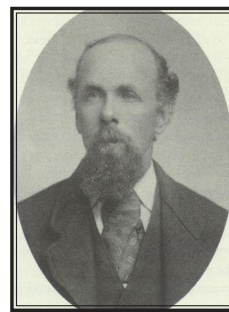


ROBERT REEDER



Born: 1837 England

Age: 19

Willie Handcart Company

From Robert's own writings we learn much about this trek:

I embraced the Gospel 5 May 1852 and was anxious to gather with the Saints in the valleys of the mountains where my brother, George, and sister, Mary, had gone in 1853. We were always talking and wishing to be with them, not having any idea of the trials and hardships to be endured along the way in completing the journey. But being moved by the spirit of gathering, my father, David Reeder, my younger sister, Caroline, my sister Eliza, and her husband, James Hurren, with their three little girls from 2 to 8 years of age, started for Liverpool where we met with others from different parts. There were 721 persons very much all on the same errand.

On the 5th of May we sailed out from Liverpool, England, on the great ocean, which took us a little over six weeks to cross. I was very sick on the way and could not eat such food as they had on "seafare," which consisted of what they called sea biscuits and salt pork and salt beef, also brown sugar and vinegar and very little other food. I got very feeble living principally on sugar and vinegar for three weeks.

I was glad when we arrived at Castle Garden, New York, where we could get a piece of bread once more. We rested here a few days, then pursued our journey by railroad and steamboats, changing from one to the other until we arrived at the Iowa camping ground, where we had to lay over two or three weeks waiting for our outfits.

The Church had a herd of cattle there, which was at the time a general fitting out place. While laying over there, we had to herd those cattle night and day. There were lots of us to change off if all would have taken a part, but it was a very rainy country and some would not take their part, especially in the nighttime. I can well remember those who had charge used to come to us and say, "Will you go and herd again tonight as we cannot get anyone else to go." Me and my father and my brother-in-law, James Hurren, have gone three and four nights out of a week in the pouring rain, wet through from head to foot and in the water part of the time up to our knees—anything to help get fitted out and started on the road.

Eventually we got our outfits of four wagons with ox teams loaded with flour which was calculated to take us to Salt Lake City, making calculations for 60 days and one pound of flour for each grown person per day and half that for all children under 12 years of age. Besides that we had one wagon with four mules loaded with bacon and groceries for the trip and one saddle pony belonging to an elder returning home which was used for hunting campgrounds, and the rest were handcarts, about 120. As a general thing, one to each family, in some cases two young men and two young women to each. Those with handcarts were loaded with their baggage and children that were not able to walk. The company comprised of about 500 people [when they left Iowa City]. In this way we travelled to what was called Florence and this side of the Missouri River. We were again detained waiting for some Independent emigrants who wanted to travel with us as it was very dangerous to cross the plains in those times—one thousand miles of wild Indian country. ...

When we got out about three hundred miles on the road, our cattle stampeded, most all of our best oxen leaving, which left us in a bad state to move any farther. We stayed there for several days, hunting as far as we dared to go to find some of our cattle but could not find any, believing the Indians must have driven them away. Then some of the flour was taken out of the wagons and put on the handcarts according to the strength of the party drawing them. Some had one, others two or three, and, if my memory serves me right, Brother Hurren, being considered the strongest man in the company, had had five sacks put on his cart besides two small girls that were not able to walk and all his baggage and cooking utensils. His wife helped in pulling the cart and walked the entire trail. We made up with the few cattle we had left, one yoke of cattle and one cow to each wagon, and on account of weak teams and handcarts loaded too heavy, we traveled only a few miles each day. Our provisions were going fast while we were making but little headway. Our rations had to be cut down to half and some were sick with bowel and other sickness.

My father, David Reeder, would start out in the morning and pull his cart until he would drop on the road. He did this day after day until he did not arise early on October 1 1856. He was found dead in his bed, and his fellow bedmate had not heard a thing during the night. Sister Eliza wrapped a cherished sheet around him, and we placed him in a shallow grave, hoping the wolves would not disturb. We must go on our way in silent mourning and in a weakened condition.

Our rations were growing shorter, and we reduced them by common consent from day to day. Nights were getting colder, and some would sit down by the roadside and die. My younger sister, Caroline, seventeen years old, after traveling all day and seeing the camp being made for the night, took off her apron to tie some sagebrush in to bring into the camp. She sat down to rest, leaning on her bundle, exhausted. They found her chilled and dying and

carried her to camp. She died without gaining consciousness. She, too, was placed in an unmarked grave near Three Crossings—Sweetwater. She died the evening of October 15, 1856.¹ Her death was another real loss to us, but we must hurry on in threatening weather and colder nights on the Windriver Pass. So it was with others, as many as thirteen being buried in one grave at one time. I think fully one hundred died on this trip.

