

ROBERT PIERCE (or PEARCE)

Born: England (died, probably on September 18, 1856, Nebraska Territory)

Age: 31

Martin Handcart Company

Little is known of Robert Pierce's background. The British Mission Record (BMR) for the Latter-day-Saint emigrants who signed up to sail on the ship *Horizon*, tells us that Robert was 31 years old with an occupation as a "pedlar."¹ Robert's ticket was sent to "Jn Kay, L'pool." Because emigrant tickets were often sent to one of the Elders, it is assumed that this is a reference to Elder John Moburn Kay, whose missionary assignments located him in Liverpool at this time.² A Liverpool branch record indicates that Robert had been received earlier from the Cheltenham branch of the Church. Early LDS branch records for Cheltenham are not available, so it is not known if Robert was born in the Cheltenham area or when he traveled to Liverpool.

Because of diaries and reminiscences written by five members of the Martin handcart company, we know that Robert was a remarkably determined man with a severely handicapped body. We also know that on September 12, 1856, Robert got separated from the group long enough to make a wrong turn and he found himself in a serious and vulnerable situation:

James G. Bleak: *Friday 12th We travelled but 6 miles, in consequence of it being discovered that a cripple had been left behind.*

Samuel Openshaw: *Sept. 12—Started about 8 o'clock, traveled about 4 miles when we came to the Wood River which we crossed on a small bridge yankee; continued down the side of it, stopped for dinner at 12 o'clock. For ought we knew, but a cripple, a young man who walked with crutches, had been left behind. We sent four men back to search for him, which caused us to move none today. About sunset they brought him into the camp.*

William Binder: *Friday Sept. 12th: The wheather was excessively hot today. The company was detained today through a cripple stopping behind and only travelled 7 miles.*

John Jaques: *Fri. 12: Left camp about 8 a.m. In about three miles crossed Wood River after crossing a dry creek with steep banks, taking the cattle off the wagons to cross both. Kept along side of the river for five miles and baited. Robert Pearce was missing and several men were sent out with a handcart to find him. This detained the company here for the night. He had gone up the side of Wood River instead of crossing it.*

John William Southwell: *There were the invalids to be looked after and cared for. An old gentleman 70 years old was elected to this office. [This reference is to Elder George P. Waugh, a returning missionary and counselor to Captain Edward Martin. See his story in Martin section of *Tell My Story, Too*.] He would muster them together, make an early start and travel them so far as they were able to walk. Those who tired out would fall back to be taken up by some young man and carried to camp on his hand cart, which was a light, frail article. . . . In the morning father Waugh called his invalids together early and started on the road. In his company was one of the worst cripples I ever saw to be a traveler. His lower limbs were paralyzed and his body badly deformed but he was strong in the faith. He was able to propel himself with surprising speed with the use of crutches.*

On the road the old father missed him. The road followed down an old dry bed of a creek but finally crossed on to the other side where we expected to get back of him. There were, on the road he was traveling, faint tracks that had been used by stock, perhaps buffalo, and the poor fellow followed those tracks instead of crossing on the other side. We camped for noon near the loup part of the Platt[e] River. Myself and two other men, taking a hand cart, went back to where we left the buffalo tracks and followed down about a mile when to our horror we saw around an old tree two large gray wolves prowling around, and half a dozen eagles hovering over the tree waiting for him to quit his screams and gestulations with his crutches so they would pounce upon him and devour him in his cramped position under the roots of the tree, screaming out his death knell.

We arrived in time to save him from his pending fate, took him out and placed him on the cart we had brought, placed him in position to ride back to camp. How the poor fellow begged us to let him walk, as he said he had promised brother [Daniel] Tyler when we started on our trip that he would walk every foot of the way to Salt Lake City. However, we only saved him to travel a few days longer, when at the close of the sixth days march his trouble in this world came to an end and he was buried on the banks of the Elkhorn River where one other passed beyond the veil of tears.

It appears from Southwell's account that Robert Pierce died about September 18. John Jaques did not write on that date. James Bleak wrote but did not mention any deaths. However, Bleak's entry indicates that the company traveled 23 miles on that very difficult day. The other two diarists, Openshaw and Binder, wrote of only one person dying on September 18, but Southwell indicated that two persons died on that day.

