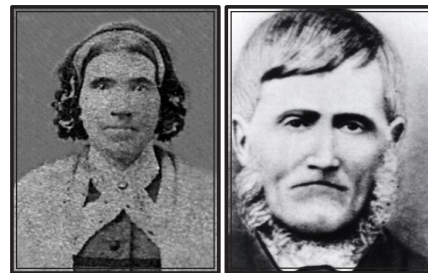


RHODA REBECCA OAKEY

Born: 1845 England (Died Nov. 9 at Little Mountain)

Age: 10

Willie Handcart Company



Ann Collett and Thomas Oakey

Rhoda Rebecca Oakey left England in May 1856 with her parents, Thomas (age 42) and Ann Collett (43), and siblings: Ann (22), Charles (18), Jane (16), Heber Thomas (14), Lorenzo Moroni (12), Reuben Hyrum (8), and Sarah Ann (4). Two other boys had died as infants in England.

In 1840, the Oakey family was taught the gospel of Jesus Christ by Elder Wilford Woodruff in Herefordshire. They were impressed by his teaching and were among the first 600 “United Brethren” converts who were baptized. They had an earnest desire to come to America to join with the Saints and they worked hard to try to save enough money to make the journey. In 1856 their dreams came true with help from the Perpetual Emigrating Fund. Aboard the ship *Thornton*, little Sarah celebrated her birthday with her only present being a sea biscuit. She said she remembered all her life how hard it was.

At the outfitting point near Iowa City, the family worked to sew tents and build handcarts. Thomas also worked in nearby grain fields to earn money for the journey. They finally started out with two handcarts, one for the boys and one for the girls. Sarah Oakey rode on top of one of the carts. She later wrote about the family’s experiences:

“The first Indians that we met came up to our carts and pushed our people away and pulled our carts into camp laughing at us. I was four years old and was riding on the top of one of the carts. Mother was frightened when the Indians came up so she took me from the top of the cart. The captain said that they would not harm anyone so Mother put me back.

“Sometimes in the evenings the Indians brought buffalo meat into camp to trade for salt and clothing which was a welcome change. We saw lots of buffalo along the trail but did not shoot any. Twice we had to split the company to let the buffalo pass.

“Rhoda Rebecca had a sweet a sweet soprano voice and many evenings after the camp had been set up and supper eaten she would sing the hymn ‘Come, Come, Ye Saints,’ which helped lift the weary travelers in camp.”

When the family reached the last outfitting camp at Florence, Nebraska Territory, the company met to discuss the advisability of continuing that season. The overwhelming majority voted to go on. But even before reaching Florence, Lorenzo Oakey had no desire to continue. One day during the noon meal, he turned to one of the younger children, handed his plate to him and left the camp.¹ His parents were frantic when he did not return in the evening. They searched through the handcart train, along the trail, and visited the houses and farms in the area, but were unable to find Lorenzo. They had no choice but to continue on. Thomas felt confident that his son would find work and come to the Salt Lake Valley the next Spring. Ann was given a blessing in which she was promised she would one day see her son again.

As the family struggled on, Rhoda’s father became ill. It was not unusual for the family to leave him resting under a tree or bush and go on into camp only to return for him later. When rescue finally came, the Willie company had to cross Rocky Ridge in a blizzard in order to reach Rock Creek Hollow where they recruited their strength and laid over for a day. Thirteen people were buried in a common grave here and it had taken its toll on the Oakey family as well.

Family records report that it was here at Rock Creek that Thomas’s condition grew much worse and Rhoda Rebecca became very ill. Sarah recorded: “Father’s health began to fail and sometimes he would fall down and have to be helped. He would sit down to rest. When he felt better we would go on and catch up with the rest of the company again. There were many people in camp who died but we fared fairly well until we reached the deep snow in Wyoming. Our father froze his feet and hands and his toenails came off. Though the family suffered many hardships we always held our family prayer.”



Sarah Oakey
(Sterrett)
(Humberg)
(Ludlum)

¹ Evidence suggests Lorenzo left the company July 29 near Des Moines, Iowa.

