

Episode 8

Legacy

THE MORMON TRAIL

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NATHAN WRIGHT: One of the most remarkable aspects of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is its unique history. Throughout the world great stories from faithful Church members have only added to that history. This program shares some of these incredible stories of faith, perseverance, hope, and inspiration. You're listening to Legacy. I'm your host, Nathan Wright. [END MUSIC]

Since its founding in 1830, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were often persecuted due to their religious beliefs. This persecution was one of the motivating factors that made the Latter-day Saints part of the Great Migration West. The Mormons, however, were a unique part of this migration. Their trek to the Great Salt Lake Valley was, in great part, an effort to maintain their religious and cultural identity. This was a movement of an entire culture, an entire religion. It was a movement driven by religious fervor and determination. In studio today is Mel Bashore, a librarian since 1975 at the Church History Library. His current assignment is Historic Sites Researcher, where he's involved writing interpretive guides for missionaries who work at these sites. For several years he's worked as researcher and reviewer for the recently published history on the Mountain Meadows Massacre. He created and administers the Mormon pioneer database on the Church website. His research and publications have centered on Mormon and Utah history with a particular focus on Mormon Trail history. Mel received a Bachelor's degree in Art from the University of Utah and Master's degrees in Education and Library Science from the University of Missouri, St. Louis and Brigham Young University. Mel, welcome.

MEL BASHORE: Thank you.

NATHAN WRIGHT: And to begin with how did a guy with an Art degree get tangled up with Church history?

MEL BASHORE: Interesting question. I think many of us go through life and we just sort of trip and stumble our way into what we do in life and that's the case for me. I did a little teaching and thought that really I'd like to venture into the library field. I've always loved to read and so I went back and got a

degree in Library Science and was hired after receiving that degree by the Church History Library to produce indexes and finding aids for researchers who come to the Church History Library. And that was 34 years ago.

NATHAN WRIGHT: My! As I understand it, your passion for Church history or perhaps the thing that you've been dealing with most recently is the Mormon Trail, the Church history, the migration West. It's a subject as large as the trail itself, but there seems to be a few misconceptions, perhaps, along the way. Maybe today we can talk about a few of those. Let's begin, though, with one of the most talked about episodes on the Mormon Trail, the handcart companies, if that's ok. We've all heard that it was Brigham Young's brainchild, but my question is, did handcarts exist before Brigham Young made this a part of the migration?

MEL BASHORE: They did, in fact, during the Gold Rush era many people, I think it was 1850, that many diaries mention seeing a man pushing a wheelbarrow and many of our Mormons crossing the plains saw this man too and so that idea, that germ of an idea, may have been sparked by seeing that Gold Rush man pushing that wheelbarrow across the plains. Going back, though, to my beginnings in Mormon Trail history, it was within, oh, about 30 years ago, I saw many people coming into our Church History Library who, probably a third of the people coming in, wanted to know something about their pioneer ancestor, what it was like for them to cross the ocean to America, what it was like for them to go over land to Utah. And so they would come into the library and we didn't really have any good finding aids to help them and some cases the, some of those companies only had very few journals or narratives that would tell the story of that company. In some cases we might not even know who was in which company. The ships crossing the ocean, we have very good passenger lists for all those ships, but for the, those companies that took people to Utah we are missing many rosters. For a third of the companies crossing the plains we have absolutely no roster for those companies.

NATHAN WRIGHT: None. Not just handcart companies, but all of them.

MEL BASHORE: Not just handcart companies. Yeah, handcarts are just simply a very small portion of the whole emigration story for Mormons. There were only 10 handcart companies, which is, oh, around, 4% of the total companies that Mormons traveled to Utah in were handcart companies. So very small part of the story, but it has become the icon of the pioneer experience, the handcart, but for those people who would come into our library and wanted to find some information about their pioneer ancestor we really did not have a good finding aid to help them. So knowing how many were interested, I started 30 years ago systematically surveying our collection, reading all of these journals and finding which ones mentioned the story of

either crossing the ocean or, and then I would identify which ship they traveled in, or crossing the plains and which company they would have come to Utah in and that took probably a decade off and on of just creating a bibliography. And then we entered the internet age and the Church just, less than a decade ago, and so we put our database on the internet and it's now available there so people can at home search that database, find out which company their pioneer ancestor was in and even if their ancestor didn't keep a journal, somebody in the company or several people did and may mention their ancestor in those journals. And so they, from the comfort of their own home, can read those narratives, of which we have over 3,000 trail narratives in full text on our Church website.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Where would that site be found?

