

MARY LAWSON KIRKMAN

Born: February 1823 in England

Age: 33

Martin Handcart Company



As a young child, Mary worked in a factory winding thread on spools to help support her family. She learned to read without the benefit of schooling, but never to write.

Mary was one of the early converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Lancashire, England. She was baptized September 18, 1841, at the age of 18. Her parents disowned her when she joined the Church. She never received any letters from her parents or other family members after coming to America, and she never spoke of them to her children or grandchildren.

Mary met another convert, Robert Kirkman, at her branch in Lancashire. They fell in love and were married in January 1845. They became the parents of five sons and were expecting their sixth when they left to join the Saints in Utah. They boarded the sailing vessel *Horizon* in May of 1856 with their sons, Robert (age 10), John (8), Joseph (6), Hyrum (4), and James (2). After five long weeks, the steamer “Huron” towed them into Boston Harbor on June 30, 1856. They traveled to Iowa City, Iowa, by steamship and rail, arriving July 8, 1856. Mary spent this day in her final stages of labor, to the accompaniment of a severe thunderstorm. We learn of this day from the journal of 18-year-old Elizabeth White, “When we completed our journey to Iowa City, we were informed that we would have to walk four miles to our camping ground. All felt delighted to have the privilege of a pleasant walk. We all started, about five hundred of us, with our bedding. We had not gone far before it began to thunder and lightning, and the rain poured. The roads became very muddy and slippery. The day was far advanced, and it was late in the evening before we arrived at the camp. We all got very wet.” Fifteen-year-old George Cunningham described it this way, “I think that it is written somewhere that the devil is prince and power of the air. If so, he must have been in an awful rage.” The next day, Mary was delivered of her sixth son whom they named Peter.

After delays to build handcarts, the family joined with the Jesse Haven handcart company. (This handcart company was originally separate from the Martin company, but later combined with it, and Jesse Haven went to the Hodgett wagon company.) Robert was a saddle maker and had been offered a position for the winter so he had decided to stay in Iowa City until Spring. However, others in the company kept coming to see him and urge him to travel with them so that after talking it over with Mary, they agreed to go with the company “live or die.” (Perhaps this occurrence was not in Iowa, but closer to Florence, Nebraska, the main starting point of the trek.) Robert’s friend, Samuel Openshaw, wrote in his journal on August 16, “We ... crossed over the North Coon with our handcarts in the water which is about knee deep. Close by is the town of Adel which is the county of Edeby. We found Robert [Kirkman]. He had stopped behind from Haven company last Saturday night and was cut off from the Church. We took him along with us and crossed over another river which is also about knee deep.” That previous Saturday, August 9, Jesse Haven’s journal records, “Camped on the Middle Coon River. ... Saints traveled badly today. Much problems after we got into camp. Eleven left us.” Apparently Robert Kirkman was one of these. It should be understood that the Captains needed strict obedience in order to move that many people across the plains. They had authority to excommunicate or “cut off” any who refused to comply with their orders. It seems that Jesse Haven had used this power before.

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On July 30 he recorded, "This morning at prayers, we disfellowshipped Emma Batchelor, who left us yesterday and went out among the gentiles to tarry there." On August 1, Jesse Haven recorded that three or four had left the camp the night before and "Two families talk of leaving and wish to get my counsel. To do so, at the last, I told one of them he might do as he thought proper, and I would not disfellowship him for it. I had established the rule, if any left the camp without counsel, they should be disfellowshipped from the church. Brother Moses left today with his family, also Brother Hunter and his family."

Perhaps Robert, like many others, was having second thoughts about starting out so late in the season, especially when he had been offered a job and could have supported his family if he had stayed in Iowa City. At any rate, he continued on and was very faithful to Mary and his children.

It was a very difficult journey. When they arrived at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, the amount of expected provisions for resupply were not there. This required more rationing of the little food they had. They also had to leave more belongings behind in order to travel faster. These items included blankets and coats that they would soon need. The ox teams carrying their provisions and tents were also rapidly failing due to the increasingly cold weather and lack of feed.

When the Kirkman's reached the last crossing of the North Platte River on October 19, snow began to fall and the Saints had to cross in freezing conditions. Some of the men from the Martin and Hunt companies made many trips back and forth across this icy river, carrying their wives and children. Their clothing froze on them, and the storm did not abate. The company became stranded for over a week after this last cold crossing. Each day and night took its toll of lives. Mary was weak with the care of a nursing baby and five other young children. Robert was weak from want of food, having denied himself for his wife and children. Many of the men had been giving their meager rations to their families. Many of the men of the Martin company died here.

