

Testimony of Robert Scott Lorimer
Before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee
on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands
On H.R. 4103, the Martin's Cove Land Transfer Act
May 4, 2002

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands, it is a privilege to be before you today to discuss the use of and ownership of one of our national landmarks, Martin's Cove. My name is Scott Lorimer. My involvement during the past 30 plus years with Martin's Cove and other Handcart historical sites has been as a non-historian volunteer. I have received no compensation or reimbursement for my work. I have no formal training as a historian but have written extensively regarding the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies and have been presented awards honoring my work. (please see Exhibits A and B)

I grew up in Casper Wyoming, approximately 60 miles from Independence Rock, Devil's Gate and Martin's Cove. Throughout my childhood years I was completely captivated as my Mother would tell me stories of my great grandfather, Neils Peter Ipson. He was a native of Denmark who like so many emigrants of the 1800's came to America in pursuit of the right freedom of religion and many of the other freedoms enjoyed on the American shores. He was a member of the second handcart company to come in 1856, the McArthur Company. Mom would tell me how he pulled a handcart across the plains wearing wooden shoes he himself had made. I learned of the hardships suffered by the handcart pioneers and was very proud of my heritage.

At the age of six, I was invited to go on a tour of Martin's Cove by a great Sunday School teacher. My classmates and I were treated to a guided tour by Tom Sun Jr. As I walked into Martin's Cove, I felt a special feeling that I did not completely understand. I listened to the stories of how the Martin Handcart Company had suffered in the October storm of 1856. In my mind I envisioned the pioneer children huddled near their dying parents as the relentless Wyoming winds tore at them and robbed them of body warmth, determination and life itself. I contemplated the feeling of starvation and despair. Those feelings never left me.

After serving a mission in Germany and completing my college education I returned to Wyoming to live in Riverton. I had learned that there were two handcart companies stranded in the October 1856 blizzard, the Willie Company and the Martin Company. I knew somewhat concerning the Martin Company but very little about the Willie Company. I resolved to find their campsites of note and more particularly Rock Creek Hollow near South Pass.

Again as I walked for the first time on the ground at Rock Creek Hollow I felt a deep sense of reverence for the bold and courageous people who had given all that they had, even life itself, for generations yet unborn.

I found myself desiring that other people that I knew might have the opportunity of visiting both Martin's Cove and Rock Creek Hollow. Access to both locations was on private ground so permission needed to be obtained each time a visit was made. I also began to visit sites on public, BLM, lands such as the base of Rocky Ridge and Rocky Ridge.

I took everyone I knew to these areas and interest began to grow. They in turn brought their friends and so it went. In addition I began to be keenly interested in the handcart pioneers personal histories. I began collecting first hundreds and then thousands of pages of journals and other information relating to the handcart companies and the individuals who made up their number. The research made the sites of Martin's Cove and Rock Creek Hollow more meaningful and the pioneers became real. Their stories are about faith, dedication and love. Through the study of their lives we all became better people.

On October 16, 1991, I invited local members of the Mormon Church to assist in the construction of three monuments along the Mormon Trail. The monuments were to be at Martin's Cove, The Willie Rescue Site and Rocky Ridge. The monuments were to resemble one that had been constructed at Rock Creek Hollow in 1932. After permission was obtained from the BLM and land owners, construction began. The response was overwhelming. Not only were the monuments constructed entirely from donated materials and labor but the large bronze plaques on each monument were cast by volunteers in Wyoming. This required not only creativity but the construction of a kiln, oven and tools to handle the molten bronze. These monuments were completed and dedicated on August 15, 1992. Descendents of the Martin or Willie pioneers and other interested individuals began to visit the monuments in large numbers.

The interest grew to the point that I approached the leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and asked permission to purchase first Rock Creek Hollow and then the Sun Ranch. President Gordon B. Hinckley, current President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, not only granted permission but enthusiastically embraced the idea of the purchases.

Rock Creek Hollow was purchased on September 9, 1992. Work began immediately on a reclamation effort to restore Rock Creek Hollow to its original status as mining operations in the 1800's had significantly changed the river bed and left large tailings piles from dredge operations. After one and a half years of continuous work by volunteers who donated supplies, equipment and labor, Rock Creek Hollow was dedicated on July 23, 1994 by President Gordon B. Hinckley. After Rock Creek Hollow had been made available to the public, I obtained authorization to approach the Sun family for either an easement into Martin's Cove or the possible purchase the Sun Ranch.

