

Alice Clegg endures hardships, frozen hair

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It was morning. Ten-year old Alice Clegg saw light on her closed eyelids. The light was there, but it was not sunshine and she wasn't any warmer than she had been all night. It was even colder because mania had moved from her side. The whole family had been sleeping close together on the ground under and beside their handcart.

She could hear the hustle of the morning camp and the voices of mama and daddy. She kept her eyes closed and tried to dream again of England; tried to remember the green country-side and the warm sheep as they brushed past her and the soft furry warmth of the kittens in the barn, and lots of warm milk to drink.

Jonathan and Ellen Wamlsley Clegg had joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Lancashire, England. In 1856 they brought their family to America and looked forward to reaching "Zion". Salt Lake Valley, before the cold weather came. As members of the ill-fated Martin Handcart Company they would not reach the Salt Lake Valley until the 30th of November.

"Alice. Alice, can you get up this morning, Mama called.

Half awake, eyes still closed. Alice tried to lift her head. Someone held onto her hair.

"Ouch!" she shouted. And quickly she remembered to lay quietly as she heard mama say,

"Daddy is coming dear." She remembered that many mornings lately, while on this trip across the plains, the moisture from her head had held her hair to the cold ground with a fist of ice. She had learned to lie still and wait patiently for papa to melt sonic snow over the fire until the water was very hot. Then he would pour it on the ground to melt the ice around her head.

She didn't mind lying here. She was not warm; but she was warmer than the dead people. Every morning there were more, people to bury.

They laid down at night and just didn't wake up. Some of them had been sick the day before, and some had been very tired. They were so tired they couldn't push their carts another step through the wind and cold and snow.

Alice remembered when Great Aunt Bessie was buried in England.

What a fine wood box a man had made to bury her in the wood was so smooth it felt like a mama's velvet cape. It was polished like a mirror, and Alice could see her face in it. There was no such other coffin for the people who died here. The ground hard and the men so weak and tired they could hardly dig. They made one great hoe for all the dead each morning. Oh! It was all so sad and made your heart hurt to a baby, or grandma, or a mama, or a daddy in this lonely place.

Alice began to cry and shiver. She wondered if ever she would be warm again. She opened her eyes and saw Daddy's smiling face come into view. He cautioned her, as he always did, to lie still while he poured the hot water on the ground around her head. There, at last she was free!

Another cold and wintry day had dawned for Alice. Another day to walk beside the handcart that held all the family owned. Her dress would get wet and freeze as she walked. She was glad that people seemed to get warmer as they walked. At the end of the

day the night would come again, and she would still be hungry. In the morning the ice and cold ground would hold her hair again.

The company walked on the wagon trail mile after mile. Week after week passed. Then the months had passed and the wheels on the carts kept turning, except on the days they were broken. Alice didn't mind stopping often for repairs, because sometimes the broken carts were burned and everyone was warm for awhile.

When the handcart company was still many miles from Salt Lake Valley, a morning dawned that was full of ice blowing snow. The ice did not hold Alice's hair this morning because she had huddled in Mama's arms all night. There was no wood to build a fire to melt snow or cook the food, but there was no food either. Alice cautiously lifted her head and peeked from under the shawl that covered her and mama.

"Where are the people of the Company?" she thought.

Dimly through the snow she could see the other handcarts and decided that the snow covered lumps must be her friends. The band of survivors of the Martin Company had resigned themselves to never reach the Valley. They knew they would freeze to death here, this day. From one of the white mounds came a quavering voice singing.

". ... and should we die before our journey's through." The song was never finished because someone shouted,

Look! Look! Our prayers are answered. All the white lumps popped up and people were stumbling towards the shadows coming through the blowing snow.

Soon Alice would see them, too. There were horses with big packs of supplies on their backs, and there were horses with strong healthy people riding them. Those "Life Savers" had wood for fire. There was food to eat. There were even Indian style sleighs to carry the people who could not walk and further or who were half frozen. Alice jumped and whooped and yelled until mama told her to be quiet so we can think.

Written and submitted by: Beth S. Edvalson