As war and mobocracy erupted in western Missouri late in 1838, the Saints were once again in grave danger. One night, the Missouri militia, which was often little more than an organized and authorized mob, began raiding some of the outlying Mormon settlements. On October 24, they raided one homestead, burning haystacks and shooting livestock. Then they took three men prison and vowed they were taking them to be executed. On hearing the news, Joseph Smith called out the militia in Far West. Led by David W. Patten, senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve, seventy-five men set out in pursuit.

One of the men who answered Joseph’s call was James Hendricks, a native of Kentucky. In 1827 James had married a young girl named Drusilla Dorris, who lived just across the border in Tennessee. They joined the church in 1835, in spite of strenuous objections from their families. In the spring of 1836, they moved with their family to Missouri, settling first in Clay County, and then eventually moving north to Caldwell County, where they lived in a dugout. For a time they and their fellow Latter-day Saints lived in peace.

But as October drew to a close that all changed. James was a member of the Mormon militia and so was called out in the night to help rescue the three men. Drusilla later wrote of that night:

We had prayed and went to bed and fell asleep. I dreamed that something had befallen him and I was gathering him in my arms when Brother Charles C. Rich (one of the captains of the militia) called at the door for him and told him what he wanted. They had word that the mob was on Crooked River ten miles south of us and was a strong band. He said they had two (it was actually three) of our brethren as prisoners and were doing all the damage that lay in their power... He bid me goodnight and got on his horse, and I took his gun from the rack and handed it to him and said, “Don't get shot in the back.”

The Battle of Crooked River

Two companies of the brethren, under the command of Charles C. Rich and David W. Patten, rode all night. As dawn came, they approached a ford on the Crooked River. But they were traveling eastward, so the light was in their eyes, and they didn’t see that the Missourians were camped in the brush on the other side. As the Mormons started across the ford, one of the guards saw them coming and opened fire, shouting at his comrades that they were under attack. An intense firefight followed. Silhouetted by the dawn light, the Mormons were easy targets.

One man was shot in the face and killed instantly. David Patten took a ball in the stomach and would die later that day, becoming the first apostle to be martyred in this dispensation. James Hendricks turned when the firing erupted and started back across the river to find cover. Tragically, Drusilla’s premonition proved correct. A bullet hit him in the back of the neck and he fell into the water, paralyzed.

Drusilla’s account continues:

I had got used to his going, so went to bed and went to sleep. Just about the time he was shot I was aroused from my sleep suddenly, and I thought the yard was full of men and they were shooting. I was on my feet before I knew what I was doing. I went to the window at the
back of the house but all was still. I was afraid to open the door. I could hear nothing, so I ventured to open the door. It was getting light enough, so I could see very little. I went out and around the house and found there was no one there. Then I was worse scared than ever, for I thought it was a token to me that they had had a battle.

A short time later, Drusilla learned that James had been wounded and was in a house about four miles away.

My husband lay within three feet of Brother Patten and I spoke to him. He could speak but could not move any more than if he were dead. I tried to get him to move his feet but he could not. This was Thursday, October 25, 1838... My husband was shot in the neck where it cut off all feeling to the body. It is of no use for me to try and tell how I felt, for that is impossible, but I could not have shed a tear if all had been dead before me. I went to work to try and get my husband warm but could not. I rubbed and steamed him but could get no circulation. He was dead from the neck down.

I Strained Every Nerve

As if the tragedy that had befallen her husband was not enough, now the full fury of the Missourians fell upon the Saints. Hawn's Mill, the fall of Far West, and the arrest of Joseph and other leaders all occurred a few days later. The Saints were told to leave the state as quickly as possible or face death. Drusilla's oldest boy was eight at that time, and she had four other children, including a nursing infant. All of that, and with her husband paralyzed from the neck down.

Through the dark days ahead, numerous prayers were offered and two blessings given to James. Joseph Smith Sr. blessed James to the point where he could eventually stand on his feet and walk a few steps if he was helped by others. That was a miracle, and Drusilla expressed gratitude for it, but it didn't change her situation a great deal. At one point during those terrible months, James became very ill. Drusilla said, “I had to lift him at least fifty times a day, and in doing so I had to strain every nerve.”

Along with the rest of the Saints, Drusilla and her family eventually came to Nauvoo, and they entered into a time of peace. Life improved somewhat, but James was still unable to provide for his family. Life for Drusilla was very difficult. Yet in spite of these grinding challenges, she never lost her faith. Looking back many years later, she talked of the myriad of things she did to try to support her family-she chinked and plastered her own chimney, planted a garden, sold things to the crowds on public holidays, took in washing for others. Then she added: “I paid a good deal of tithing by making gloves and mittens.”

The time of peace was short-lived. In 1844, the Prophet Joseph and his brother Hyrum were martyred in Carthage Jail. Within another year, the enemies were on the prowl again, threatening the Saints if they didn't leave the state the following spring. The first wagons crossed the Mississippi River on February 4, 1846, and headed west across Iowa. The main body reached Council Bluffs, Iowa Territory, in mid-June.