Samuel Openshaw: *Sept. 18—Started at 7 o'clock this morning, traveled until 1 o'clock when we stopped for dinner at the Platte River. Old Sister [Ann] Gregory from Chew Moore died and was buried on the banks of the Platte River. Started again and traveled over the sandy bloffs [bluffs] and camped again at the Platte River.*

William Binder: *Thursday Sept. 18th: Wheather milder today but the roads were very sandy. Sr. [text missing, Sister Ann Gregory] died at noon today. Travelled 20 miles today.*

James G. Bleak: *Thursday 18th Sept. We travelled 23 miles to day. According to Clayton's Guide we are 294¼ miles from W. Quarters.*

It is truly remarkable that Robert Pierce had already traveled 600 miles on his crutches before he succumbed to the hardships of the trail. His heart's desire had been to gather with the Saints in Zion and not be a burden to any of his fellow travelers. He had signed a PEF bond promising to repay the emigration loan after reaching Utah. Robert did not want any handouts or special treatment.

Early records for the St. George Temple indicate that James G. Bleak did not forget Robert. Bleak listed himself as a cousin to Robert when he completed ordinance work for Robert shortly after the St. George Temple opened.

The character of Robert Pierce is portrayed as "Albert" in T.C. Christensen's movie "17 Miracles" (released in 2011), and again in the movie "Ephraim's Rescue" (released in 2013).

Sources: British Mission Records (*Horizon*, 1856); St. George Temple records; "John Moburn Kay," in *Biographical Encyclopedia*, by Andrew Jensen, vol. 3; see Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website for journals quoted. (*17 Miracles* and *Ephraim's Rescue* are available through Deseret Book Company.)

Excerpt from "On a Distant Shore" - a song about Robert Pierce by Jolene Allphin:

Tucked in the cart,	Where all is light	And the wolves don't prowl
I saw God's face.	And peace and rest.	And the wolves don't howl
He bid me rise,	I'd fought the fight	At the Shepherd's door.
Go to His place,	And passed the test.	

¹Robert's ticket was #60, his PEF bond was #1485, his notification number was 166, his acknowledgement of notification was April 28, 1856, and he was numbered among others with the Liverpool Conference allotment for this emigration. He is on the same ticket number as the Richard Blakey family, who had been living in Liverpool since 1855. He may have been traveling in their care.

²John Jaques' diary entry for January 8, 1856, indicates that Elder Kay was with him when copies of the *Deseret News* arrived in Liverpool. That newspaper contained a copy of the recently released official "Epistle" announcing the handcart plan. Brother Jaques wrote: "Tues. 8: The Utah November mail came in, bringing 'Deseret News' No. 30 to 34, the last number containing the Thirteenth General Epistle of the First Presidency. About 8 o'clock P.M. went with my wife, and her sister, Tamar, and my daughter, Flora Loader [Jaques], to Elder George Tumbull's, Miss Margaret Aison Fait having been married to him on the 2nd instant. Flora, being unwell, was rather peevish. Elders George D. Grant, John Kay, William H. Kimball, Spicer W. Crandall, Asa Calkins, Thomas Williams, and James Linforth and wife, and Brother William Perks were present. Spent a very pleasant evening. Left for home at 12 1/2." John M. Kay was returning to Utah from another English mission in 1864 when he died on the plains. A Daughters of Utah Pioneers history of John Kay is praiseworthy of him as a champion for the underdog: "His spirit was chivalrous and he would always defend the oppressed. It was partly due to his disposition that he became a Latter-day Saint. One of his fellow employees (Samuel Croyer) at St. Helens, to which town he had removed [from Bury] to work in a foundry, was a member of the 'Mormon' Church, and being a small, timid man, he was ridiculed by his shopmates, who went so far as to offer him violence. Without knowing anything about his religion, John Kay defended him and thrashed his leading assailant. Curiosity then led him to inquire into the little man's faith. The result was his conversion and baptism in the fall of 1841." Kay's relationship, if any, with Robert Pierce is unknown.