

In the Company of Angels

Prologue

High on the plains in central Wyoming, up near the Continental Divide, is a desolate place where it is said that the spirits of the dead can often be encountered.

It is a place far from human habitation. Fat sage hens wander about, plump and dark and as approachable as tame chickens. Away from the rivers, antelope race over the barren prairie, while mule deer make their homes among the willow reeds that cover the banks of the Sweetwater River and its feeder streams.

Even with water, few trees can survive the icy storms that blow down from the Wind River Mountains, whistling through sagebrush and rolling over the dry prairie grasses and sand-colored stones, but in the shelter of the valleys, one can find a few quaking aspen trees with bark as white as snow and leaves that shiver like a freezing child in the slightest breeze. Dark pines fill some mountain folds, creating a perpetual twilight beneath their canopies.

It is upon the banks of one silver brook called Rock Creek that many have sensed the spirits of the dead, in a place called “The Temple of Wyoming.”

It is a temple formed without human hands. Nature enforces a code of reverence there. A single rock wall along the north of the creek provides shelter from the worst of the wind, and red-barked willow reeds grow tall along the brook, shushing all sound. Heaven forms the temple’s ceiling, and beneath its floor lays a grave.

Fifteen people are buried there in a circle, laid out toe to toe. In 1856, they tried to cross a continent, hauling all that they owned in handcarts, and were caught in an early storm. Most were men who died struggling to save their families from the brutal blizzard, but others were children, weakened by starvation. They are but a few of those who died along the trail.

Their story is not a common tragedy. Theirs is a story of courage, hope, and heroism that may be unparalleled in the American West.

Few have tried to tell their tale. It is not an easy one to tell. Though survivors, and even many of those who died, left biographical accounts, it is an odd tale—a story of revelations, of angelic visitations, of people struggling to find religious freedom in a harsh world.

A cold-hearted historian would tell the story differently than I. Some have labored to dissect the errors made and assign blame for the tragedy, or to apologize. Others have focused on what was in its time the most expensive and massive rescue operation in known history.

I've read hundreds of biographical sketches by those who survived. Few of those who lost limbs to the cold ever complained, and nearly all expressed endless gratitude for their rescuers—both human and divine.

In deciding how to approach this story, it seemed that it was not mine alone to tell. It belongs to those who lie buried along the trail. I cannot present it as an episode devoid of religious overtones, as a historian might. I cannot exclude the testimonies that were borne on that grueling trek.

Nor can I gloss over the hard and sometimes uncomfortable truth of what really happened—how the callousness of average Americans combined with the oversights and errors of a few leaders to create such a high death toll.

I will try to tell the truth as best I can. I cannot tell it perfectly, for despite the biographies, despite the journals kept, not every word spoken along the trail was recorded.

In some places, the record is as quiet as the barren hills along with Wind River, but I will fill in the silence as best I can. . . .

“Send me the worthy poor, the humblest of our saints who long to sail to Zion, though they have not a sixpence in the world.” –Brigham Young, in a letter to Franklin D. Richards, 1855

Chapter 1: The End of the World

Eliza Gadd

“Doff your cap, Mormon, and show us some horns!” a man cried.

Eliza Gadd’s stomach twisted into a knot. The stranger was glaring at Eliza’s husband Samuel, who tried his best to ignore the man.

The stranger stood on the pathway to his house on the outskirts of Council Bluffs, Iowa, wearing nothing but some threadbare overalls and a battered black hat, his legs shaking from fear, his face reddened and twisted with rage. He gripped an ax, as if ready to take a swing at the first Mormon that drew too close. He rushed to the front gate of his white picket fence, one hand hovering near the latch, and demanded again, “Doff your cap, Mormon!”

A few feet ahead of Eliza, her husband Samuel pulled a handcart along the road, his blue denim shirt soaked with a V of sweat down his back, his floppy broad-rimmed felt hat hiding his sandy hair. The handcart squeaked and rattled as if it would split apart at any moment. It was a little larger than a wheelbarrow, and it held all of the family’s possessions—clothes for Eliza, her husband, and seven of their eight children, along with a frying pan, a pot to boil water, and a few spoons and cooking implements.

