A short way from camp we realized that we no longer had mountains to climb. Our route lay over the foothills at the western base of the Sierra. We had reached California, the first train with wagons to enter California. Our journey had reached its end, having been accomplished in 88 days a total of nineteen hundred and seventy-four miles.