MEL BASHORE: It's found on lds.org and the easiest way to find it is to use on the Church's home page up at the top; there's an A - Z index. I would click on that and pick the letter "p" and then scroll down till they come to "pioneer index searching" and click on that and it will take them to this template in which they can enter their ancestor's name. And then that will take them into the company and from there they can see which journals their ancestors are mentioned in.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Excellent. Getting back to handcart companies, you mentioned it only represents about 4% of everyone who came to Utah. How many handcart companies were there?

MEL BASHORE: There were 10 handcart companies and the 4% figure would be, that's the number of, 4% represents the 10 handcart companies and there were over 200, there were more than 250 companies. So the 10 was representing 4% of that total number of companies. And there were 3,000 people in those 10 companies, which, again is a very small percentage of the total number of people who came to Utah, which, it's difficult, we have to estimate because we don't have solid figures for every company, but I would estimate that somewhere in the neighborhood of 65,000 people travelled in companies to Utah between the years 1847 and 1868.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Would you say the ratio in the handcart companies of men, women, and children was about the same as other wagon train companies?

MEL BASHORE: I can tell you that in the handcart companies, at least in the companies, the two that we so often hear about, the 1856 Willey and Martin companies, there were more women in those companies, adult women than men, probably by about a third.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Why would that have been do you think?

MEL BASHORE: If I were to speculate, it may be that, and these people came from England, that the desire to join the Church may have been, for women, you know

they're a little more sensitive maybe than us men and that spark that might cause them to join the Church may be more prevalent in women than men. I think that maybe we see the same thing today in some of the emerging countries.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So getting to some of the nuts and bolts of what these handcart companies did along the trail. A couple of summers ago I went with my stake and daughter on one of the stake treks up to Martin's Cove in Wyoming and some of the surrounding trails and each of the participants were only allowed to bring a five gallon bucket of their own personal things to sort of represent what happened in the handcart companies, but these people had to eat and drink and surely there was some sort of support system along with the handcarts.

MEL BASHORE: There was. There was a great, they had a desire in Salt Lake to support them, but sometimes things fall between the cracks and in the case of the Willey and Martin Companies things did fall between the cracks for those poor people and they weren't supplied at the places where they were hoping to be supplied. So they, over time, had to reduce the rations that they had. They had wagons accompanying them with, that were carrying some of these, flour and needed supplies and as the, they got closer and closer to Utah the food supply dwindled and they were cut back on rations. In fact the, as I think about it, the final rations before they were rescued, for the adults, the amount of flour that was given per day for the adults may have produced a small loaf the size of a Twinkie. Very difficult to travel and have enough energy each day on just that much food. Nathan, if I can go back to how I started studying this, about 1997-1998, just after the Mormon Trail Sesquicentennial I received an assignment from the Ensign to write an article about the number of deaths that occurred on the trails. Deaths is never really been my interest. When I look at the trail experience I try and see the positive side of things and there is much in the positive side. In fact, I did not grow up a Mormon and I remember in my elementary school history classes we learned about Brigham Young and the coming of Mormons to Utah. And for my small teaching at that moment it was a positive thing, Brigham Young guiding thousands to Utah and so I've always had this positive outlook about things. And so I like to look at things in that way and I remember Virginia Hinckley Pierce in 1997 spoke, and this was published in the Ensign, and she said, and I thought it was the most perceptive thing I heard that year about the Mormon pioneers, and she said that for most people coming to Utah that most people it was not a death and starvation and freezing but it was, they simply walked and walked and walked. And I think that was the experience for many who came to Utah.