Samuel nodded, but kept walking. The ax-man leaned over the gate and screamed, “Look at me when I talk to you!”

He was an unsavory fellow. His sunburned arms were knotted with muscle, and sweat seemed to have permanently left a greasy stain in the armpits of his overalls. “Show your horns! Show ‘em to me, you Mormon devil!”

The farmer trembled with anticipation and terror, as if both eager to see a Mormon’s

horns and terrified by the prospect.

Horns? Eliza wondered. He can't seriously believe that Mormons have horns? In a saner world, she would have hoped that he was jesting, but she spied his two daughters in an upper bedroom, peering out the window with eyes made as round as hens' eggs by fright. These buffoons really did believe that Mormons had horns.

Similar scenes had greeted them in town after town. The locals would gather at their doors to gawk and to jeer at the poor deluded Mormons who were hoofing it off into the wilderness to starve.

Eliza and Samuel were traveling with five hundred Mormons in the Willie Handcart Company, trying to reach Utah—the promised land of the Mormons, the American Zion.

Before they could reach Zion, they had to pass through Council Bluffs, a few hundred rough log-and-mud houses sheltered in a small valley between two rows of hills; the town boasted nearly a dozen taverns and little else. Rail fences partitioned off the gardens behind the houses, where corn grew tall in mid-August. Chickens, black and red, raced about the street, while a few hogs wallowed at the roadside.

In all of human history, no group had ever traveled so far to escape persecution. The Jews had fled Egypt and traveled only a few dozen miles, while the gypsies had spread several hundred miles across Europe. But most of the folks in this company had left their homes in England, Scotland, Denmark or France and sailed thousands of miles across the ocean—only to march across a continent. One member of the party, Sister Tate, was a Hindu, all the way from India.

The immigrants in the handcart company dressed shabbily. Most of the children and even many adults could not afford shoes, and so they walked barefoot. Half the women in the band were widows, and so women outnumbered men three to one, and of the folks in the company, a dozen were cripples, senile, or mad, and thus had to be carried in the carts.

Eliza had been born to an upper-class family, but she had landed among the poorest of the Mormon poor.

The signs of poverty among the group went well beyond the immigrants' threadbare attire. Most were stunted from malnutrition, and many suffered from lice, strange rashes, and scabs that would not heal.

So the poor were walking to Utah, unable to afford the wagons that a wealthier man would consider necessary.

In every town that they had passed, the company had been forced to run a gauntlet as the locals came to ogle, mouths agape. The Willie Company had given them a free freak show; secretly Eliza knew that she was biggest freak of them all.

She held her chin up, tried to show no fear. Her cheeks burned with shame. She had been walking down a hot road all day, and the clouds of dust raised by others had powdered her face. She only hoped that it would hide her embarrassment.

Eliza straightened her little white cap, a stylish thing that her mother had left her.

She strode past the ax-man, smiled genteelly, nodded good-day, and tried to ignore him, even as every nerve in her body warned her not to turn her back. The fellow stood trembling, a crazed look in his eyes, and shouted at Samuel. “Don’t you—don’t you walk past me, Mormon. Don’t turn your back on me. I’m talking to you!”

Eliza was just congratulating herself on making it past the ax-man when her seventeen-year-old daughter Jane strode up to the fellow, bouncing baby Daniel on her hip.

Jane smiled, affected a silly American accent, and said, “Sorry to disappoint you, feller, but we filed off our horns just yesterday. Makes it easy to hide among you gentiles!”

Eliza wanted to warn Jane away from the madman, but she was a pretty girl, as lissome as a swan, with hair that shone like spun flax, and Jane seemed to think that her sway over men held no bounds.

The ax-man’s eyes bulged and his Adam’s apple bobbed as he vainly tried to figure out something intelligent to say. It was common to file off cows’ horns, so that they wouldn’t gore their owners. Obviously the poor man was trying to figure out if the ploy might work on a Mormon.

Jane laughed and thrust out her tongue at him, wagging it in snakelike fashion.

The American stumbled backward, retreating, and tripped over one of his uneven paving stones.

The clown! Eliza thought. His entire senses have gone derelict!

