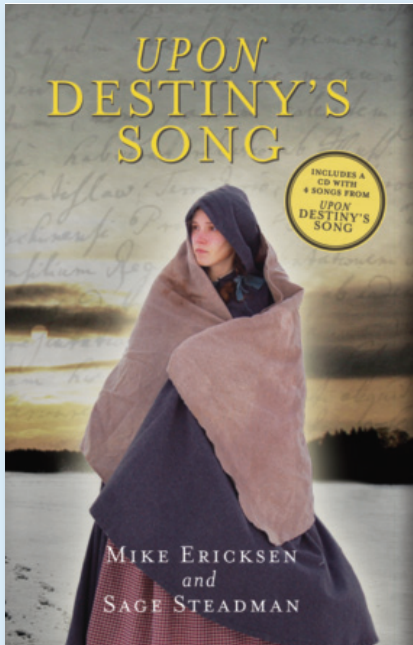


# Upon Destiny's Song

In this excerpt from his book, *Upon Destiny's Song*, Mike Ericksen retells the harrowing story of his ancestors' journey across an unforgiving Western frontier.

All photos by Nancy Ericksen, courtesy of Groberg Films



October 23, 1856

"Hell's fury fell." — Rock Creek Hollow

**U**pon *Destiny's Song* is a remarkable story about sacrifice, courage and love. Ane Marie Madsen, author Mike Ericksen's great-grandmother, emigrated from Denmark with her family seeking an American Zion amidst the Rocky Mountains. Her father, Ole Madsen, was answering the call of early leaders of their newfound religion, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to gather together. After traversing over 1,000 miles on foot pulling a handcart, the pioneer company runs out of provisions and is forced to climb the snowbound Rocky Ridge in Wyoming in order to meet the relief train on the other side of the ridge in South Pass. Ane Marie Madsen was only ten years old when she immigrated to Utah with her family. She was numbered in the ill-fated Willie Handcart Company of 1856, which saw the deaths of almost a third of the company when winter storms hit Wyoming. After settling in Utah, Ane Marie's faith is tested once again as her path moves through the misadventures of colonizing a new territory ridden with danger and disease. Over 150 years later, descendent Mike Ericksen retells this epic journey and discovers lessons for his own modern sojourn. Ericksen has previously told the story of his ancestors harrowing trek through song and speaking engagements held across the country. Now the amazing story and its beautiful message is finally available in *Upon Destiny's Song*. The following is an excerpt from the book in a chapter titled *Rocky Ridge*.

7 A.M.

William H. Kimball reached down and grabbed a handful of snow. His hands, nearly frozen, were barely able to feel the soft flakes coalescing into a ball in his hand. He thought back to his words, when he had promised blithely that he would stuff in his mouth all the snow they would see. He gazed upon the white landscape, ashamed. He had come back with the rescuers to do his part in making sure

the company, who had trusted in him, would be delivered to Zion. He thought upon the words his father Heber C. Kimball had spoken to him before he left, "If you die during this trip, you will die endeavoring to save the people, and who has greater love than he who lays down his life for his friends."

Somewhat fortified by the food that Kimball and the rest of the rescuers brought, the Willie Company now faced the worst challenge of the trail, the

ascent up Rocky Ridge, a five-mile climb from where they were, to the summit, through rocky terrain, wading in snow up to their knees. Temperatures had dropped way below freezing. Kimball knew he would have to push them, whip them if necessary. If they did not move, they would die. This would be the hardest part of their journey, and they would have to do it when at their weakest. But they had no choice. They had to move.

Most of the relief wagons moved on to the Martin Company, which was two weeks behind them and also in dire need. It was a decision the Willie Company had made together. When the situation was explained and voted on, the company unanimously raised their hands in support. They had faith that other wagons would be along for them. They knew the Martin Company was likely worse off than they were. Kimball had sent a messenger ahead to South Pass the day before with a note relating the deplorable conditions of the company and informing them of their arrival. The provisions the Willie Company had now would last them until the next relief train arrived, but they would have to move forward to meet it, and that meant climbing the ridge.