NATHAN WRIGHT: In fact, from some of the things I've read it actually was kind of a great adventure, kind of a very long campout.

MEL BASHORE: It was and I look at it that way. I think, I love to hike. I hike every week all year round. I just hiked Saturday up to Red Pine Lake, still snow on the lake up there, but I think, gosh, what a neat thing to be able to do: get up each morning take a bed, go to bed, get up, take another hike the next day.

NATHAN WRIGHT: [Chuckle.]

MEL BASHORE: And for however long it took, usually three to three and a half months to cross the plains, you get to hike every single day.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So the first company, Brigham Young's initial company, they were very well prepared and knew exactly what they were in for and so for them it probably was just a great adventure, going from this point to the next and finding out what was going to be there...

MEL BASHORE: I think so...

NATHAN WRIGHT: ...when they arrived.

MEL BASHORE: I think so because those, many of those men were frontiersmen. They had that spirit of adventure in their bloods and for them it was a great adventure. Even Wilford Woodruff, who was a fisherman, and he took his fly fishing pole, and is regarded as one of the first to fly fish in the West.

NATHAN WRIGHT: I've heard that.

MEL BASHORE: When I started this, you know as getting back to that initial time when I was asked to write this article, and you know, I did write it, but I realized at the time that I could not really come up with a good figure. And that's what the Ensign wanted me to do, was to tell how many people died crossing the plains in all of these Mormon companies, handcart and wagon both. But afterwards I realized that I could not do that unless I knew actually who died and to do that I would have to go through the diaries and the narratives and cull out the names of all of those who died crossing the plains. I had the help of some Church service missionaries to do that and this took close to five years to go through thousands of diaries and narratives and reports and letters and newspaper articles, coming up, putting names with those who died. And it's still something that I tabulate up to today and in fact, at this point I can say that there are 1,846 people that I've found that have, that died in those 22 years of crossing the plains and it's ever-growing. It will probably be something as we receive new journals and diaries that I'll learn even more, but in that listing that I compiled, I not only identified their names, but I identified were they a male or a female, what age were they at the time they died, where did they die, the source of that information, and then I included notes: who their parents were, the cause of their death. And now, so I initially did it simply to come up with a figure, a calculation of the number of people who died,

but after I put together that compilation with the help of these missionaries, I realized that I had a database here from which I could study these different topics. Not only how many died, but the causes of their death and did more men die than women or did, at what ages were the bulk of the deaths taking place, were children dying in greater numbers than adults. And so my database provided me with that insight and from that one of the great lessons, of course, all of our listeners will expect that the 1856 would have been the year in which most people died and in fact that is what we're seeing, is that over 300 people in both handcarts and wagons in 1856 died. And that's a spike very different from what we see in the other years, but still there are other years where I see a spike too. 1852 was a year in which almost 200 people died in our Mormon companies to a low of three having died in 1858, the year following the Utah war year when we didn't have many companies coming to Utah. So as little as three, but as many as over 300.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So is the figure you came up with anywhere near previous estimates or guesses as to how many people came across the...

MEL BASHORE: Andrew Jensen back about the turn of the century. And he was an assistant Church historian in the historical office, historian's office. And he came up with a figure of 6,000 people dying and he never explained what he meant by that, but in later looking at that figure it appears that he included everyone who died in the process of immigration: those who traveled on the ocean, those who traveled on steamboats and railroads to get to an outfitting place and those who were at the outfitting places prior to leaving for Utah, so he included the whole picture of immigration deaths and my study only looks at those people as they are at the outfitting post and then when they take that first step to Utah, that's when I begin counting trail deaths. So I didn't look at deaths in all of those other aspects of the immigration. So my figure 1,846, that is only represents those who are taking that first step to Utah until the day they arrive at Salt Lake.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So we read accounts of parents and family members who have to bury their loved ones on the trail and, for the most part, we have no idea where those specific burials took place. Is that true?

