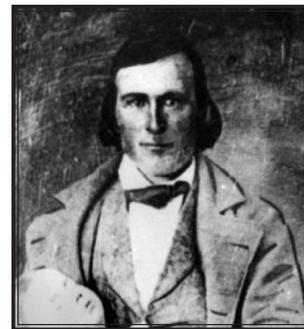


CHARLES FRANKLIN DECKER

Born: 21 June 1824 Phelps, New York (near Palmyra)

Age: 32

Rescuer



Affectionately known as “Uncle Charlie,” Charles F. Decker’s obituary in March of 1901 honored him by stating that “his deeds will live after him” and that his dramatic life experiences and “narrow escape from death in a hundred different forms would fill a volume.”

At the age of 12, Charles’s family was living in Ohio when they were taught the gospel by missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Decker family became a group of 1,500 converts who were baptized and joined the Church in 1836. Their lives became ones of repeated sacrifice as they labored on the Kirtland Temple in Ohio, gathered with the Saints in Missouri and Nauvoo, and suffered persecution and expulsion from each of these places. Charles and his family were with a group of people who observed Joseph and Hyrum Smith as they kissed their families goodbye and left Nauvoo for their martyrdom.

After being driven from Missouri and as a young teenager, Charles worked as a mail rider in Dublin, Indiana, in order to help support his beleaguered family. He also worked for three years on riverboats. He spoke of this period of his life as having taught him to “be tough, and to keep my ears open, my eyes skinned, and my mouth shut.” Charles was also tutored by the likes of Orrin Porter Rockwell and Kit Carson.

During the Nauvoo years, Charles began to court Brigham Young’s 2nd oldest daughter, Vilate. He was also a missionary at this time and served the Church in many ways, particularly in assisting in the exodus. As a teamster, he crossed the frozen Mississippi River many times in the winter of 1846, helping the Saints to escape their persecutions. Before he left, Charles received his endowment in the unfinished Nauvoo temple that he and his family had helped to build. Charles continued to return to Nauvoo many times to defend and rescue those who were unable to leave in 1846. He also gave much service to the suffering Saints in Winter Quarters that year.

In February of 1847, when Charles returned from a trip to buy corn for the sick and starving Saints at Winter Quarters, Brigham Young asked him how he felt. Charles replied, “Just like getting married.” Brigham responded, “Well, bring Vilate to my cabin and we’ll attend to it.” After the short ceremony, but before he could be alone with his 17-year-old bride, Charles went with Brigham Young to attend to burials at the graveyard.

Charles and Vilate traveled to the Salt Lake Valley with the Jedediah Grant pioneer company, arriving October 2, 1847. Along the way, Charles assisted many times by riding back and forth to help others and to deliver messages. Vilate would sometimes have to hide in the wagon from the Indians during these absences. The Indians admired her beauty and auburn hair and would have liked very much to trade for it. Many a night Charles slept on his gun in defense of his family and attractive wife. He also once traded a valuable and favorite rifle to Indians outside the old fort in Salt Lake City in order to save the life of a young Indian girl.

Charles was the lead scout with the advance rescue party sent out by Brigham Young in early October 1856. Charles left behind his three small children and his wife, who bore him another son just weeks after his return. By the time Charles went out on the rescue, he had much experience on the emigrant trail. Altogether during his life, Charles crossed the plains 53 times, not counting partial trips while en route. Daniel W. Jones, a fellow rescuer of 1856, wrote of their experience in the rescue, “Each evening the Elders would meet in council. I remember hearing Charles Decker remark that he had crossed the plains over fifty times ... and this was the darkest hour he had ever seen.” George D. Grant, Captain of the advance Rescue Party wrote a letter of report to Brigham

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Young on Nov. 2, 1856, from their camp at Devil's Gate, Wyoming. They had just managed to bring the Martin Handcart Company in and the Hodgett and Hunt wagon companies arrived a short time later. An excerpt from Captain Grant's letter reads: "I never felt so much interest in any mission that I have been sent on, and all the brethren who came out with me feel the same. We have prayed without ceasing, and the blessing of God has been with us. Br. Charles Decker has now traveled this road the 49th time, and he says he has never before seen so much snow on the Sweet Water at any season of the year. ... We will move every day toward the valley, if we shovel snow to do it, the Lord helping us."

Before needs could be met and these last 3 companies regrouped, the storms and severe cold again bore down on the Saints. Charles Decker, as the lead scout, and one who had spent much time in his travels in this area, knew of a sheltered place about two miles from Devil's Gate. He assisted the Martin Company in seeking refuge in this place which later became known as "Martin's Cove."¹

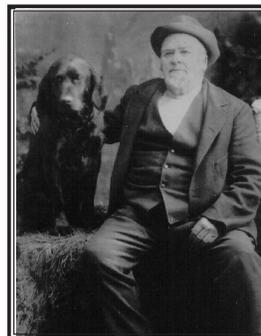
Charles many "other" trips across the plains included riding the mail, freighting, and serving as one of the so-called "down and back boys" who rode out from the Salt Lake Valley to meet pioneer companies at the railroad terminus and bring them to Utah. Charles freighted the first wagon of soda from Wyoming to Utah, and was also instrumental in bringing the first steam powered sawmill to the Valley. On this particular trip, Charles and his business partner (and fellow 1856 rescuer), Feramorz Little, were captured by the Indians. They told the Indians that the huge tank they carried was a giant gun that could wipe out a whole village with one shot. Not even the Indians believed that story, so next they wet their fingers in their mouths and made spots on their faces. This convinced the Indians that they had the dreaded disease smallpox and Charles and Feramorz were then run out of camp.