A man limped by Kimball, stopping only a moment to rest at the fire before moving on and finding a place to relieve himself. *He could be dead by morning*, Kimball thought, shaking from his mind the horrific image of the frozen bodies they had buried the night before.

Kimball gazed at the fire. He

couldn't imagine anyone surviving this if the approaching storm were to lay down another foot of snow. The hard winds began to blow, presaging more snowfall.

Kimball looked Captain Willie in the eyes, but Willie could feel he wasn't looking at him, rather beyond him to the ridge, to the climb ahead. "Captain," Kimball spoke, "Get your leaders assembled immediately."

Willie nodded, walked to the center of camp and rounded up his sub-captains who were busy helping those who were ill by packing up their tents. Many were sick, and when they ate they would not feel satisfied, and upon eating would vomit, or lose their bowels. Dysentery was rampant.

As the sub-captains grouped around the fire, Kimball looked at them and without emotion or inflection in his voice said, "I am taking command of the company. I know you want to stay a couple of days, but we do not have days or even hours. I don't know if we can make it without losing half of them, but those who can make it will only live if we go now. We will have to drive them, we will have to

push them and we will have to put the strap to them if necessary. Their lives — and yours, depend on your resolve. We leave in two hours. Find if there are any dead before we go, and get them in the ground."

There was no discussion, not even a question. They all knew what had to be done and what it meant if they failed.

8 A.M.

Marie hugged Kristina for warmth as she slept. Marie dreamed of walking by her old church in Jyderup in the summer and looking up at the large white bird as it sat in the belfry. Some boys were throwing rocks at the bird. She looked around, intending to scold them and noticed dark figures in large numbers slowly moving up behind them. She tried to call to them, but no words came out. One of the boys picked up a palm-sized rock and threw it at the bird. It jumped as the rock passed it and hit the bell. The dream ended as she awoke.

"Time to get up, my little lambs," Ane greeted them. The children stirred. Despite the extra rest and some food, they



The set of *Sweetwater Rescue*, Groberg Films, depicting the rescue site located at Martin's Cove Historical Site, Wyoming.

awoke with the same lack of energy. "The snow is coming down, and we are moving today. We must pack up the tent and our things. I already have food prepared for you."

The children rubbed the sleep from their eyes, wrapped themselves in thin blankets and braved the severe cold. They ate while Ole and others collapsed the tent and packed it.

"The climb today will be brutal," Ole muttered to Ane as he used a tin plate to dig out the handcart, making sure the children didn't overhear. "The wagons will be used to carry the sick and dying. I have been assured that Andrew and Marie will be able to ride, but Kristina and Johanna—"

"They can manage," Ane said coolly. She did not lack compassion for her young girls, Ole knew. She just had to find the strength and faith that their family was struggling to maintain. She would be the one to carry them through, and any sign of fear, any weakness would infect her whole family. She would not allow it.

It was a gift Ole did not have, but he loved it in Ane. He finished tying down their things and joined the children bunched around the fire.

"Finish up and wash your dishes," Ole said, "Johanna and Kristina, you are going to be with us pushing the cart. You are strong girls and I know you can do it." He spoke as if it were any other day. "Marie and Andrew, you will be in the wagon. Your job is to take care of the sick. The sick will be frozen. You must rub their limbs to restore warmth."

The children looked at him puzzled. Was he serious?

"Did you hear me?" Ole spat.



*On location with Groberg Films in Wyoming. Recreating the rescue scene of the Willie Company. The temperature was -15 degrees and the wind was blowing at 50 mph.*

The children all nodded. "Yes, Father."

"Good." Ole walked behind the wagon so his children could not see his grief. His children's faces were excruciating to look upon. They had beheld the very face of death, and now they were being asked to arise and climb. He bit his fist until the grief passed, and then pulled away his hand and saw teeth marks in his knuckles. He felt nothing.

## 9 A.M.

The sick were being loaded back into the wagons. Ole lifted Andrew and Marie up and put them beside the ill and dying. "I will see you tonight for dinner. Remember your duty." He knew they needed something to do, to keep them awake and active, lest they close their eyes to rest and freeze.