MEL BASHORE: That is true. The diaries often when they do get specific oftentimes the describe a place that may have had a name 150 years but no longer goes by that name or they describe a place with a, based on a, something that was there, some geographic feature that was there then or some tree or something that has long since been cut down and as, so as very, we know of very few places on the Mormon Trail where there are actually Mormon, and that's the case for even non-Mormon deaths, there are very few sites where we know who is buried where.

NATHAN WRIGHT: And so a specific one that I have read about is a Rebecca Winters who was a Mormon pioneer and the story of how this site was found and how it's up kept to this day is very interesting. You want to share a little bit about that?

MEL BASHORE: Yeah, her grave was marked and I can't recall if it was marked at the time, but it was marked at least later with a rim of a wagon. And then as people, and there must have been, and journals probably identified it as such, so we knew of all these years where her grave was. And then they put the railroad very close to her grave and a number of years ago, people, Mormon people were visiting that grave and it was rather unsafe with passing trains so they relocated the grave in a safer location, but nearby where she had been buried.

NATHAN WRIGHT: At one point in my family, my father was convinced that we had an ancestor that was a member of the Mormon Battalion by the last name of Allred and I was happy and proud of this heritage until I did some research of my own, just to verify this and I checked some dates, I checked spouses names and come to find out that was a person of the very same name as someone in the Mormon Battalion, but not the very person. I wonder how often these family traditions or even in a bigger scope Church history can cause strife for Church members. Is this something you deal with?

MEL BASHORE: It does happen. I recall working with a family who were, was away from going up to have a reunion at Martin's Cove and they had always thought in their family lore that their ancestor had been buried, had died and been buried near Martin's Cove. In point of fact I was able to look on my death list that I'd compiled and found out that their ancestor had died several hundred miles east of where they had assumed he had died. It was too late for them to change their reunion place there where they were going, but with the information that I had gleaned from diaries we were able to not exactly pinpoint where they were buried but within a mile or two of where their ancestor had died and had been buried so that hopefully the next year or some future year they will be able to go to that place.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Specific to the Mormon Trail, we think of the Mormon pioneers coming across, cutting trees down, just blazing the trail anew, the very first time, but that isn't necessarily the case. They were following some trails that already existed. Is that...

MEL BASHORE: That is...

NATHAN WRIGHT: true?

MEL BASHORE: That is true for the most part, except I think the Brigham Young's company, the pioneer company did blaze a little bit, maybe a mile or so down Immigration Canyon. They followed the route down through that

canyon that had been cut through by the Donner Company, but right near the end the Donner Company instead of going out through the canyon mouth went up over this big hill, it's called Donner Hill now. And so that last little bit through the canyon was the only part of the Mormon Trail on which Mormons actually cut through a pass to get out and in terms of cutting trees down there weren't many trees to cut down out on the plains really. The trees were so infrequent that there was one called "the lone tree" and it stood for a number of years out there until somebody actually did cut it down, but there were very few trees out on the plains. It wasn't until they got into the mountainous where they started seeing trees.

NATHAN WRIGHT: What are the other trails that existed that they followed mostly?

MEL BASHORE: These would probably have been Indian trails, trails used by trappers and other frontiersmen. Another impression we get is that there was just a one single Mormon Trail. In fact, there are, is kind of a spider web of trails that Mormons used. Some Mormons began going to Utah from Texas. And they went up on part of what is now referred to as the Cherokee Trail they went up through central Colorado and then, up in Southern Wyoming, hooked in, it could have been one or two different places, to then join into the Mormon Trail closer over by Fort Bridger. So, and then we, there's another myth that the Mormons always went north of the Platte River. Brigham Young's group did and all of those succeeding up until 1850, and in 1850 there was a lot of water out on that northern part of the trail and so all of our Mormon companies in 1850 went on the south part of the Platte River. It was called the ox bow variant and then crossed over to the north part after they got couple of hundred miles west.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So the Mormon Trail is not one single path.

MEL BASHORE: Exactly. It's not a single path at all. It's from where each pioneer started and some would start in the south. So it was different for them. And it would seem very strange today I guess if we were to see a highway sign in Texas calling it the Mormon Trail, but in fact there was a Mormon Trail coming up from Texas.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Let's talk a little bit about section 136 in Doctrine and Covenants where the Lord gives Brigham Young some help on how he should get the companies organized.