(Rhoda Rebecca Oakey - Page 2)

Rhoda and her father struggled on for the next 16 days after leaving Rock Creek. Ann was often called upon to go among the sick of the company and do whatever she could to help them. They looked upon her as a doctor and nurse for the suffering Saints.

Ann stayed up nursing Thomas through the night of November 8-9. When she went to wake the children in the morning she discovered that Rhoda had died. She was so close to Zion! This was the long-awaited day that the company would finally reach the Valley of their dreams. Thomas was gravely ill, rendering him unable to travel. He was left to mourn alone with Rhoda's body. Ann continued with the company and the rest of the children into the valley where she settled them at the home of her brother, Daniel Collett, and then returned for her husband and Rhoda's body.

Rhoda was buried in the Salt Lake City Cemetery and the rest of the family remained at the Collett home while they were being nursed back to health. The family eventually was called to help settle the Bear Lake Valley in Idaho, where they pioneered in Paris in 1865. Thomas and his sons dug some of the first water wells, fenced fields, and helped build roads, houses, barns and churches in this valley. Thomas was ordained a Seventy and then to the office of Patriarch, which position he held until his death in 1890. Ann was one of the first midwives in Bear Lake and assisted in bringing many babies into the world from St. Charles to Montpelier. Her fee was two dollars per delivery and she usually took that in trade.

These faithful parents accepted their grief and heartache with Rhoda's death and Lorenzo's disappearance, but never stopped praying for their missing son. Ann particularly was confident she would see him again. In the early 1870's, Charles C. Rich, who was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles assigned to the Bear Lake area, was going east with his son on business. Thomas and Ann took the opportunity to ask Elder Rich if he would please advertise in the newspapers in Nebraska for any knowledge of their son. Through this advertisement, Lorenzo Moroni was located, at that time living in Kansas. He was married and had a family. He brought them to meet his parents and siblings in 1876.



Joseph L. & Mary Stewart
"O'kee," wedding day

Lorenzo told his family he had left the handcart company twenty years before because he was discouraged, tired and hungry. He had gone to one of the homes in the area—one to which Ann and Thomas had gone seeking him. The family had hidden him and when the handcart company had gone on, they invited Lorenzo to stay with them. They had raised him as their son. Lorenzo Moroni had changed his name to Joseph Lorenzo O'Kee. He had also fought in the Civil War on the side of the North. On one occasion he was sent into battle with a battalion of 983 men of which only 33 survived.

The Oakey family made faithful payments to the Perpetual Emigrating Fund but they never were able to get the account paid in full. Their account was one of the "faithful poor" that was forgiven by Church President John Taylor during the Jubilee Year in 1880.

Sources: "The Harvest Continues," *Ensign*, November 1987; "Harvest in Herefordshire," by David J. Whittaker, *Ensign*, January 1987, 46; "Original Mormon Chapel Reopens," by Ruth Gledhill, Religion Correspondent, April 24, 2000; Joseph L Okee obituary; photos and Oakey family histories from David Barkdull; family histories of Laura Middleton; interview with Laura Middleton, April 2005; *Infinite Love: Oakey, Passey, Phelps, Price, Allied Lines*, by Dorene Mae Oakey Stoney, 1996; "Our Bear Lake Heritage," by Dorene Oakey Stoney; "Sarah Ann Oakey Ludlum," *Paris Post*, by Milton Rebentisch, 1935; *Our Experience on the Mormon Handcart Trail between the Ice Slough and Rock Creek Hollow, Wyoming*, by Franklin Del Barkdull, David Barkdull, Jason Barkdull, 20-24 Oct. 2006. See *Follow Me To Zion* by Andrew Olsen and Jolene Allphin, *Deseret Book*, 2013, for artwork and more complete Oakey family stories.

Note: The painting on the cover of *Tell My Story, Too*, entitled "Reverence at Rock Creek" by Julie Rogers, represents Rhoda Rebecca Oakey.