Marie nodded, her mouth agape, her features gaunt. Ole turned away from her as the wagon moved off. He looked at Kristina and Johanna hugging each other. Ane was ready to pull the cart. Ole climbed

between the handles with her and grabbed the bar, gently placing his hand over hers. He looked at her and squeezed her hand. Any strength they had left they would find in each other. They had to look past the sadness in each other's eyes to find their Zion.

"Whatever happens, do not stop to rest," Ole instructed his family. "We have to keep moving, no matter what." The girls nodded in understanding and looked up at the steep ridge. This mountain appeared to be the only thing standing between them and deliverance.

Many in the company would have preferred to stay at camp. Their spirits had given up long ago. The flame that had once burned so bright in their hearts and longed for Zion had burned out and turned cold. Their will for living was fading, but they moved on like the walking dead.

They could have fought against it, begged for another way or gone off the path in hopes of finding an easier passage. Instead, they looked upon the trail ahead, the rough ridge, now bound by thick snow, and

they accepted the path they had chosen. The men, women and children of the company latched onto their handcarts, which carried the only things they had left on this earth besides each other, and they climbed.

They moved slowly and laboriously. The Madsens didn't know which was worse, waiting and anticipating the trek ahead, standing still in the cold, dark and uninviting morning, or

it fell. The same blustering wind that had been such a sweet relief in the blazing heat of the summer now slashed their frostbitten faces. The crosswind whipped the women's skirts and loosed their hair from under their bonnets. The strands of hair mingled with the snow and became tiny icicles that whipped against their skin.

The snow absorbed all sound except the unrelenting howling of the wind, so strong that it

forward without assistance. They attempted to move by grasping the cart's handle and falling forward with their weight, only to be pushed back by the wind. The cart fell backward too, as the handle flew up towards their necks. With all their strength, they gripped the handle and pulled it down, securing it just beneath their ribs as they leaned forward and pushed. Still, the carts did not move. The sub-captains, along with other men who still had strength, stood behind the foundered carts and as a group, pushed, helping the handcarts move individually and slowly up the steep ridge. Ole waited his turn. He looked at Ane, who stood next to him. Her determination was slipping. He looked at his daughters, Johanna and Kristina, shivering; their eyes closed as the cold pierced them like ice, making them freeze and dry before every blink.

Peter Madsen approached from behind, "You must keep moving or you will freeze."

"We cannot move the cart without more help," Ole said.

"Keep trying. We are instructed to keep moving."

Ole nodded and turned to his daughters, "Keep walking, keep moving ahead of us if you need to. We will be right behind you." ❧

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MIKE ERICKSEN has been a devout student of the handcart pioneers ever since he learned of his family's trek. An accomplished classical guitarist, Mike has produced films and music related to their stories including the documentary *Walking in Obedience: The Ole Madsen Story*, which was heralded a "historical masterpiece." He is currently playing with the band Cedar Breaks.



On the set of "Sweetwater Rescue", Groberg Films. Scene depicting the crossing of the Sweetwater River.

having the feeling of pins and needles rush over their bodies every time they moved.

They looked to each other for support, for strength, and at times, motivation, to remember why and for whom they lived.

## 11 A.M.

The ascent was brutal, the scene around them horrific. Men and women who barely had the strength to get up this morning, collapsed the first mile of the climb. Two men had already collapsed dead and were buried at the base. The punishing wind beat down upon them. The snow hit them like bits of ice as

haunted their ears with its cries. The wind was a demon telling them to give up, to surrender and to die. But they ignored the wind's cries and pushed on. They moved, barely able to hear the creak of the wheels or crunch of the snow. Not even the sound of their own labored breathing was audible.

With their limbs unfeeling, they struggled to wade through heavy thick snow. Perhaps it was better that their feet were numb so they couldn't feel the rough terrain beneath them.

At one point, the steepness of the climb and their failing strength made it impossible for Ole, or anyone, to move