After lengthy negotiations a portion of the lands controlled by the Sun family were purchased on July 22, 1996. Work began immediately to construct a Visitor's Center, a new bridge across the Sweetwater, handcarts, restrooms and trails into Martin's Cove.

The bridge was constructed entirely by volunteer labor which amounted to over 8,000 man hours. It became known as Veil Crossing. The trails were constructed by volunteers and BLM employees working side by side. The BLM provided very valuable suggestions that they had obtained through the management of other historical sites.

The Visitors Center was completed by volunteers and was dedicated on May 3, 1997 by President Hinckley. The Visitor's Center became known as the Mormon Handcart Visitor's Center. Not only is the history of the Martin Handcart Company presented in the Visitor's Center but the history and legacy of the Sun family who had served as wise stewards of the land for over 150 years.

After the dedication of the Visitor's Center thousands of visitors came every year. A dream that I had envisioned since my childhood had come true. People not only were being allowed to visit the sites of

the Handcart Pioneers, but they were internalizing their stories. There began to be an ever growing reverence in relation to these sites.

Virtually all pioneers that went to Oregon, California, Utah or other western destinations went through the Sweetwater valley past Independence Rock and Devils Gate. These areas became favorite camping locations because of the Sweetwater River and the geologic wonders. Less than 1%, however, of the pioneers who trekked the plains of Wyoming ever went into Martin's Cove. Every pioneer who used Martin's Cove was a member of the Martin Handcart Company or the Hunt and Hodgett wagon companies that were directly behind the Martin company and eventually joined them at Martin's Cove.

In discussing the area with the Sun family it became obvious that they likewise had never used Martin's Cove with the exception of occasionally grazing during the winter. It is obvious that it has very little agricultural value as Tom Sun and his family never approached the Federal Government to purchase the land even though they continually bought other land along the Sweetwater River. The ground is largely granite boulders and a large sand dune. It is located approximately one and one half miles north of the Oregon, Mormon and California Trails.

Although Martin's Cove is on the National Register of Historical Places, without the Martin Handcart Company and Brigham Young who sent rescuers from Salt Lake City, the Cove would have no meaning and be of no value historically or for agriculture purposes.

There are thousands of stories of the Martin Handcart Company that have been discovered since 1992 that are being told at Martin's Cove. Two of those stories are contained at Exhibits E and F of this testimony. The accounts of heroism are well worth the readers time. Please take the time to read and learn of the events that occurred in October of 1856.

One very brief story of a young woman and her fiancé is as follows:

Sarah Ann Franks (21) and George Padley (20) were both from England. They became engaged but wanted to be married in the Endowment House, the equivalent of LDS temples today, in Salt Lake City. They joined themselves with emigrants that eventually became the Martin Handcart company.

Sarah and George made their way across the Atlantic Ocean and then across the plains of America. They reached the last crossing of the Platte River near Red Buttes when the October snow storm hit the ill fated Martin Handcart Company. George was a strong young man and therefore spent the majority of the day on October 19, 1856 helping others across the Platte River.

Due to the extreme exposure to the cold, George became ill, suffered hypothermia, and eventually died in Martin's Cove.

The Journals of the Martin Company are very graphic as to what happened when the dead were buried in shallow trenches of snow. The wolves would come in and devour the dead bodies. The horrible sound of the snapping and snarling wolves was only exceeded by the graphic look of the area after the wolves had finished their work leaving body parts strewn about in the snow.

Sarah did not want this to happen to her beloved George. She therefore took off one of the few things she had to keep warm, a shawl. She asked the men responsible for burial duty to wrap George in the shawl and hand his lifeless body in a tree to keep him away from the wolves.

As Sarah departed Martin's Cove the last thing she saw - her fiancé George Padley's dead body hanging in a tree, warped in her shawl. Only through the willingness to serve others that these two young people possessed were they not allowed the privilege of marriage and a family. Our world today could learn much from such sacrifice.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints owns and operates historical sites and visitors centers through out the United States and Canada. The sole reason to own and operate these sites is to make them available to the public and tell uplifting historical stories like that of Sarah and George. The Church spends an inordinate amount of money maintaining these sites in a pristine state. Volunteers serve in these centers and sites to allow visitors to obtain a complete knowledge of the history, meaning and application of that knowledge in the every day life of the visitor. The track record of the Church speaks for itself not only for these historical sites but Martin's Cove operation as well.

Since acquiring the Sun Ranch properties, hundreds of thousands have visited Martin's Cove. Access prior to that time had been very limited and the BLM had done nothing to make it accessible to the public.

