

NIELS NIELSON

Born: 1850 Denmark (Died October 24, 1856, buried at Rock Creek)

Age: 5

Willie Handcart Company

Five-year-old Niels was traveling with his parents, Jens and Elsie Nielson, and a group of about 160 other individuals from Denmark. They had departed from Copenhagen in April on the steamship *Rhoda*. The Scandinavian mission president had appointed a returning missionary, Elder Ahmanson, to be the leader of this company of Danish Saints. Peter Madsen, one of the Danish Saints kept a daily diary. He wrote, "The saints were joyous and bid the saints of Copenhagen a hearty farewell. ... The company was happy and thankful; a good spirit and order prevailed." They traveled by train and ship until they arrived in Liverpool, England. This must have been quite an adventure for a young lad such as Niels and his 9-year-old friend, Bodil Mortensen, who was traveling with the Nielsons.

On May 1, 1856, they boarded the ship *Thornton* "a large three decker from America, commanded by Captain Collins. [They] joined the company of 608 English brothers and sisters who had gone on board before [them]. As President Franklin D. Richards came on board two days later to wish them well and ask the blessings of the Lord to follow them, it was "answered with repeated cheers by the company who was happy and thankful for the consideration that was shown us." President Richards appointed Elder James G. Willie "as the president for the whole group during the complete trip to the valley. Elder Ahmanson was chosen as his councilor, assistant, and president of the Scandinavian division of the company to whom he gave several instructions and recommended cleanliness and order."

The month of May held many adventures for Bodil and Niels. They passed huge icebergs and a damaged ship "not worth retrieving." That was a day selected for worship, prayer, and fasting. Many talks were given and Elder Ahmanson told his Danish flock that they "were highly favored of the Lord." That afternoon, "the families who were not clean and orderly were spoken to; warnings and admonitions were given." That night "a fire broke out and burned between the decks, but the Lord preserved us so that the fire did not overpower us. An English boy who had stowed away on the ship was discovered. He had accompanied us without permission and ticket. For this action he would have been punished and caused to bear a wooden jacket or barrel; but since he was a member of the Church he was forgiven. The two pounds which Captain Collins required for his passage were collected by free-will offering. The Danish Saints gave three dollars."

Thomas Pedersen, a boy about the same age as Niels, fell down from the top to the bottom deck and died four days later. "He was buried in the sea with the same ceremony as those who died previously." This included being wrapped in canvas and the American flag, and being then deposited in the ocean. Singing, dancing, marriages, births, worshiping, storms, and more icebergs and deaths are recorded on this eventful journey. Those who were going by aid of the Emigration Fund had to sign contracts more than once, giving "written assurance that they would pay the fund back either by work or money for the deliverance of others."

As this company approached the New York harbor, Elder Ahmanson spoke to his Saints: "He prayed that everyone will show benevolence and helpfulness to each other and be orderly in all their undertakings. An appeal was given to the brothers who had temporal means to help the brothers and sisters home who did not." Niels' father was one of those who stepped forward the

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next day and contributed money for those who needed it. Ane Olsen also stepped forward and donated. Ane would later join Niels in death at Rock Creek. But for now Niels was happy. Imagine his and Bodil's delight as they watched "many seahorses" appear on the water at this time. After they landed and were on their way, Jens Nielsen and Ane Olsen again stepped forward to help others, this time in the form of loans, for which promissory notes were made. Upon arriving at the end of the railroad in Iowa, Jens Nielson parted with more money and security. He had the money from the sale of his farm, but he gave it all to the Church.

Finally, what had begun as a grand adventure for Niels and Bodil, came to a sad but a blessed end. They both succumbed to death and were buried in a common grave at Rock Creek with 11 others. The end appeared to be near for Jens, also. His feet became so frozen that he could not walk another step, which caused his right foot to be deformed the rest of his life. At this point Jens said to Elsie, "Leave me by the trail in the snow to die, and you go ahead and try to keep up with the company and save your life." Elsie, a very small woman, replied, "Ride, I can't leave you, I can pull the cart." The following excerpts are from Niels' father's own account:

1300 hundred miles from Salt Lake City [is] where we started our Journey with the handcarts. ... At Council Bluff we lay in our supplies for a 1000 miles to S.L.C. Calculated 1 pound of flour for grown people ½ pound for children for 70 days. Instead it took us 90 day journey. Accordingly the Captain had to cut down our flour to ½ pound a day till there was not a pound of flour in camp.

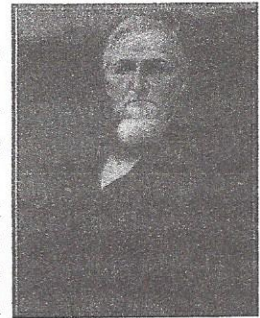
When we started from Iowa there was 20 people to each tent, 5 men and the rest women and children. I was the captain of our tent. ... We had the first snow storm about 500 miles from S.L.C. From that time the people began to die very fast. We traveled about 200 miles farther, sometimes pulling the handcart through the snow two feet deep. The captain told us there was not a pound of flour in camp. He said he would saddle his mule and ride night & day till he found a team with flour for we understood there were teams on the road to meet us with flour.

Next night the flour came to camp and there was great rejoicing. We could get very little because they had to pass [it] on [to] another handcart company three weeks behind us.

So we had to start our Journey again but before we did we had to dig a hole and bury 14 bodies & my only son [Niels] was among them and a girl [Bodil] who I had along for Bro Martensen. I told you there were 5 men to the tent but now the four was dead and I was the only man left so I had to ask some of the largest and strongest women to help me to raise the tents and it looked like we should all die.

I remember my prayers as distinctly today as I did then. If the Lord would let me live to come to S.L.C. that all my days should be spent in usefulness under the direction of his Holy Priesthood. How far I have come short of this promise I do not know but I have been called to make 6 new homes and as far as this goes I have complied.

Speaking of the hardships of the handcart company, no pen can describe nor can it be understood or comprehended by any human being in this life but only those who were called to pass through it. It would not be so terrible had they started in good season & had plenty of food to eat. . . . About 100 miles from there [Omaha] we lost 14 young oxen. Hunted 5 days for them but did not find them. So we had to yoke our steers & heifers which were brought along for beef. These were used to haul food tents and other things we could not get on the handcarts. Then we had to put 100 lbs. of flour on each handcart & it made our journey very slow. About a week after the first team met us with flour, we were met by another team and after this were allowed 1 pound of flour day. If the saints in Zion had not given us a helping hand not one would be able to reach Zion. You have heard about Bro. Kimball's prophecies about a bushel of flour would be worth a bushel of Gold. If I had been offered a bushel of flour or a bushel of gold, I would say keep your gold and give me the flour for the gold could not sustain life. We came to Fort Bridger and teams came from S.L.C. to meet we & here we left our handcarts. We came to S.L.C. on Sunday, Nov. 9th 1856. (Some spelling and punctuation corrected for easier readability.)



Jens Nielson

Sources: Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel online database; <http://www.bsmarkham.com/julie/jens.html>; <http://ilovehistory.utah.gov/people/difference/nielsens.html>.