

Testimony of Lee Underbrink

Congressman Radanovich and committee members:

I have been a resident of Casper for 46 years. I would like to share with you my views on this purchase. The actual area of Martin's Cove is very small and the Church, through land it already owns, has the only access to it. The cove is a spiritual place for the LDS where the handcarters actually took refuge and many died. The Martin Company tragedy was the second largest loss of life in one event in the State of Wyoming, the largest being the coal mine disaster in Hanna in 1903.

After Highway 220 was re-routed through the Sun Ranch there was no monument or indication that something historic had happened in the area. I tried very unsuccessfully to convince the State of Wyoming to install an interpretive sign along Highway 220 explaining the event. My letters and conversations were met with absolutely no interest at all.

Before the LDS purchased the Sun Ranch visitation to the cove was very restricted. If cattle were in the area you could not visit. As more and more persons wanted to visit the cove a charge was made to cross the Sun Ranch land to visit the small BLM portion of the cove. Even though I knew Bernard and Noline Sun I was charged \$30 to drive across their bridge to go to the cove. At that time I actually drove in the cove where there was nothing but evidence of cattle bedding down. Now this area is pristine again with the grass growing. The government had no signage that it was BLM land or any indication that you should not drive in the cove itself. In other words the State of Wyoming and the BLM had little interest in preservation or interpretation of the site. The LDS have changed all this to make Martin's Cove available to all with free access that protects the environment.

The argument has been placed that this is a pre-historic Indian site. To my knowledge no organized excavation has ever occurred in the cove. Indians, historic and pre-historic undoubtedly used all the coves of

the Sweetwater Rocks.

The Oregon-California-Mormon-Pony Express trail is located across the Sweetwater River from the cove and is on land already owned by the church. With the prior owners the Oregon-California Trails Association was not allowed to place the white Carsonite markers that are now so useful to indicate where this trail is. The LDS welcomed such marking by that trails preservation organization.

When the original draft of this bill was made it directed that the money from the sale go to The National Historic Trails Center here in Casper. Since this center is being built with BLM, State, County, City and private donations this seemed like a good use of the proceeds. I personally would like to see this clause put back in the bill. I would also like to see the clause that guaranteed that Martin's Cove would always be open to the general public.

The argument of trading or selling historic land or any land governed by the BLM has always been contentious. It is very common for the BLM to trade land to make grazing allotments more even. It is very common for the BLM to limit access to certain areas. In many cases private land limits access to BLM lands. This land should always be open to the general public.

It took the purchase of the Sun Ranch to tell the Martin Handcart story. At the present time they are reconstructing Semino's Fort which was discovered by a recent archeological dig. One only has to visit the ranch to see how many people now have access to this land. The LDS have invested a lot of money and time to make this an enjoyable place to live this history. In doing so they have increased visitation to the State of Wyoming and have created a new environmentally clean, interesting, and enjoyable tourist attraction that our entire state benefits from.

I have yet to talk to anyone at the Martin Handcart Interpretive Center that tried to convert me to his or her religion. The missionaries are kind, helpful, unpaid docents that volunteer their time and money to explain

the site.

The LDS church has been very instrumental in the early development of Wyoming and the West. They settled much of the Big Horn Basin and The Star Valley area. In my opinion the church is a good Wyoming partner, and selling the cove they feel is so important to them, is a payback from the rest of us for the job well done.

#####