She’d faced unreasoning persecutors back in England, yet she’d never seen anyone so frightfully dense as this.

Still, she’d been surprised by the impoverished intellect of Americans all along her trek. After arriving by ship in New York, the saints had been harassed at every stop—assailed by men with foul mouths, threatened, denied shelter at hostels, brutally treated by railroad

executives who forced the immigrants to sleep in cattle cars when they'd paid for better.

Illinois had been worst. The immigrants had taken a train up to Lake Superior, and then gone by steamboat to Chicago, and from there rode to Rock Island, where they crept into the town by night and hid in a train house to wait out a thunderstorm. A mob gathered, two hundred men with guns and torches, demanding that the Mormons "send out their women" amid threats of rape and murder. They'd hurled insults and rocks at the train shed for five hours, while the immigrant men huddled behind the doors armed with nothing more than a couple of pistols and sabers.

The immigrants hoped that the local peace officers might come to save them. But Captain Willie informed them that there was no law that would protect a Mormon in Utah.

Ten years earlier, in 1846, Illinois had placed a bounty on Mormon scalps, offering thousands for the heads of the church's leaders. Even the hair of Eliza's young babes was worth a dollar a scalp.

Illinois was just one of more than a dozen states that had passed such laws against various religions in an effort to drive out Mormons, Jews, and other undesirables.

Over the years, only luck had saved any Mormons from losing scalps in Illinois. The first pair of bounty hunters that had ever tried to bag a Mormon attacked a passing wagon, killing a man, his ten children, and three "wives." Fourteen people had been butchered. Yet when the authorities researched the case, they discovered that the alleged Mormon was just an innocent Methodist minister, traveling with his large family and two aunts. The scandal over the murders had spurred state officials to withdraw the bounty, though the laws remained on the books.

At eleven that night a sheriff had finally come with enough deputies to disperse the fatigued mob, though a summer storm deserved most of the credit for scattering the killers.

Eliza had learned to be wary of the mobs that formed in nearly every city they visited. Sometimes even the lawmen joined in. A week earlier, a sheriff from Poweshiek County, Iowa, had come with a small army and forced the handcart company to unload all of its supply wagons on the pretense of searching for women tied up under the floorboards. The charge was insane.

Yet rumors spread by the eastern press persisted in telling of Mormons abducting women and hiding them in compartments in wagons—or carrying them through secret tunnels under the Rocky Mountains—all in an effort to get them to Utah, where the women were used to sate the monstrous appetites of Brigham Young, the Mormon leader.

Eliza thought that you'd have to be as dumb as a fencepost to believe such tales.

But there it was.

The whole United States was in turmoil, everywhere Eliza looked. It wasn't just the attacks on Mormons. There was a war breaking out in Kansas between the slavers and the abolitionists. In May, Old John Brown from Missouri had gotten up a gang of men and gone through the countryside in Kansas hanging every abolitionist he could roust out of bed. So the abolitionists began gunning the slavers down in the streets. The federal government had called in troops from all over the frontier and begun blowing houses down with cannons. Now they'd arrested the governor and were threatening to hang him for treason—all for failing to stop the violence.

It seemed to Eliza that the federal government was to blame.

It was an election year, and the newly formed Republican Party was calling for an end to the "twin relics of barbarism"—slavery and polygamy. Mormons were opposed to slavery, but while polygamy was widely practiced on the American frontier—mostly by fur trappers and settlers who had taken multiple Indian squaws as wives—the Mormons were the only American religion that openly condoned polygamy. Joseph Smith, the church's first prophet, had proclaimed that polygamy was sanctified by God if it was practiced, as by Abraham, with the goal of raising children in righteousness. So a select few members of the church were asked to enter into plural marriages.

President Buchanan, a Democrat, was responding to the Republican threat by promising to "get tough" on the Mormons. By making a sufficient example of them, he planned to cow the southern states into giving up the practice of slavery, and thus avoid a civil war. Whether that meant that Buchannan would send an army across the plains with orders to exterminate the Mormons, as had been done in Missouri a dozen years earlier, or if he had something else up his sleeve, no one could yet guess.