On October 17, we awoke covered with eight inches of snow and rations about gone.² We pulled our carts sixteen miles in a blinding snowstorm and arrived at Rock Creek, where we sheltered against the hill as best we could to avoid the north wind and blowing snow. Weakened to such an extent and without food, thirteen died that night. All the able-bodied men dug one large grave, but not too deep. My brother-in-law, James Hurren, held out his eight-year-old girl, Mary, to see her little playmate lying among the dead. They were laid in the clothes they wore, in a circle with feet to center and heads out. We covered them with willows and then earth and slid rocks down the hill to keep the wolves from disturbing them. Two of the men who helped dig the grave died and were buried in another nearby. We could go no further. The weather was severe and we had not a morsel of food in camp. We had heard assistance was on the road and we still had hopes.

We had one pony and one mule that were not entirely exhausted and two of the men took these animals and started out to find some relief which they did after traveling to Pacific Springs. The relief party had laid over at Pacific Springs because of the storm, not knowing the dire straits in which the handcart company was at the time. When they heard the report, they left part of the wagons, doubled up teams and came to us as quickly as possible. They reached us after we had been in camp 48 hours. They dared not give us much food for fear of killing us all, which most likely [it would] have done with the few that were left. Potato peelings and rawhide off old handcarts were good if we could get it. I myself, set by the campfire with Brother Hurren and scraped and singed the hair off a piece of hide, some that had been taken off discarded handcarts that had been pulled through the sands hundreds of miles. It was hard but we would boil and soften them and cut them up in small pieces and put in our pockets to chew on the road the next day and it helped to keep life in us.

Through snow and wind we mostly walked behind the relief wagons about three hundred miles to Salt Lake City and arrived on Public Square November 9, 1856. We stopped for about two hours, and many of the Church authorities came and talked to us. Then we were given over to the bishops of the different wards. Each bishop took a few, whom they saw got some kind of work to pay for their keep during the winter. I went out under Bishop Weiler, but I did not stay long. I had a brother, George, in Brigham City, and with my brother-in-law, James Hurren, I started to walk there. My brother-in-law was stronger than I and he soon left me behind. I remember a good lady who took me in one night and fed me when I was almost worn out. That was Sister Bankhead and she lives in Wellsville now (1917). Some day I hope to see her again and let her know how that I shall always be thankful for the food and shelter she gave me that night.

In the summer of 1857, we heard of the coming of Johnston's army, and the man I was working for, Claudius V. Spencer, sent me to represent him at Echo Canyon. I was not there long until I became so badly afflicted with rheumatics that I could not move a limb; could not even feed myself. Then we moved back to Provo Bottoms until the soldiers passed through Salt Lake, then we came back.

It was the fall of 1858 that I was first in Cache Valley. There were no houses here anywhere at that time, except a few at Wellsville. They were log huts and all built together so that one would protect the other from the cold winter.

Robert Reeder crossed the plains several other times—twice to bring immigrants from the Missouri River, and an undetermined number of times bringing cattle, before and after the railroad. While on the first trip he found the grave of his father, David Reeder. Robert married Lydia Wilkinson in 1861 and Ellen Flatt in 1872. He became the father of fourteen children. He was a cattle man, butcher, deputy sheriff, and hay merchant.

¹ The company journal for Oct. 15 states: "Early this morning, Caroline Reeder, from Linstead, Suffolk, England, aged 17 years, died. Levi Savage wrote in his journal for Oct. 15: "Sweet Water. Today we travelled fifteen and a half miles. Last night Caroline Reeder, aged seventeen years, died and was buried this morning." The campground where Caroline is buried is one mile west of Independence Rock. It was the first day the company reached the Sweetwater River and crossed it.

² On October 18, the Willie Company camped near the fifth crossing of the Sweetwater River. The next good water source was 16 miles away, so the Company needed to get through in one day. It was at this last camp that the rations were completely depleted and the snowstorm overnight October 19-20 further stranded the company. It was here that James Willie and Joseph Elder left the company in search of the rescuers. When they returned with a few of them, the company then pushed on, the second day crossing Rocky Ridge and on to Rock Creek, in a "blinding snowstorm."