MEL BASHORE: Yes it, they were, that revelation delineates the organization that should take place in these companies and in dividing them into hundreds and fifties and tens in a kind of organized fashion. In those early years they followed that revelation to a T. Later they realized, though especially in 1848 when Brigham Young went back to Winter Quarters to then bring a larger groups back. The 1848 emigration is very large. His company in 1840 amounted to 1,200 people, whereas his first group in 1847 there were

a hundred, there were only over a hundred and forty in his company. They found that those larger size companies were very wiely because each time you stopped during the evening to camp you had to have enough feed there for your animals and enough water and with a company the size of 1,200 that over burdened the resources. And so they soon realized that they needed to be a little more flexible in crossing the plains, but each company strove to have a captain sometimes they would have a president of a company who served as a spiritual leader for the company. They would often have assistant captains and they continued to have that organization up until the final year in 1868.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Do we know if the ill-fated handcart companies used this organization or didn't use it or is that even an issue with them?

MEL BASHORE: They had some of those elements, yes, they did, but here we get the impression that this revelation and these organizational patterns were, was inflexible when in fact, Mormons are practical people and they saw what worked; they saw that the large sizes of the companies was not working so they cut back on those and usually thereafter we see company size around 250-300. It was a very nice size company to have. Now the handcart companies, they were rather large. They numbered, the Martin company had over 500 in it. So that was a sizeable company.

NATHAN WRIGHT: You've mentioned that historians are basically myth-busters, that's what they do, they find out the true facts of what happened. What are some of your favorite Mormon Trail myths that you love to mention at people.

MEL BASHORE: Well, in terms of studying this mortality in the handcart era and looking at our impression is that, if you been on a handcart trek, I would think that many of the teenagers on those treks come away from it hearing the stories and then after they experience that thinking well, if you were a pioneer you just simply died, but that, my studying of the matter in this statistical fashion shows that that isn't really the case. I was able to see that there were, for instance, oh, in 1856 even though we have so many deaths in those Willie and Martin companies if you take that, the Willie and Martin companies out of the equation, the trail deaths and wagon deaths are equal. If we don't look at the Willie and Martin companies, they're an anomaly; they are unique to our Mormon story. That's when so many died from those, the wintery onset of winter and their hunger and starvation, but really if we take them out of the equation the same number of deaths occurred percentage-wise between wagons and handcart companies. So they really, that's a myth that probably ought to be exploded.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Very interesting. We hear about Levi Savage warning, I'm not sure which company it would have been, that they were starting too late. Is...

MEL BASHORE: Mm-hmm.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Is this an accurate story?

MEL BASHORE: It is. Levi Savage had a trail experience and he knew that this was late in the season and yet he said there at Florence Area that, I think they even put it to a vote and that if it was their will to continue on, he would go on and suffer the same, whatever, challenges they faced, he would also face with them. But he was a voice in trying to dissuade them from continuing on.

NATHAN WRIGHT: What other facts of the Mormon Trail do our listeners need to really know?

MEL BASHORE: I was interested to find out that of the, those 250+ companies that Mormons traveled with, that fully a third of those companies, more than 80 companies, there was not a single death. That was unique to me and even among the handcart companies, one of the handcart companies, the Stoddard Company, in 1860 did not suffer as single death. And then another interesting thing that I found in this was that only 18 of all of these Mormon companies suffered more than 20 deaths and so that was an interesting finding so that of only 7% of all of these companies, 7% percent of all these companies suffered almost half of the deaths. So we find a very small number of companies having the number of deaths that are tragic. In fact, one of those companies was, let's see, there was a company in 1855 that had more than 50 deaths, another company in 1866 that we call it the Cholera Company, the Lowery Company, they had over 50 deaths and you know we never hear about those companies and yet they suffered almost as much in terms of death counts and as our Willie and Martin. There's stories still yet to be told. And how did they die, too? I found that interesting. Most deaths, and now I'm speaking here not just of the handcart companies, but all trail deaths, most deaths that happened on the trail the cause was from disease, not from freezing. Weather related causes were a very small part of trail deaths. Not for the Willie and Martin, but for other companies. Cholera was the big killer on the trail. Half of all of the diseased-caused deaths are attributed to cholera. People did not know what cholera was; they didn't know how to prevent it. Now cholera is caused by waterborne, it's a waterborne disease caused by poor sanitation. They were, the best way to keep from dying from cholera, course is to not to get cholera. They didn't know how to prevent that. Just by accident they did boil their water, but it wasn't to, for cleanliness, it often times, the taste of the water was either salty or alkaline so they boil it to get the taste better or they'd see these little, they called them wiggler, little insects or something, little parasites in the water and so they'd boil it to kill those insects, but that was the only way that they could prevent cholera is to boil their water.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Overall the Mormon migration is considered a success based on, I guess just numbers. Is that true?