It wasn't a good time to be a Mormon.

So Eliza had learned to fear these "Yankee yahoos," as Brother Savage, liked to call them.

Eliza sighed wearily as she lifted her sleeping babe Isaac higher on her shoulder. She waved away a trio of mosquitoes bent on carrying the child off to eat.

Her calves and back ached from walking the past three hundred miles, and this had been the easy part of the journey. There had been good roads and an occasional town, where

one might buy what one needed. Ahead of them was nothing but wilderness. Eliza licked her sunburned lips, sucked in her hungry belly, and lifted her chin.

Ahead were more houses, and the gawkers were streaming out to greet them. She wanted to make sure that her children stayed near, that they presented themselves well.

Jane looked fine. Sarah, age five, was riding in the back of the handcart and had fallen fast asleep, her head lying on a bundle of clothes. Mary Ann, age seven, was old enough to walk much of the way, but her father was letting her ride, too.

Thirteen-year-old Bill plodded behind the cart, ready to push it if need be.

She half-turned to see little Sam Junior, age ten, who walked well behind the cart, talking softly to one of the Danish emigrant girls that he played with, a bright-faced little blond girl with a blue dress and golden hair. Her name was Baline.

“That there is a dragonfly,” Sam Jr. told Baline. “Can you say dragonfly?” He gestured to a streak of red that buzzed nearby. The dragonfly hovered near Baline’s white apron, seeking a place to land.

“Ya, I say it, ya,” Baline answered merrily. “Is like two words, dragon and fly, dragonfly. Ya?”

“Precisely,” Sam said, sounding for all the world like some school proctor.

“Sam, catch up—and watch your posture,” Eliza called. “We’re coming through town. Remember your station.”

Sam glanced at her and suddenly began marching with his back ramrod straight as he hurried to catch up. She didn’t have to say more.

Eliza frowned at Baline. She was a bright child, a magnet for other children, and that was what worried Eliza. Though she was only ten, Sam Jr. might find himself attracted to such a girl, and Eliza didn’t believe in interracial marriage. Most Mormons saw all people as brothers and sisters and treated the Danes and even the French as equals. However, it was bad enough when an Englishman married a lowly Irish woman or a Scot, but Eliza wouldn’t have her son chasing after a brutish, ill-mannered Dane.

At the front of the column of weary travelers, Captain Willie, a bearish man of forty, called out, “Let’s give them a song!” Obviously he hoped to drown out the voices of his detractors.

The Mormons, as obedient as sheep, began to sing the anthem of Mormon pilgrims:

“Come, come, ye saints, no toil nor labor fear,
But with joy, wend your way.
Though hard to you, this journey may appear,
Grace shall be, as your day.
‘Tis better far for us to strive,
Our useless cares from us to drive,
Do this, and joy, your hearts will swell—
All is well. All is well.”

Eliza refused to sing. She wouldn't even mouth the words. Still the music began to ascend around her as the immigrants plodded into town, handcarts creaking and rattling. Their practiced voices rose in harmony, echoing from the small hills along the road, frightening chickens, drowning out the voices of the locals, many of whom ran from their houses and stood at their gates to jeer.

“Say ‘hi’ to the injuns for me,” one man cried from a rocking chair on his porch as Eliza passed his white house. He took off his hat and revealed a massive scar on the crown of his head, circled by scraggly hair.

“Mother,” ten-year-old Samuel cried at her back, “that man has been scalped!”

The fellow laughed derisively. His antics had had their desired effect.

“Don't let him alarm you,” Eliza warned, “It will only encourage him.”

Two doors down, a portly matron in a faded cotton dress accosted Eliza. “Don't go,” she shouted, reaching out as if to stop her, or perhaps grab baby Isaac from her arms. “Please don't go. It's too late in the year to cross the mountains!”

Eliza smiled and nodded at the woman kindly; she whispered, “Thank you,” but kept walking.

The matron shouted desperately, “At least leave the babe with me! If you love it, you'll leave it behind.”

If we were back in England, Eliza told herself, I should want to be her friend.

Eliza wasn't the kind of woman that could leave her child behind. She walked on. For three houses, people just stared sullenly as the Mormons passed.

