

HISTORY QUESTION OF THE MONTH

Who was the man that saved three little girls, who were part of the ill-fated Willey handcart company?

ANSWER

John Saline was born John Savilaakso in Oulu, Oulu, Finland in 1831. He was sent to school in Sweden where his last name was changed to Saline. He ran away at age 14 and went to sea with his brother who was a ship's captain. He learned to speak 5 languages fluently. At age 19 he decided to come to America, he had no difficulty finding work to pay for his passage. While on board the ship, he met 2 Mormon missionaries and was converted and baptized in July of 1853, before reaching America. He followed his new friends to Utah, working as an ox team driver. He settled in Union Fort. In 1856, he drove one of the five wagons from Union, that were sent to rescue the ill-fated Martin-Willey handcart companies that were stranded in Wyoming by an early snow storm. After returning to the valley, John felt that he needed to return. He headed up East Canyon where he passed several handcarts that were straggling into the valley. As he started up Echo Canyon, he noticed a handcart pulled over to the side of the trail. When he stopped to investigate, he found three young girls, ages 11, 4 and 2 under the handcart huddled around the body of their dying mother. The mother died soon after and was buried in a snowy grave in East Canyon. Her husband and a son had died on the plains of Wyoming and were buried there.

John loaded the girls in his wagon and brought them into Salt Lake City. The three little girls, Susannah Rebecca, Sarah Ann and Martha Ann were taken in by Silas Richards, the Bishop of Union. The girls were so weak from the cold and lack of food that they could hardly walk across the room. The 4 year old died the following year.

John kept in touch with the girls and six years later he married the oldest girl. They eventually moved to Fairview and helped settle that community before moving to Pima, Arizona.

Sources: John Saline and Susannah Rebecca Osbourne, Family Search; Story on monument dedicated to John and Rebecca in Pima Arizona.

Published January 2022 – Gayle Conger