Charles was a quiet and unassuming man whose descendants say is best remembered for his kindly and generous nature, his extreme loyalty and his quick wit. His obituary speaks of "his wonderful constitution and cheerful nature." He memorialized his own life in his humble way by scratching his initials on top of Independence Rock, near Martin's Cove in Wyoming, on one of his many trips through that area. He had a rich heritage of service and sacrifice, and was involved with all of the major events of the Church from his boyhood. He was with Brigham Young at the time of his death and witnessed Brigham's last words: "Joseph, Joseph, Joseph!"

Ever faithful to his callings, he served one last mission to lead settlers to Vernal, Utah. He was 76 years old at the time. Charlie died in Vernal the next year on March 22, 1901. Perhaps sensing his time was short, Charles had made a friend, Riley Green, promise him that when he died he would secure him the fanciest wagon and best team to rush him to the cemetery at the fastest gallop they could go, or as he put it, "at a full tilt." This promise was fulfilled by Ward Relief Society President and community nurse, Annie Bartlett. When Charles died, Annie told her son, Ashley, the following story:

"In 1868 when your father and I were married, the temple wasn't finished yet so we, like so many others, were married in the Endowment House on North Temple. We were very poor then and if I recall it right, your father only had fifty cents in his pocket and all I had was a cheap calico dress. ... After we left the Endowment House as man and wife, we had walked about a block and a half when this fancy carriage pulled up beside us. This was about as fancy a carriage as we had seen and with a beautiful matched team pulling it ... quite a sight to our poor eyes.

"The driver of the foxy buggy asked us to hop in. We recognized him as the man that your father worked for. He was in charge of the Church's cattle and was married to one of Brigham Young's daughters. Always a kind, generous, happy man, he would do about



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anything for you if you treated him square and gave him an honest days work. ... Everyone knew Charles Decker, and he knew anyone who was someone in the West. He ran with Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, [and] most others of that era who were shaping the West. He also knew we were getting married and didn't have much, so he wanted to help out. Such was his nature.

"Well, we accepted his ride gladly, but instead of taking us home, he told us he would take us to his place so his wife could fix us a wedding dinner. ... He was a wealthy man and had a nice home over near the mouth of Parley's Canyon. ... He said, 'Throw yer hat in the corner. We ain't got too much, but it won't take us long to eat it.' When we got there, we met his pretty wife and seven children, and then she served us a wonderful meal. They even put us up for the night in an extra room. They treated us like royalty. Your father worked for him some time until he finished school and we moved away."

Annie organized a brief and sparsely attended funeral at the Stake Center in Vernal. She spoke with the neighbor who had the "foxiest" wagon in town and then she met with the man who had the prettiest and fastest team of horses to pull it. She made sure the fanciest harness was used with lots of silver and pretty buckles and hand cut ribbons to blow in the breeze on the way to the cemetery. Charles' friend, Riley, at whose home Charles had died, donated the burial space in his plot, as Charles was currently a poor man.

Ashley Bartlett later told Charles' request and of the wild ride to the cemetery "at a full tilt." Ashley said:

Now, in those days the water ditches crossed the road and there was a bridge, another bridge, and still another bridge. Now, I was in that wagon helping to hold his body, and whenever we went over the bridges the coffin would go way up and my two older brothers were holding on also and it was quite a ride trying to keep the box in the wagon and all. So my mother saw to it that this man had the grandest burial she could arrange.

Charles's obituary in the *Deseret News* concluded: "Peace to his name."

Sources: Shepard, Landes D. and Shepard, Don E., with contributing editor Richard B. Anderson, *Fast Rider on a Wild Wind: The Life and Times of Charles Franklin Decker*, 2nd edition, 2005 and 5th edition, 2011, privately published, in library of Jolene Allphin; interviews and email communications with Landes Shepard by Jolene Allphin, 2005, 2007, 2012; Mormon Pioneer Trail History website, entries for July 1847; FamilySearch.org.

¹Nellie Rae Donohoo Shepard grew up on a cattle and sheep ranch in Wyoming. Her mother, Gertrude Decker Donohoo, told her family stories about her grandfather, Charlie Decker, that she had heard repeated all her life. (Gertrude was six years old when her grandfather Decker died.) Nellie's son, Landes Shepard, also grew up hearing these stories repeated. Most of these stories were of Charlie Decker's legendary trips across the pioneer trail, and especially his part in the 1856 rescue of the handcart companies. Charlie told his children and grandchildren of the "box canyon" where he had helped to escort the Martin handcart company. He was aware of its frequent usage by frontiersmen and Indians with whom he had become acquainted. It was a place for shelter and refuge as well as a convenient place to drive animals for slaughter. In places such as the Sweetwater Valley near Devil's Gate, where buffalo could not be herded over a buffalo jump, box canyons were effective for trapping the animals. The following definition of a box canyon can be found on Wikipedia: "A box canyon is a small ravine or canyon with steep walls on three sides, allowing access and egress only through the mouth of the canyon. Box canyons were frequently used in the American West as convenient corrals, with their entrances fenced. They were also used as kill sites for wild game, which could be driven into the confined space and killed." Martin's Cove was also a naturally sheltered place, where good feed for the cattle and firewood was readily available.



Charles F. and Vilate Y. Decker