War With Mexico

By now, Drusilla's oldest son, William, was sixteen years old. He was a great blessing to his mother. Though she had a daughter two years older than William, now
Drusilla Dorris Hendricks

she had a man to help take the place of her crippled husband. They secured an outfit, put James in a bed in the back of their wagon, and started west. When they arrived in Council Bluffs, Iowa, in mid to late June of 1846, Drusilla had no way of knowing that another severe test of her faith was about to descend upon her.

In 1845, President James K. Polk decided to accept the petitions of a large group of Texans and formally annexed the area known as Texas into the United States. Most of Texas lay in Mexican territory, and Mexico was understandably angered by Polk’s decision. Relationships between the two nations deteriorated to the point that on May 12, 1846, Congress declared war on Mexico.

During the same time, the Church had been petitioning Congress for assistance in their move west, hoping to build forts along the Oregon Trail. The war with Mexico created a different kind of opportunity. On July 1, 1856, Captain James Allen of the U.S. Army came to Council Bluffs with the request that the Mormons furnish five hundred volunteers to march to California and claim that territory of the United States as well.

In spite of the lack of support the Church had received in previous years from the federal government, Brigham Young saw several distinct advantages to this request, and on July 3, he signed an agreement and issued a call for volunteers to join what would become the Mormon Battalion.

Are You Afraid to Trust the God of Israel?

When young William Hendricks heard the news, he immediately determined to go. What an exciting adventure for a young man who would not turn seventeen until November of that year. But when he went to his mother, she adamantly refused to consider it even for a moment. She later wrote of her agony at that time:

“One would say to me, Is William going? I answered, no... Why, they said, they would not have their son or husband stay for anything. Then I would say, a burned child dreads the fire.”

In other words, she had already seen her husband go off to battle in the Lord's cause, and he had returned paralyzed from the neck down. She wasn’t about to send her son to war and risk the same thing.

But it was more than that. She still had to take her family, including her handicapped husband, across a thousand miles of wilderness and make a new home in the Rocky Mountains. We can only imagine her thoughts at that time. Surely the Lord did not expect her to do such a thing without the only man she had to help her? Hadn’t she already done enough, sacrificed enough? While her logic may have been good, it didn’t work. She noted that even in her adamanacy she felt doubts about her decision.

“The whispering of the Spirit would say to me: ‘Are you afraid to trust the God of Israel? Has He not been with you in all your trials? Has He not provided for your wants?’ Then I would have to acknowledge the hand of God in all His goodness to me.”

This is astonishing in so many ways. Surely the Spirit wasn’t chastising her for a lack of faith? She, who had already stood steadfast through eight years of trial and challenge? Why didn’t she blurt out, “But, Lord, have you forgotten about my husband? Have you forgotten

President James K. Polk
11th President of the United States
what I have already been through? Would you really have me cross the plains on my own?”

Instead, she acknowledges the goodness of God and His hand in her life. What an amazing woman!

The volunteers were mustered in on 16 July. Before they marched away to California, the Saints treated them to a farewell ball... Drusilla... attended the dance with her son William... But William wanted to go with the battalion, and Drusilla struggled to decide what to do. The next morning she watched him go about his work.

“I got ready to get breakfast,” she wrote, “and when I stepped up on the wagon tongue to get my flour I was asked by the same spirit that had spoken to me before, If I did not want the greatest glory and I answered with my natural voice, Yes I did. Then how can you get it without making the greatest sacrifice, said the voice. I answered Lord, what lack I yet? Let your son go in the Battalion, said the voice.”

I said it is too late, they are to be marched off this morning. That spirit then left me with the heartache. I got breakfast and called the girls and their Father to come to the tent for prayers. William came wet with dew from the grass and we sat down around the board and my husband commenced asking the blessing on our food, when Thomas Williams came shouting at the top of his voice, saying “Turn out men, Turn out, for we do not wish to press you but we lack some men yet in the Battalion.” William raised his eyes and looked me in the face. I knew then that he would go as well as I know now that he has been.

With heavy heart, Drusilla told her son that he had her permission to go. What an amazing example of a softened heart, and what happened immediately afterward was a direct result of that submission to the Lord’s will:

I went to milk the cows... I thought the cows would be shelter for me and I knelt down and told the Lord if he wanted my child to take him, only spare his life and let him be restored to me and to the bosom of the church. I felt it was all I could do. Then the voice that talked with me in the morning answered me saying, It shall be done unto you as it was unto Abraham when he offered Isaac on the altar. I don't know whether I milked or not for I felt the Lord had spoken to me.

So how did the story end for Drusilla? Her earnest prayer that her son's life be spared was answered. William survived the long march to California and rejoined his family after they had reached the Salt Lake Valley. Together they went on to help settle Cache Valley in northern Utah.

James survived the trek to Salt Lake and became the first bishop in the Nineteenth Ward in Salt Lake, where Drusilla also became the Relief Society president. He died eleven years before Drusilla, who passed away at the age of seventy-one. In her final years she wrote:

“The gospel is true. I have rejoiced in it through all my trials for the Spirit of the Lord has buoyed me up or I should have failed.”

Brigham Young spoke highly of such women as Drusilla. “If the women did not accomplish as much as the men did,’ he said, it was because the women 'had no wives to help them.'”