Now came the mockery. "Gee-haw," some teenage boys shouted as they perched on a fence, taunting the men and women who pulled the carts. "Get up, mule!"

Eliza kept her eyes forward, ignoring the taunts, even when a green apple flew through the air and rebounded off of Samuel's back.

The rules of the handcart train were strict. The saints were to ignore any abuse, to say nothing in retaliation, and to follow the Savior's example and turn the other cheek. To revile one's tormentors in any way or to seek to rebuke them tended to only invite further attacks.

So the immigrants trundled down the street, voices rising in song just enough to drown out the worst of the insults, until they entered the merchant district.

Eliza's feet hurt. She'd only carried her babe five miles this morning, but her feet were swollen and callused from weeks of abuse.

She passed a barbershop and an apothecary, a dry goods store and a pair of blacksmiths with the bitter scent of coal smoke coming from their open doors. But there were also the taverns where scantily clad prostitutes leaned from the upper windows, their breasts nearly falling out of their flimsy attire, as they shouted down to Jane, "Hey, you—you're a likely one. Show us a bit of leg."

Suddenly the handcart at the front of the column came to a grinding halt, blocking the road so that all one hundred carts behind had to stop, too.

Captain Willie stood at the head of the column talking with a strange, heavysset man in a cheap brown suit.

"Who do you think that is?" Eliza ventured to ask her husband.

"Church agent, I imagine," Samuel answered, removing his cap and wiping the sweat from his face with the worn sleeve of his shirt. "There's a church outfitting station across the river where we're supposed to acquire more supplies."

The church agent, a young broad-shouldered man with a thick beard the color of chestnuts, gestured toward the banks of the river. His voice suddenly grew loud and carried as he told Captain Willie, "Give 'em a couple of hours to rest and to shop, then we'll ferry across."

Captain Willie nodded in acknowledgment. Docked just downhill at the side of the river was a huge ferry, a brand new steamboat, gleaming in the midday sun.

Eliza relished the idea of shopping. She didn't have much money, only twenty-eight cents left to her name, mostly big American pennies. Rations had been scant on their journey, so she hoped to buy a little candy for the children, and perhaps some buttons or extra needles.

The volume of the Mormons' voices rose as they came to the climax of their song:

“And should we die before the journey's through,

Happy day, all is well!

We then are free, from toil and sorrow too,

With the just, we shall dwell.

But if our lives are spared again

To see the saints their rest obtain,

Oh, how we'll make this chorus swell!

All is well. All is well!”

Eliza hated stopping. She was embarrassed to be here, to be among the ill-bred Mormons, to be so filthy. The trail through Iowa had been filled with tumultuous hills. The tops of the hills found the ground dry, with dust as fine as talcum, while down in the valleys, recent thundershowers had left mud holes and ruts, so that one man could not pull a cart alone. Thus, everyone's feet were caked with mud. Her son Bill was as sooty as a chimney sweep, and nothing could be done about it.

“Tuck in your shirt,” Eliza whispered to him, “and comb your hands through your hair.”

Jane stood with the other twin, Daniel, who was just shy of his second birthday, bouncing the babe on her hip.

In the profound silence that followed, a rough-looking fellow in front of the tavern called, “Gee-haw, mule,” at Samuel and grinned like an idiot, as if he were the first to come up with the insult. He'd been leaning against the hitching rail, but now he reached behind his back

and pulled out a bullwhip.

A couple of the man's friends stepped forward, too.

Crack! The whip snapped just inches from Samuel's ear. Samuel cringed but made no move to run, nor to defend himself. He stood with legs trembling, quivering, head bent, cowering. Sickness and hard labor had taken thirty pounds from him on the past month, and his poor clothes hung on him like rags.

Samuel would not fight, Eliza knew. He'd been the branch president in their tiny congregation back home, a sort of lay minister. He wouldn't break the rules of the handcart company.

Suddenly a memory exploded into Eliza's consciousness: "Don't marry that man," her father had commanded in a severe tone. "Don't even think about it. 'Ye, gad!' Can you imagine the taunts your children will suffer? 'Look, there goes a Gadd—or is it a gadfly?'"