MEL BASHORE: I believe it is. I believe Brigham was the American Moses. He led thousands here, over 60,000 people. And if you were a pioneer I think you had a pretty good, except in those when things were skewed, when things didn't go right, you had a pretty good chance of getting here. For instance, you're a descendent of a Mormon pioneer who crossed the plains, and probably, and did get here safely. That's why you're a descendent. So yes, it was a very successful movement to bring thousands here and very well organized. In fact I think our statistics in terms of death compare very favorably with the whole picture of Mormons and non-Mormons, that both Mormons and non-Mormons suffered probably around 3% or less trail deaths.

NATHAN WRIGHT: We hear about non-Mormon companies like the Donner Party etc.

MEL BASHORE: Mm-hmm.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Is there any fair way to compare?

MEL BASHORE: There is. A few years ago Don Grayson, who's an anthropologist at the University of Washington, spent a while at our Church History Library. He had previously written a paper on the deaths of the Donner Party and discovered that the ones who died in the Donner Party were not the women, they were the men and the older people and the young children. He wanted to compare his findings with the Donner Party with the Willie Company. And his research showed the very same thing: that the deaths in the Willie Company mirrored those of the Donner Party. It was the men and the young children and the older people who were dying in the Willie Company. And he saw this as a situation not so much that, he noticed that women, by their very makeup, may have something that enables them to withstand the roughest of times in crossing the plains. But he also saw that the men were, by their very nature too, needing to go out and expending the energy to find the food, to hunt the game, and by expending that energy they were reducing their ability to withstand these terrible rigors that were imposed in 1856 and they were the ones who died, were the men in much greater numbers.

NATHAN WRIGHT: A very interesting comparison.

MEL BASHORE: It is.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Is there anything else you would want our listeners to know about the work that you've done, anything about the Mormon Trail?

MEL BASHORE: I think we need to look, that the Mormons took a lesson from this, as I said, they were practical people so after those difficult times of 1856, the

Church leaders realized that something wasn't, that the handcarts could be a success, they'd shown that in the first three companies that had come here successfully without these terrible deaths that happened to the Willie and Martin companies. So they wanted to continue that handcart program because it was affordable for the Church. They could no longer afford to go out and buy the wagons at the outfitting posts and bring immigrants to Utah in that way, which was changed in 1861 and a different method where they would have out in back companies go and get these immigrants, but in ... they realized that after 1856 that they sent letters out and said let's construct our handcarts in a different way. Let's look at the way we did things back then and learn from these terrible things that happened. And let's not have so many old people come. And we see a drop-off of the number of old people after 1856. It's amazing to me the number of old people who wanted to come to Utah to gather to Zion. The oldest person that I've found crossing the plains: 94 years old. Amazing that they would start out that way. She didn't make it, but she was 94. We find people in their 80s, there was an 80-year-old in the Bunker company, that was one of the earlier handcart companies in 1856, 80 years old pushing a handcart across the plains. He got here. Isn't this amazing?

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NATHAN WRIGHT: Simply amazing. Unbelievable. We've been talking today with Mel Bashore, librarian and researcher with the Church History Library and we're very grateful that you've been with us.

MEL BASHORE: Thank you for asking me.

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