The Church has expressed its interest in not only maintaining the status quo at the Visitor's Center but would like to expand its operations on additional Sun Ranch lands. The Church has preserved the history of the Martin Handcart Company, other pioneer companies and ranch life on the Sweetwater River. At its own expense the Church constructed and maintains a "Peoples of the Sweetwater" museum at the Sun Ranch headquarters.

During the summer of 2001 the Church participated in and allowed an archeological dig by the University of Wyoming to locate an old fort that once stood on Sun property. Plans are currently underway to reconstruct a replica fort. After reviewing the continual outlay of funds and the extensive work completed it is obvious that the intent of the LDS Church is to make the properties available to the general public.

The vast majority of the visitors to Martin's Cove continue to be members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There is little interest in the Cove from other groups as it has no real historical significance to them.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is therefore the most likely and most dedicated caretaker of the land where these events that affect their people took place. No other group will ever have the interest level in the area that the LDS people have. Likewise there are few groups with the resources necessary to maintain and preserve the area of Martin's Cove like The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

SUMMARY

FACTS:

- Less than 1% of all the westward emigration pioneers used Martin's Cove. It is on the north side of the Sweetwater and was only used by the Martin Handcart Company. It has no historical significance to any other group.
- During the 140 years that the Bureau of Land Management exclusively controlled Martin's Cove it did little or nothing to make the area of Martin's Cove available to the general public.
- The Bureau of Land Management did not have funds to assist in the major construction costs of developing and interpreting the Martin's Cove site or the Willie Handcart Sites.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints made the entire Sweetwater Valley from Devil's Gate to Muddy Gap, including Martin's Cove, available to the general public at no cost to the public.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints built the following with donated labor and Church funding on land owned 100% by the Church:
 1. Visitor's Center
 2. 150 Handcarts
 3. Peoples of the Sweetwater Museum
 4. Construction of trails in and out of Martin's Cove – the BLM did provide design expertise and materials along with some labor. The labor to a large extent however was provided by local Wyoming members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
 5. A vehicle bridge over the Sweetwater River
 6. A foot bridge over the Sweetwater
 7. Water wells for drinking water
 8. Restrooms in multiple locations
 9. Improved or constructed new roads on the Sun Ranch to improve access
 10. Alteration of the highway to provide save access
 11. Extensive fence work
 12. Two large campgrounds that will accommodate up to 850 people each on the Sun Ranch along the Sweetwater.
 13. One campsite on Sun land near Independence Rock along with a water well.
 14. Chapels, barns, shops and other infrastructure to support the Visitor's Center
 15. Interpretive signs on the trail to Martin's Cove
 16. Highway signs
 17. Picnic areas with sturdy tables, shade trees and water
 18. Parking lots
 19. Mobil home park for Couple Missionary Staff
 20. Two duplex apartment homes for missionaries
 21. Renovation of existing ranch homes for the occupancy of missionary couples
 22. RV trailer park for visitors

Few if any organizations have or would commit the financial resources to construct and maintain such a facility.

- Since opening the Visitor's Center at the Sun Ranch on May 3, 1997 an average of 50,000 visitors have made the trip to this remote location in Wyoming to learn of the westward migration and more particularly the Handcart history.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints maintains a staff of 68 full time volunteer missionaries who at their own expense come to teach visitors about Martin's Cove, the other historical pioneer trails, the Sweetwater River ranch history and the history of the entire western migration.

These missionaries are not employees of the Church. They leave their homes, families and grandchildren to come to Wyoming and fight with mosquitoes and the Wyoming wind and cold for the privilege of teaching others about this aspect of history.

- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints tried repeatedly over a period of several years to acquire additional historic sites along the Trail corridor to exchange with the BLM for Martin's Cove. Although the Church purchased land of greater historical value, the Sixth Crossing of the Sweetwater is part of all the Trails and the majority of all pioneers crossed there while Martin's Cove is off the trail and was only used by the Martin Handcart Company, the BLM turned down offers to exchange equal acres of this land for equal acres of Martin's Cove.
- Access to Martin's Cove has never been restricted by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and will not be as long as individuals and groups entering the Cove conduct themselves in an appropriate manner for the nature of the site and what occurred there.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has participated in and sponsored archeological work by the University of Wyoming and Brigham Young University on lands it purchased from the Sun family.
- No extensive archeological projects have been allowed on lands controlled by the Bureau of Land Management near Martin's Cove.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a very good track record of managing historical sites and visitor centers through out the United States and Canada. The Church currently owns and operates 13 historical sites and 15 visitor centers throughout the world. These facilities accommodated over 5 million visitors during 2001.

