

Comments of Lloyd Charles Larsen
Before the
House Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands
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Casper, Wyoming

Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee: I am Lloyd Larsen of Lander, Wyoming. I am honored and pleased to appear before this distinguished committee today.

I am the co-owner of Triple L. Inc., a construction and general contracting business that primarily serves the petroleum industry with 20 employees. I am also the President of the Riverton, Wyoming Stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). There are 2587 members of our faith in this stake, located in 10 different congregations throughout Fremont County.

I am pleased to present to the subcommittee petitions from nearly 6,000 members of the LDS faith in Wyoming in favor of legislation to convey Martin's Cove to the Church. These petitions are from Wyoming citizens who are all of voting age from 101 communities throughout the state. They reflect the strong support of the Wyoming LDS community for this legislation. And so, on behalf of thousands of LDS church members, we thank House Resources Chairman Jim Hansen for providing a legislative vehicle to enable the congress to review the ownership issue of Martin's Cove.

We also join in expressing appreciation to Representative Cubin for insisting that public hearings on the bill take place in Wyoming. Speaking for myself, while I am pleased with the direction and concept of this bill, I would also welcome legislative changes that would keep the proceeds of the Martin's Cove sale in Wyoming, that ensure the public access to the Cove, and that take into account other views.

The intent of this testimony is to try and help the hearing committee understand the sacrifice of time, labor, equipment and money, that has generously been donated by the citizen's of this great State who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the development of Mormon Handcart Visitors Center ("Visitor's Center") which includes the development of Martin's Cove ("Cove") so that the public could have access to this site. I would also like to inform the committee of the efforts of the Church to identify, research and acquire other lands that have historic value that could be traded to the BLM for Martin's Cove.

For five years prior to the Church's purchase of the Sun Ranch members of the Church living in the geographic area surrounding Martin's Cove had been involved in a project that required researching the names and events associated with the Martin and Willie Handcart Companies. In that process we were able to obtain copies of journals that had been written by the handcart pioneers, or their descendants. We not only became acquainted with the events surrounding the saga of the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies, we come to understand the spirit, human kindness, compassion, stamina, character, and sacrifice of those handcart pioneers. We also come to understand to some degree the voluntary sacrifice, courage, character, and compassion of those who came to rescue the stranded handcart companies. As we came to know these people, a bonding took place. Many members of the LDS Church in Wyoming are descendants of these pioneers who crossed the plains, and they have come to recognize the sacrifice their forefathers made to believe and worship the way they wanted. Other LDS citizens in the State found that they could relate to the sacrifices of the handcart pioneers because, like these early pioneers they too made sacrifices to embrace this religion.

Because of this relationship the members of the Church were excited whenever an opportunity arose that allowed them to eulogize the handcart pioneers. In 1991 members of the Church here in Wyoming erected three monuments along the Oregon/Mormon trail dedicated to the members of the Martin and Willie

Handcart Companies. The time, equipment, and materials for the casting of the bronze plaques, building the interior structure of the monuments, hauling rock from a BLM quarry in LaBarge, Wyoming 200 miles away, and the masonry work on the plaques were all donated.

We were thrilled when we learned that the negotiations for the acquisition of the Sun Ranch had been successful in the fall of 1996. Up to this point access into the Cove had been limited because you had to drive across private land prior to accessing the public land where the Cove is. After the Church purchased the ranch, a meeting was held at the old Sun ranch house to determine how we could make this property an interpretive site that would be conducive to the history of the handcart legacy, and maintain the influence of the Sun family who the property was purchased from. At this same meeting it was also noted that 1997 was the sesquicentennial of the vanguard company of Mormon pioneers crossing the plains and entering the Salt Lake valley. Because of this historic celebration it was decided that every effort should be made to make the handcart historic site accessible by May of 1997.

In order to have the area ready for visitors a number of things had to be done, which included:

- 1.) The bridge across the Sweetwater River needed to be replaced. The existing bridge was an old railroad car that was too narrow. This bridge had also been set too close to the river and would sometimes get covered with water when the river flooded.
- 2.) Some sort of visitors center needed to be created to tell the story of the handcart pioneers and of the Sun family.
- 3.) A parking lot needed to be made.
- 4.) There weren't any public restrooms.
- 5.) With the ranch being there for many decades, there was need to "clean up, pick up, paint up, and fix up."
- 6.) We needed to establish more water sources for drinking water. Water wells needed to be drilled.
- 7.) The access road from the highway into the visitor's area needed to be improved.
- 8.) A walking trail needed to be designed and constructed from the visitor's center into Martin's Cove.
- 9.) A footbridge needed to be placed over the Sweetwater River up closer to the Cove.
- 10.) Interpretive signs needed to be designed, constructed, and installed along the trail to help people better understand the events in the area.
- 11.) Campgrounds with water and restrooms needed to be established to accommodate those groups and individuals that wanted to camp in the area.
- 12.) A picnic area around the Visitor's Center would be needed for visitors. It was anticipated that because the closest town of any size was 50 miles away, many visitors would be bringing their lunches with them.

