

ANDREW LAFAYETTE SILER

Born: 4 Dec 1824 Tennessee

Age: 31

Willie Company / Independent Wagons

Andrew Siler apparently never kept a diary or wrote an autobiography. Most of what we know of him comes from his descendants and others who wrote about him. We know that he was well over six feet in height. One unknown author describes him as “about seven feet tall and slim as a rail, and wore about a No. 14 shoe. He was awkward and uncouth, but a real man.”¹

In May of 1854, Andrew was called to serve in the “Georgia N. States” mission. In November of that year, he was assigned to help establish an emigration outfitting point on the Missouri River in the newly opened Kansas Territory. This area, which contained groves of hickory trees, became known as Mormon Grove. The activity of the Mormons in this area gave rise to the nearby town of Atchison, Kansas, making it a viable and busy port on the great western bend of the Missouri River. Andrew served the English Saints at Mormon Grove as their Branch President. He was also the foreman for projects such as building a warehouse and several homes, fencing, digging wells, and establishing a large farm for those traveling by the aid of the Perpetual Emigrating Fund.

The political climate in Kansas at this time was rife with issues that would eventually explode into the Civil War. Andrew’s interpretation of these events was expressed in a letter dated January 29, 1856, to the editor of *The Mormon*, a Church publication in the Eastern States:²

To the Editor of the Mormon: DEAR BROTHER – The snow is now two feet deep here, and the weather is cold enough to require fire at all hours. The Missouri river is now frozen over and has been ever since the 24th of December – teams are crossing all the time; unless there is very warm weather, lasting for several days, the river will remain so for some time yet; if the snow extends west to the mountains, the Missouri river will certainly overflow the bottoms this spring. While I write, the conversation in the room is in regard to late fights in Kansas; the war cloud has not entirely blown away yet. The Saints in Atchison and Mormon Grove are enjoying good health, with peace. There is no work, and but little business of any kind doing. I remain, Your Brother in the Covenant, A.L. SILER.

Mormon Grove was finally dissolved when it was stolen at gunpoint by unscrupulous men. One of the original rock houses is still standing and in use today. According to the Kansas Historical Society, the headstones marking the Mormon Grove cemetery graves were later used for foundation stones for the barns of local farmers or otherwise cleared off the land.

In the spring and early summer months of 1856, needed supplies for the support of the season’s emigration were being shipped upriver to Florence, Nebraska. It was here that the Willie handcart company obtained their final outfitting before heading west across the plains. It was also here that Andrew Siler joined with the Willie company. His mission was completed and he was going home to his family in Utah.

Andrew was called to preside over the four or five Independent wagons that also joined the Willie company at Florence. These included the Cantwell, Geary, and Jost families; Christina Anderson, whose parents had died at Mormon Grove;³ the widow, Ravinia Mount Leason⁴, and her baby, William; Lucinda Melissa Davenport, and William Wilford.

During the Willie Company emigration, others wrote of Andrew’s service in presiding over his group. The following are two examples: “Friday, 22 August. During the afternoon Sister Sophia Geary had her left foot run over by Bro. Wilford’s wagon. She was administered to in the evening by Bros. Siler, Cantwell, and Geary, Capt. Siler officiating. He sealed the blessing of health and strength upon her and promised that inasmuch as she would exercise faith she should walk tomorrow. ... Saturday, 23 Aug. ... Sis. Geary walked a considerable distance pursuant to Bro. Siler’s promise.” (William Woodward Journal)

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“Capt. Siler and Bros. Jost and [Joseph] Elder by permission went ahead of the Camp in pursuit of Buffalo and succeeded in killing one which was not brought into Camp till about 11 p.m.” (Willie Company Journal)

When the Willie Company was near Ft. Laramie, the decision was made for Andrew’s company to remain at the fort in order to rest and recruit their animals. They continued from Fort Laramie a short time later with the Hodgett wagon company. They were also traveling closely with the Martin handcart company and assisted them in every way possible, as they had done with the Willie handcart company. After much difficulty with dying oxen, short rations, severe winter weather, and finally snow-filled canyon roads leading into the Valley, the Hodgett company arrived in Salt Lake City in mid-December. Hundreds of heroic rescuers sent by Brigham Young had helped them to accomplish this.

Andrew continued to serve in many capacities. The brethren would ask him to move and he would be obedient to their requests, moving as often as necessary to meet these requests. Finally, he moved his family to “Upper Kanab” near present day Alton, Utah, and declared that he would move no more. He felt that his family was too large and he was too old. His last child was born after settling on this ranch.

Andrew was an educated man. He was a botanist and also practiced law. He was very proud of the fact he never lost a court case. He discovered a very rare cactus near Pipe Springs, Arizona, which was named the “Utahia Sileri” in his honor. Andrew was also a school teacher, but he did not teach his own children to read or write. His daughter, Ruth Ann, tells of sneaking her father’s mail out to a secret spot on a nearby hillside and copying the words until she learned both reading and writing.

Andrew was well known for his gruffness with anyone whose actions did not meet with his approval. One time a neighbor from Kanab stopped for the night at the Siler Ranch. He started for the house when Andrew called, “Wait a minute. I’ll get some grain for your horses.” “Oh, that isn’t necessary, Brother Siler. They’ve got enough to eat. They’re not used to grain anyway,” replied the man. “They’re going to have grain tonight just the same. You’ve driven them hard all day and they look ready to drop in the harness.” Andrew then gave each animal a generous portion of grain, led the man to the road, and stated, “There is no supper or bed here for such as you, sir. A man who thinks no more than you do of his faithful animals does not deserve food or a bed. Get goin!” The poor man continued on foot to the next ranch for the night. He sent the neighbors over the next morning for his animals, afraid to face Andrew himself. But Andrew refused to let the animals be retrieved without several days of rest.

Andrew died in May of 1898 and was buried on his ranch in Upper Kanab, Utah.

One of Andrew’s descendants, Elder Cliff Siler, has served a mission with his wife, Ann, at the Mormon Handcart Historic Sites in Wyoming.

Sources: Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website; Daughters of Utah Pioneers history files; family histories compiled by and obtained from Anne Siler, in files of Jolene Allphin.

¹Other accounts seem more reasonable in describing him as 6 ft. 6 in. or 6 ft. 8 in.

²Apostle John Taylor was the mission president in New York and editor of *The Mormon*.

³Christina became friends with the Peder and Helena Mortensen family and assisted them with their two handcarts. She later married their son, Anders Mortensen.

⁴Andrew Siler married Ravinia in January of 1857 and they had three children together.