"Gadd is a good name. It's Welsh. It means 'gate.'"

"Wales," her father snorted. "You mean you couldn't find a man of low enough breeding in England?"

"He's a good man father—" Eliza had said, "not a low sort or a mean man at all. Though he might not be the first in consequence in Wimpole, many hold an elevated opinion of him."

Eliza's mother had chimed in more sympathetically, "It's not that he's a low man, Eliza. There is no discernable flaw to his character, no overpowering defect in his intellect, but he's a common man, common in every way. He's got a common man's intelligence, a common man's education and lack of ambition. He'll never be a superior provider for you, and heaven help you if you should bear offspring."

Twenty years ago her parents had spoken that warning, twenty years ago and four months, almost to the day.

It's funny how a few words can come back to haunt you, Eliza thought. Her father had been dead for three years, her mother for five. Yet their warnings rang in her ears, almost as if their ghosts were at her back, whispering.

Her parents had been right. Samuel was not the first-rate provider her parents had aspired to. He'd made a marginal living as a middle-man, renting fields from lords and then advancing the land out again to tenant farmers. Though he was not poor, he'd never brought

home enough to keep the family comfortable, and once Samuel had united himself with the Mormon church, many a lord had refused to do business, hoping to starve him into submission; thus Samuel's income had shriveled away until Eliza had been forced to take a position as a nurse just to keep food on the table. Now the whole family was destitute, beyond the verge of ruin, and Samuel had brought them six thousand miles to escape their persecutors.

Still, Eliza thought, I'm fully prepared to follow him off the edge of the world.

So Eliza's parents had been right about Samuel. He had no great intellect for extracting an advantage in a business deal. She had argued, "Samuel is not a common man. There's uncommon goodness in him." Eliza had been right, too. Samuel was unflinchingly faithful to his lofty standards, firm in his decorum. He would not engage in an altercation now, not even to save his own life.

"Oh, he don't like that whip," one bully chortled. "He don't like the whip one bit. He's an angry old mule, ain't he?" The bully turned from his companions and taunted Samuel. "You got something to say to me, mule?"

One companion pointed at Jane and sniggered, "Forget him—now she's more like it! Hell, I'd be glad to put my spurs to her. What do you say, boys?"

Eliza's jaw clenched at the insult. She looked at her husband. Samuel was a brave man in his way. Though his shoulders were tense and angry, he just stood like a dumb ox and would not answer the men.

Nor would any of the other Mormons come to their rescue, Eliza knew.

One man jested, "She looks plenty skittish to me. Might just buck you off."

Eliza handed baby Isaac off to her thirteen-year-old son Bill and strode toward the brute that had last insulted Jane, but the bully with the whip stepped into Eliza's path, intercepting her. He was thin, perhaps thirty, with dark brown hair, a hatchet face, and a bushy mustache that dripped down well below his chin. His hat was slung low over his eyes.

"Sir, you and your friends owe my daughter an apology," Eliza demanded, though she instantly regretted bestowing upon him the honorary "sir." He was obviously a lout.

The bully smirked, dark eyes flashing. He was chewing slowly, and now he spat a wad of dark tobacco. He made it look as if he was aiming at the ground, even as he soiled Eliza's skirt.

She glared at him and then explained as calmly as possible, "Mister, these immigrants

are Mormons. They adhere to strict rules that prohibit violence, and so, as I'm sure that you suspect, you have nothing to fear from them."

The bully smiled. "Hell, I know that. I was Mormon once't, for about a week—until old Brigham started preaching polygamy."

"Then you should understand this:" Eliza said, "though my husband and children are Mormons, I am not. I don't partake of their perplexing notions any more than you. As a 'gentile,' I'm free to give you the rebuttal that you deserve." With that, Eliza slapped the bully's face so hard that spittle flew from his mouth and she hoped that she'd knocked out a couple of teeth.

There, she'd finally admitted it in public. Here she was among five hundred Mormons heading to Zion and she didn't give a hoot about their uninformed beliefs.

More the fool me, she thought.

The bully fell back. Rage flashed across his face . . .