This meeting was held in the middle of September, and it was determined that we should be ready for visitors on May 1st, which gave us seven and a half months to be ready. The biggest obstacles were the coming on of winter and labor. When the members around Wyoming found out that there was a need for

help the response was incredible.

It was decided that the historic ranch house which was in a sad state of repair should be repaired and made into the visitors center which would not only protect the inherent atmosphere of the ranch, it would also help establish a setting for the visitors. Volunteers who were familiar with the building trades removed the old floor and excavated under the bottom log of the structure by hand. They leveled the walls and then poured a new concrete floor. Where the logs had rotted out they were replaced with other logs salvaged from other demolition.

The bridge over the Sweetwater River was unique. Members from the Riverton area were asked if they could build a bridge. They answered yes, and were given the assignment to build it. In reality none of them had ever built a bridge before. The existing bridge was an old railroad car that was 8 ft. wide and 90 feet long. They decided to try and find another railroad car with the intentions of putting the two together side by side. A civil engineer in Casper who was a member of the Church found out about the project and offered his services. Another railroad car was found in Oregon and shipped to the site. Both railroad cars had been in wrecks and were no longer straight and true. It was decided that pilings should be driven into the ground on both sides of the river for the railroad cars to set on. The pilings were driven and the cars set with an additional space between them to get the desired width. There were several members that were welders who volunteered their time to repair the damaged railcars and to join the two cars together with structural steel. Some of these men took their vacation time to work 12-14 hours a day on the bridge throughout the month of October and part of November. It gets cold in Wyoming during those months. In addition to the welders there were orthodontists, grandmas, housewives and school age children who would show up to do whatever they could to make sure the bridge was completed. Some had so much clothing on to stay warm that they had a hard time moving around. Because the new bridge was set at a higher elevation than the old bridge, new approaches had to be made, which took over one thousand yards of dirt and gravel. A businessman in Casper who sells construction equipment heard that the approaches were being constructed. He called and inquired what equipment was being used and what was needed. The next day he sent out a large rubber tired loader, a compactor, and a motor grader all to be used free of charge. The motor grader and compactor were left there until May to be used as needed. A lot of people were needed to help put the planking on the bridge. The turnout was so good that there were more people than was needed. A group of women who had come to assist with the planking wanted to know what else could be done. They were pointed to a pile of rocks, which needed to be carried underneath the bridge and placed around the bridge pilings to help prevent erosion. There were 15 yards of rocks in that pile all weighing between five and ten pounds each. That group of women, one of whom was pregnant, carried the whole fifteen yards of rock by hand under the bridge, and placed them around the pilings. Thousands of hours of labor and equipment went into the building of this bridge so that all who wanted access into the Cove would have the ability to cross the river in a manner more favorable than the handcart pioneers. The civil engineer who helped on the bridge estimated the cost of the bridge with all that was done would have exceeded \$200,000.00.

The Church expressed to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) a desire to develop an access into the actual Cove where the Martin Handcart Company camped. The Bureau of Land Management accepted the opportunity to develop the site, but didn't have the funds or the manpower at that time to accomplish all that needed to be done. The BLM developed and provided a blueprint for an interpretive trail that started near the Visitor's Center and went across Church owned property, to Federal land. Once the trail was on Federal land it went up into the Cove, from the Cove it then back onto Church property ending up back at the visitor's center. The total distance of trail that needed to be built was over 2.5 miles. 1.25 miles of the trail was to be built on Federal land. An archeological study needed to be conducted on the BLM land. Again the BLM didn't have the funds or the manpower to do the study at that time. The Church funded the study. Brigham Young University's archeology department came and identified two archeological sites. It was decided by the BLM that the trail could be constructed to the Cove without damaging the integrity of

