

Jens Nielson – Rock Creek Hollow and the Hole-in-the-Rock

Perhaps the most memorable pioneer stalwarts were the Saints who made the journey in handcart companies. These companies brought nearly 3,000 pioneers west between 1856 and 1860. In **1856**, two handcart companies, with 1,075 pioneers under the leadership of James G. Willie and Edward Martin, left later in the year than planned, and they encountered early winter storms in present-day Wyoming.

We find one of the most touching stories of sacrifice, faith, and loving charity in the life of Jens Nielson, who was a member of the Willie Handcart Company. Jens, a relatively prosperous Danish farmer, heeded the call to bring his family to Zion. In Iowa he wrote that he had let all of his money go to the Church except enough to buy a handcart and stock it with 15 pounds of belongings per person. Jens wrote, "Obedience is better than sacrifice." The people for whom Jens was responsible were himself; his wife, Elsie; their six-year-old son, Neils; and a nine-year-old girl, Bodil Mortensen, whom Jens offered to take to Utah. In the early Wyoming blizzard, temperatures plummeted below zero. Jens feet were completely frozen. "Elsie, said Jens, "Go, leave me here to die; alone you might make it." Elsie replied, "Ride, Jens, ride; I can pull the cart." The Nielsons had consumed their last pound of flour days before, but somehow they made it over the treacherous **Rocky Ridge**, urged on by their indomitable courage and unconquerable faith. Tragically, 13 of the company died at **Rock Creek Hollow** and were buried in shallow, snow-covered graves—among them, Jens and Elsie's son, Neils, and young Bodil Mortensen, whose frozen body was found on a morning with a handful of sagebrush she had gathered for the fires.

President Hinckley describes this portion of the trail as "a trail of tragedy, a trail of faith, a trail of devotion, a trail of consecration, even the consecration of life itself."

Jens later said when describing this ordeal, "No person can describe it, nor could it be comprehended or understood by any human living in this life, but those who were called to pass through it." He also said at a later time, "As extreme as this handcart ordeal was, the trek through the Hole-in-the-Rock was more severe." He was able to keep the covenant that he had made with the Lord on the plains of Wyoming; that he would do anything the Lord should ask him to do for the rest of his life.

The pioneering into the San Juan Mission to befriend the Indians called upon the many years of experience, unwavering courage, and faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ which were found in Jens Nielson. And so they went. They blasted, they scraped, they dug, they sweat, they strained, and they struggled through two feet of snow. They pulled, they pushed, they heaved, and they slogged through ice cold axle-deep mud. They walked in worn-out shoes full of sand and pebbles. 1879 - They worried, they froze, they starved and they prayed through all that year. President Smith called a meeting to announce the decision to move ahead. "The miracle of this decision went through the company like an electric shock," wrote Kumen Jones, a member of the group, "and all was good cheer and hustle." In the meeting, many bore testimony in support of moving ahead. A spirit of unity prevailed. Jens Nielson said, "We must go on whether we can or not," and if "we have plenty of stickie-ta-tudy we cannot fail." Someone began to sing. Others joined in, and soon the chilly December air rang with "The Spirit of God like a fire is burning!"

Jens' faithful second wife, Kirsten, is not diminished in these hours of struggle, there are no tears, neither condemnation nor despair. If the artist's brush could truly portray the expression in her eyes, one could behold a love stronger than the bonds of death – love born of adversity, poverty, hard labor and anxiety. One would see her understanding that her husband is more than a strong, kind, courageous, self-disciplined, natural-born leader. She sees that he is a man of God, holding the Priesthood which blesses their family and community. If faithful to the end she shall one day share, all that God has, with him and their families.



**Laura, Lindsay, and Chris Jones at
Rock Creek Hollow
"Remember"**