Access to the public is granted free of charge. Although access is completely free of charge and granted to all who wish access, the vast majority – 97% - of all visitors are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This again is logical and verifies that it has very little if any significance to other groups of interested Trail enthusiasts.

ARGUMENTS:

Access

It has been argued that if The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was allowed to purchase Martin's Cove that it would be able to restrict access into the area. This argument runs cross current to the Church's proven track record and dedicated desire to make historical sites available to the public at no charge.

The access argument cuts both ways. Those who raise this red herring need to ask themselves, has the Federal Government ever changed its position on land access? Other government-managed facilities have an entrance fee. Could an entrance fee per head be in the future of a BLM controlled Martin's Cove?

The issue of access indeed is a red herring when one considers the track record of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Church allows free access to all its facilities. If access is a concern, proper language can be crafted by attorneys to assure access by the public as long as activities and behavior patterns are practiced by visitors.

Precedent

The precedent issue really does not exist. Every argument about precedent revolves around special interest groups wanting preferential treatment to sites special to their interests.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has made the following offer:

1. Repay the BLM for any expenses incurred in the construction of the foot trail into Martin's Cove.
2. Pay the "fair market appraised value" for Martin's Cove and surrounding lands.
3. Maintain Martin's Cove at the same or better status as the Federal Government has done.
4. Guarantee access to the general public within the same parameters as set out by the BLM in the existing lease.
5. Make access to Martin's Cove free of charge to the public.
6. Pay for all upkeep, improvements, electrical and other utilities, property taxes, lease fees and repairs to the property. This continues as long as the property is in operation and no cost can be retroactively charged back to the Federal Government.
7. Assume all liability for the property and its operation.

8. Staff the site with qualified tour guides seven days a week every day of the year during operating hours.

If any other special interest group wishes to acquire a historical site on the same terms the Federal Government should strongly consider it. It really is a “no start” business argument to say that a detrimental precedent is set through H.R. 4103.

The precedent issue has its roots in special interest groups who want the Federal Government to give them public assets and then the same special interest groups wish to limit public access to those assets. This is not a level playing field and should not be considered in comparison to H.R. 4103.

The Federal Government is very good at managing many things. If however the private sector is able to offer to manage a historical site or any other aspect of government at the same or better level and less cost to the public than the Federal Government can, then the Government should accept the offer, monitor the results, and apply its capital and manpower resources to other endeavors.

For years the Federal Postal system was the only and best way to deliver packages and letters in the United States. Somewhere in the 1970's a group of private sector individuals determined that they could provide the same service as the Federal Government at a lower cost for packages and overnight deliveries. The Government evaluated the process, security, cost and all other factors. It eventually was determined that the offer to relieve the Federal Government of part or all of this responsibility should be considered, evaluated and tried. Hence the birth of UPS and FedEx. Both these private businesses have replaced a portion of the Federal Government's obligations by assuming the liability. No one however has been able to replace the day-to-day delivery of mail so the Federal Government has retained that segment of the delivery business.

In the case of Martin's Cove, again the private sector has volunteered to and has proven that it can manage this particular historical site better than the Federal Government at a lower cost to the public – nothing is lower than free. It is therefore my belief that the Federal Government should monetize the asset and apply those funds as well as its maintenance funds and expertise in other areas that the private sector is not capable of administering.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints not only has offered to manage Martin's Cove and make it available to the general public but has proven through its track record that it is able to manage and has managed the property to make it available to the public better and at a lower cost than the Federal Government can.

Separation of Church and State

The opposition of H.C. 4103 raise the separation of Church and State issue. Like the access issue this argument cuts both ways. A very strong argument can be made for the reality that Martin's Cove was never used by any group other than the members of the Martin Handcart Company, hence the name – Martin's Cove. What then is the Federal Government wanting to manage a religious historical site for. Especially when The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints will:

1. Assume the liability of the property
2. Make the Government whole financially
3. Make the property available to the public at no cost
4. Maintain the property at the same level or better than the Federal Government has
5. Staff the property with tour guides
6. Discuss not only the Mormon history but all westward migration history

A very valid question under those conditions is – Why would the Federal Government wish to expend funds under such conditions? It would appear that the Federal Government needs to separate itself from the Church in this instance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I believe that given all the arguments The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the best caretaker of Martin's Cove. I believe that the interests of the general public will be better served long term by the stability of that management.

It has been a privilege to speak to you concerning these matters. For me, having Martin's Cove available to the public and members of the Church is a life long dream. Thank you for your time and consideration to this very worthwhile and necessary endeavor in preserving a vital portion of American and LDS history. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have of me.