On Writing *In The Company Of Angels*

David Farland is an award-winning New York Times best-selling author with nearly fifty novels published for both children and adults. He has been published in more than twenty languages and his readership numbers in the millions. To date, nearly all of his works have been in the science fiction and fantasy genres, where in addition to his own original stories he has worked with some of the world's largest franchises.

Carolyn: Why switch genres? Why write a historical novel?

David Farland: I'm a fan of several genres. When I first began writing, I won several writing contests in literary fiction, but when I won the Writers of The Future contest with my short story "On My Way to Paradise," my career just sort of took off without me. I got a three-novel contract from Bantam Books, and my first novel was a cutting-edge science fiction piece that won the Philip K. Dick Memorial Special Award as one of the outstanding novels of the year.

After the novel was finished, my editor asked what I wanted to write next, and I suggested that I wanted to do a fantasy novel. She said, "But, you're a best-selling science fiction author. Most people take twenty years to get as high on the bestseller lists as you are now. We don't want any fantasy from you." So I worked for ten years writing science fiction novels. But on my tenth year, I gave myself a birthday present and began writing my first fantasy novel. I turned it in to my publisher, and they loved it. Suddenly I'm a fantasy author—and my publishers don't want science fiction!

The moral of the story is that if you're a writer and your work is successful, your publishers will often pressure you to write more of the same. When you're a new writer, you have to pick your rut carefully, because you'll be stuck in it for many a mile.

So I've written mainly in science fiction and fantasy, but I read mainstream literature and thrillers for fun, along with historical novels and poetry. I get ideas for stories in other genres all of the time, and usually I resist the idea to write those novels. But when I considered writing *In The Company Of Angels*, it just felt sort of special.

Carolyn: So how did you get the idea?

David Farland: Let's go back a bit. *In The Company Of Angels* tells the story of some Mormon pioneers who crossed the United States in 1856, pulling all that they owned in handcarts. Along the way they had to endure persecution, raging storms, buffalo stampedes, rampaging Indians, starvation, and then got caught in one of the coldest winters in U.S. history.

A few years ago my wife's foster parents, Larry and Jeannie Walker, were asked to serve as missionaries at Sixth Crossing in Wyoming, the final base camp that the

handcart pioneers used before they had to cross Rocky Ridge in a blizzard. This was the most taxing part of the pioneers' journey, and the most costly in lives.

As the Walkers developed expertise about the pioneers, they asked me several times to come up and visit the place. Finally, in 2006 I took my family up there for a vacation and found that the story of the Willie Handcart Company fascinated me. I just couldn't let the idea of writing about it go.

There are a number of reasons for that, I suspect. I joined the Mormon Church as a teen, and I became interested in its history at an early age, reading about the lives of various church leaders like Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, Parley P. Pratt, and so on.

But in this case, it was the pioneers themselves who caught my attention. They came from the ranks of the "poorest of the poor" in the Mormon Church—the widows and orphans, the chronically ill. Many of the people who sought to take this trek were in terrible physical condition. Some were starvelings, cripples, the elderly or insane. When I was a child, my family was very poor. I was shocked at the age of 12 when I learned that we were living at 1/3 the poverty level. So I felt a kinship to these people.

My wife's great grandfather happened to be one of the handcart pioneers, and I knew from his journals just how much he had suffered after he joined the church in Denmark. Yes, he was impoverished, but he hadn't always been. Like many early converts to the church, he'd suffered a good deal of persecution. Many of these people found that they were fired from their jobs after they converted, or if they had their own businesses, they would lose their clients. Some had their homes and businesses burned. Under those conditions, it's hard not to be indigent.

As I began to study these people's stories, I soon recognized that there were just too many fascinating characters that came on this journey. I couldn't write about them all. But one name stood out for me above all the rest: Eliza Gadd. I really wanted to understand why a woman who was not a Mormon would take this dangerous journey. The fact that she lost so much during the course of it and then experienced a spiritual transformation only piqued my curiosity.

Other people also intrigued me. I considered using Levi Savage as a main character. His decency and determination really made him stand out.