the archeological sites. The Church and the BLM built the portion of the trail that was on Church land with the BLM providing the materials and some equipment, the Church provided labor and equipment. When the trail got onto Federal land the trail became a narrow walking path. The design of the trail required that a geo-tech material be laid down where the trail was going to be and then gravel placed over it to a depth of two to three inches. Landscaping timbers were to be placed along the edges of the trail to keep the gravel in place. Again the BLM provided the materials but didn't have the labor resources. The members of the Church volunteered to provide labor and equipment for the task of building the trail. Men, women, and children of all ages spent much of late March and early April laying the geo-tech material on the trail, hauling the gravel and installing the landscaping ties. The trail was too narrow for dump trucks to drive on in order to spread gravel on the trail, so the volunteers brought their ATV's and hooked small garden trailers to them and hauled the gravel on to the trail one quarter of a yard at a time. A majority of the high school and jr. high school students that were volunteers spent their spring vacation that year building a trail that would allow all who desired, an opportunity to walk into Martin's Cove. The BLM recorded that an excess of 7,000 man-hours of labor were donated in the construction of that trail.

After the trail was completed the Church researched and designed information that could be placed on interpretive signs for people to read as they went into the cove. These signs tell the story of the Martin Handcart Company. They had the signs made and installed them along the trail.

Pinedale Wyoming is at least 240 miles from Martin's Cove. It is a rural community, where ranching, timber, and minerals are the backbone of the economy. When the members of the Church in that community found out about all that was going on at Martin's Cove, they wanted to be a part of it. When asked if they could build picnic tables, the Pinedale people volunteered for the job. They went back to Pinedale where one of the individuals owns a sawmill. They cut the lumber from native logs and made picnic tables that will hold a truck up. They scheduled the delivery of the tables to the Visitor's Center on the day when they knew that there was a lot of work scheduled to be going on around the Visitor's Center. They left their homes in Pinedale at 4:00 a.m. so that they could get to the visitor's center by 8:00 a.m. They left early in order to deliver the tables and have enough time left to work a full day. They set the tables and then found that the new public restrooms constructed by the Church was supposed to have log siding put on it which had been made from the logs of an old barn. They along with members from Dubois, and Lander who also had experience working with logs made sure that the installation of the log siding on the restrooms was completely finished that day. They left on the four and a half drive home that night knowing that they had made a contribution to the comfort of those that would come to visit Martin's Cove.

The examples that I have given of the efforts made by the members of this Church are intended to illustrate the relationship that we have with the handcart pioneers, because of the legacy that they left behind. All of the tasks that have been identified were completed in time for the dedication of the Visitor's Center on May 3, 1997. We here in Wyoming want to preserve and protect this site for generations to come. It is a place where all that are residents of Wyoming and all who are visiting can come to learn about this important event in the history of the Church and the history of the west. It is a place where we can learn a little more about who we are.

After the acquisition of the Sun Ranch, Church representatives started negotiating with the BLM in an effort to trade other lands the Church owned for the land Martin's Cove was at. Initially it was thought that we could exchange some other deeded land on the ranch for the Cove. The BLM told us that a piece of property that was as historically significant as Martin's Cove would have to be found, evaluated, and agreed upon before a trade could take place. The Church had a representative travel along the Oregon/Mormon trail across the entire state of Wyoming looking for property that was historically significant. Once those properties were found an inquiry was made to see if the properties were for sale. Three properties were located with the possibility of meeting the requirements, and that the current owners were willing to sale.

The first site identified was for sale, but not at a price that we felt was reasonable. Negotiations with the owner were conducted over a substantial period of time without reasonable terms being reached.

The second site was a section of property on the Sweetwater River known as 6th Crossing. This is an area where all pioneers crossing on the Mormon, California, and Oregon trails crossed the river for the 6th time. This area is particularly significant in the history of the LDS Church because of the events that involved the Willie Handcart Company, which got caught in the same winter storm as the Martin Company. This property also contains a section of the trail known as the Seminoe Cutoff. The Seminoe Cutoff was an alternative route around some of the rougher portions of the trail going over South Pass. The Church was able to purchase this property. The Church wanted to keep the portion of the property at 6th Crossing because it has a comparable importance to Martin's Cove. The Church did however offer the Seminoe Cutoff and a permanent easement into 6th Crossing for access to the trail as it crosses over the Sweetwater River. The BLM declined this offer indicating that it didn't "meet the test".

The third site identified was a piece of property that the BLM was interested in, and the owner was initially interested in selling the property. The owner however decided against the sale in favor of keeping it for personal use.

After we reevaluated our situation, it was our judgment that further comparable sites did not exist. We approached the BLM representatives to inquire if they knew of any other sites that they would be interested in. They indicated that they weren't aware of any at that time. It was at this point that we entertained the option of pursuing legislative avenues. The BLM representatives were the first ones that we informed of this intention. This was done in an effort to be forthright in our dealings with them.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony today. I would be please to respond to questions you may have.

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