The strain of the journey was too much for Robert and one night, near the Bitter Cottonwood Creek, just west of Split Rock, he passed quietly away. Baby Peter also died that same night, November 11, 1856. They were buried together in the same grave. Mary's son, John, told it this way: "Snow fell and winds blew. We waded the cold water of the river which was about two feet deep with a thin covering of ice. Our clothes were frozen to our bodies. We scooped away the deep snow as best we could with frying pans and sticks as we had left our shovels by the roadside. There was hardly a man that had strength enough to drive the pegs into the hard frozen ground. ... Upon waking one morning, I found my father, Robert Kirkman and my infant brother with fifteen others frozen to death. Little Jimmy, my two-year-old brother, had his feet frozen so badly that one half of each came off." ("History of Springville", Mary Jane Chase Finley, 1948) John's daughter, Lou Kirkman Potee, interviewed John once and then wrote it this way: "Robert found some wood and built a fire to melt the snow and thaw the ground so it would be warm for sleeping. Robert took Peter into his arms to keep the little infant as warm as possible. Robert had denied himself food so the children would not starve. During the night Robert died. Peter also died in his father's arms. The next morning, Robert, with Peter still in his arms, was ... wrapped in a blanket and laid tenderly away. Mary Lawson Kirkman, with five little boys, took up the journey to Zion, alone."

After the Martin company left this sad scene, they were met more regularly with rescue wagons from the Valley and they were finally all able to ride. They reached Salt Lake on November 30, 1856, and were met by William Clyde with a wagon and taken to Springville. They first stayed one night with the Bishop of American Fork, and then were treated very kindly as they arrived in Springville the next day. Some of the children's feet were frozen so badly they had to lie down all the while. Little Jimmy had to always have special boots made for him and he had lost half of

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both his feet. The oldest son, Robert, lost three toes from each foot. Their family doctor, known as Father Bird, came to their home every day for months and dressed the wounds with Mary's help. Other kind people supplied all their needs as Mary's time was taken up caring for the children.

In 1857, Mary married a widower, Charles Hulet. She was sealed to her first husband on this same day. Charles was 68 years old and Mary was only 34. He was a fine, caring man and provided a good home for Mary and her children. Mary was finally blessed with two daughters by Charles Hulet. He died in 1861.

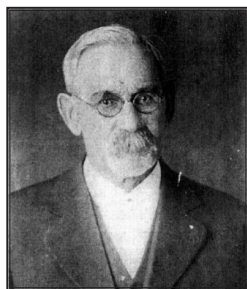
In 1864, Mary married again to Joseph Wood Cook. They were divorced a short time later when she surmised he was after her property left to her by Charles Hulet. She had another daughter from this marriage in 1865.

Mary's descendants honor her as being always loving and sympathetic to those in need, and never complaining, even with all her suffering. They said that she never could endure the sight of a handcart. It brought back such sad memories of the past and she could never be induced to join in any handcart parade.

Mary's grandson, John Hulet Patrick, told of Mary's home being only one block from the railroad tracks: "In July when the raspberries were ripe, Grandma and I would pick as many cups as we could before another train came and then I would run down to the tracks and sell the raspberries to people on the train. I would run right along the tracks and sell through the windows. We sold those berries for 25 cents a cup. ... Some years when we had a lot of snow, Utah Lake would rise high enough to come right to the edge of [her] property. ... Grandmother made sure she took good care of her pigs. When they would kill a 'porker' each fall, she would bring it into the room next to the two adobe rooms and she would make a sausage roll five feet from the floor to the ceiling. She always made a big pan of head cheese, using all of the pig's head. The head cheese never froze so hard that it couldn't be sliced. ... I don't know where Grandmother learned to read, but each evening after an early supper, she would read for about one hour and then she would put her book away, usually the Book of Mormon. ... Grandmother never missed a church meeting. She was devoted to the Church and walked to every meeting. ... She never received any letters from her parents or other family members after she came to America. In all the years I lived with her she never once spoke of them to me."

Mary served in the Church as President of the Primary and Young Women's organizations. She also served many years in the Relief Society. She remained a pillar of strength for her family. She had taught herself to read and was an avid reader of the scriptures. She lived to be 76 years old.

Sources: *A History of Springville*, by Mary J. Chase Finley; Daughters of Utah Pioneers history files; photos and family histories sent to Jolene Allphin by Mike Baird, Beaverton, Oregon; photo of Mary Lawson Kirkman, courtesy of Laura Bunker, September 2004; interviews with other family members: John Kirkman of Lehi, Utah, and Cody Ann Ricks of Clinton, Utah; Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website.



John Kirkman



Joseph Kirkman



Kirkman family home
in Balton, England