I'd wanted to chronicle the exploits of a younger man on the journey, but Captain Willie himself was such a pivotal character—a man who gave up all he owned in order to help bring hundreds of these destitute Mormons across the plains. So I chose him.

Last of all, I wrote about Bodil Mortensen for a number of reasons. The Danish connection tied her in to my wife's family, and I was intrigued as to why her parents would send a nine-year-old child across the plains, some seven thousand miles from home.

Carolyn: Wow, it sounds like you really did some research!

David Farland: The book took over a year, full time, just for research. Then I had to spend another nine months writing and rewriting it.

There are hundreds of biographies and autobiographies to read of course. Most of the biographical accounts are fairly short, just a few pages long. But I was surprised at how much information I was able to glean by combining accounts from various people.

Most of the stories dove-tailed nicely, but some of the accounts were written years after the event, and the storytellers' memories were fuzzy—or just plain wrong. I had to study the tale out as best I could, and then work from there.

Yet there are more than just the Mormon biographies to study. The Civil War was about to break out, and that needed to be taken into account. There were running gun battles going on in Kansas at the time, and this drew troops in off the plains. The Cheyenne and some renegade Sioux began attacking wagon trains, taking vengeance for atrocities that the U.S. Army had committed. Then of course I needed to look into the Crimean War; its advent had caused a huge delay in the departure of the handcart pioneers from England, which ultimately led to the loss of many of the pioneers' lives.

Last of all, I needed to actually travel the route that I was writing about.

In Iowa and Nebraska, the landscape has changed in the past hundred years, of course. The various breeds of "buffalo grass" have been replaced. The plains aren't burned off every year by the Indians anymore, so trees have grown where none stood back then. But once you get up into Wyoming, the land is still much as it was.

I wanted to make sure that I journeyed at the same time of the year that the handcart pioneers did, so I made my first trip along the old Mormon Trail in late August, following their path for about a thousand miles. In some pivotal spots, such as where the buffalo stampede occurred, I did my best to get as close to the location as possible.

In many cases, understanding the lay of the land helped me figure out exactly why Captain Willie made the choices that he did.

Much of my time was spent just studying the plants and animals along the trail, trying to re-create the scene in my mind.

I took several trips in order to write this novel, including one where I went up to Rock Creek just as a snowstorm hit, with 50 mph winds. I asked some missionaries there if I could go out and get a picture of me pulling a handcart through the snow as I forded the river in bare feet. They wouldn't do it; they were too worried about getting sued if I died.

So instead I went up on top of Rock Creek to see what it was like up there. A kindly police officer blocked my path and tried to send me back, lest I get stranded, so I just turned around and took a back road.

I think I got a great idea what these early pioneers went through.

Carolyn: You've been published by many of the largest companies in the world, yet you're self-publishing this book. Why?

David Farland: It's an odd book, in that it's about Mormons but it isn't necessarily just for Mormon market. So the question is, Where do you publish it?

I submitted it to Covenant Books, my normal publisher for the Mormon market, and they were very enthusiastic about it. I like them very much, but in today's tough economic times, they were concerned that the book was too long. They have a limit of 100,000 words per novel. So they wanted to cut it down, but several people who'd read it wanted it to be longer.

I felt that cutting a third of the book out would have really hurt the manuscript.

I had strong interest by a couple of other companies, but at about this time, my mother fell ill with cancer. I gave the book to her in November of 2008, and she loved it. My mother likes historical novels, and she felt that this was her favorite book of all time. That kind of surprised me. My mother was a Baptist, and I hadn't been certain how she would feel about this book.

In any case, as her condition worsened she kept asking me when I would get the book published. My wife suggested that I publish it myself, and my mother was very excited by the idea. When she passed away, I decided that I would use part of my inheritance to make the book a reality.

Carolyn: How have other fans reacted to it?

David Farland: Very positively. I hired one fellow to help edit the book, and he said that he'd never had such a profoundly emotional experience while reading. He said, "At one point, I just bent over and cried for half an hour, wracked with sobs. I've always known this story. In fact, I acted in a play about it, doing some sixty performances. But I'd never been touched so profoundly, either in the play, or in reading any other book."

Time and time again, I've gotten similar response. One editor called it my "magnum opus."