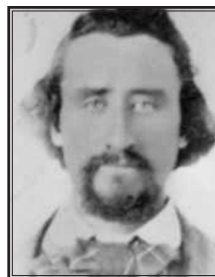


JAMES GODSON BLEAK SR.

Born: 1829 England

Age: 26

Martin Handcart Company



James Godson and Elizabeth Moore Bleak

James Godson Bleak (pronounced Blake) was born on November 15, 1829, in Southwork, Surrey, England. He was the third of six children, but the only child to grow to adulthood. One sister and three brothers died in infancy, leaving only James and his brother, John. When James was 14 years old, his father died, and James could no longer pursue his formal education. Two years later, his mother died. James and John then went to live with an aunt. In the next two years, this aunt and John also both died. His losses caused him so much sorrow that he could scarcely overcome it. He was now 18 years old. But James kept studying and, being a natural scholar, he became a well educated and widely read man. He also learned the silver and gold smith trade and became an expert silversmith.

James did have some happy memories from his childhood to share with his children and grandchildren. As a young boy, James would often wait in the park in London where Queen Victoria would drive each morning. As the queen passed by, James would take off his hat and bow to her. Many times she would stop her buggy to speak to him or pat him on the head and say, “How are you, my young lad?” This pleased him very much. James was a descendant of Horatio Nelson, one of England’s naval heroes, and he had great respect for the queen.

James married Elizabeth Moore in St. James Church, London, England, in June 1849. About two years later, James was invited to a meeting of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by a friend, Joseph Lewis Thompson. Joseph’s father spoke in the meeting that day and James felt greatly impressed. At the close of the services, Brother Thompson noticed that James had weak eyes. He explained to James the ordinance of anointing the sick and administering to their relief and invited him to receive this blessing. At first James replied that he had no faith, but finally agreed to the blessing. Later, James told his friend about it in these words:

When I came to the meeting, I could scarcely see anything. Around the gaslights on the streets were halos or rainbow colors, but when I left the building all of that was gone and my vision was clear and bright. I had been healed by the power of God. I have never suffered with that trouble to my eyes since. This miracle and the sermon I had listened to convinced me that your father was a servant of God. So I continued to attend the services and after a thorough investigation of the principles of the gospel, I applied for baptism, and your father baptized and confirmed me a member of the Church. A little while after I was ordained an elder and when your father was called to preside over the Nottingham Conference I succeeded him as president of the White Chapel Branch [in London].

Elizabeth also joined the Church. She and James were very active. After serving as the Branch president for several years, James was released in 1856 and immediately made ready to come to America. Shortly before leaving England, James presided at a Church conference where a woman bore her testimony and spoke with the gift of tongues concerning the Bleak family. James was given the interpretation, but, as he said, “refrained from speaking it.” However, another woman did arise and gave the interpretation as follows: “I, the Lord, am well pleased with the offering made by my servant Elder Bleak; and notwithstanding he shall see the angel of death laying waste on his right and on his left, on his front and on his rearward, yet he and his family shall gather to Zion in safety, and not one of them shall fall by the way.”

James and Elizabeth and their four children: Richard Moore (6), Thomas Nelson (4), James Godson, Jr. (2), and Mary Moore (11 months) sailed on the ship *Horizon* from Liverpool on May 23, 1856. The following excerpts are from a letter written to Elizabeth’s parents while on board: Ship *Horizon* / Liverpool / May 23rd/56 / Dear Father and Mother. We have arrived safely and fare all well so far. We have a very comfortable place on board and go out of dock today. Liverpool is the dirtiest place we ever saw. London is exceedingly clean in comparison. Provisions on board are of first rate quality and plenty for us. ... Remember us kindly to all enquirers. Farewell and may God our Father bless you both is the earnest prayer of your son and daughter.



Thomas

James (Jr.)

Richard

Mary

At the end of the sea voyage, their letter home said they had “a very pleasant journey of 34 days across the Atlantic. Betsy [Elizabeth] was not sea sick at all and I was sea sick one day. The children were all very healthy with the exception of James who had the measles on board.” They reached Iowa City by train. Before leaving Iowa City, James wrote one last letter home: “This is certainly a most beautiful country. The climate is hotter at present than in England but agrees with us all first rate. We are very brown. For the last fortnight we have been living in a tent in camp. We expect to start on the plains tomorrow. We have yet to travel thirteen hundred miles before we reach home. The testimony of us both is that we like “Mormonism” better than ever and we would like all in that respect on the earth to be engaged in the same good cause. If you know anyone who thinks of coming to America, tell them to come to the western states and not to stay in the Eastern cities as wages are much better in the west than in the east and living is also cheaper. In this state [Iowa] common laborers get 4.3 a day, mechanics get 6.3 a day. Flour of the very best quality is 12.1 per 100, ham 5 a pound, butter 10, eggs 4 ½ a dozen, cheese 5 a pound, beef 3 and mutton 4 ½ a pound for the best parts. We shall write again when we reach the valley.”

The Bleaks’ journey with the Martin handcart company was fraught with more delays and the onset of winter. Rations were drastically reduced while waiting for more rescuers to arrive. After moving from Devil’s Gate into Martin’s Cove, James wrote in his journal: “Our ration of flour was reduced to 4 oz. and 2 oz. for the children, making 1 lb a day for the 6 of us. Through the blessing of our Father we felt as contented as when we had 1 lb per head.”

At one time the members of the Bleak family were all very sick. The family began to fall behind the rest of the company. Elizabeth was very frightened and fearful they would all freeze to death. As James’s condition worsened, he asked Elizabeth to leave him and get the children to camp. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him alongside the trail. When Elizabeth caught up with the rest of the company they were making camp. A family friend, Maria Normington, who had recently lost her husband to death came to inquire about James’s health. When Elizabeth told her they had left James back on the trail, Maria said, “No, it can’t be.” Maria told Elizabeth she should not have permitted him to be left because of the promise he had been given in England. Maria and some others took a handcart and went back until they found James, brought him back to the camp and helped to restore him to health.¹ Maria was reportedly the woman who had prophesied in tongues that the Bleak family would all make it to Zion. This family indeed was one of those miraculous ones that had no deaths. However, they had another close call which James later wrote about in the Church magazine *Juvenile Instructor* (June 15, 1902, pgs. 365-67). He wrote it third person, using the pseudonym “Scribo” as the author. The following excerpt is from that account:

Two good sisters, one, an aged widow, the other unmarried, in the kindness of their womanly hearts, had volunteered to assist the mother [Elizabeth Bleak] by taking charge of one of the children at the close of each day’s travel till the following morning. The offer was gratefully accepted and the four and a half year old [Thomas], blue eyed, fair haired boy, became the chosen one to share the added protection of their tender care.

One morning, after a very cold night, when winter had overtaken the company, these sisters were horrified to find their little pet lying between them dead, as they decided, and in this condition they brought him to his parents. His father [James], who had already made a fire, took the child and began by anointing him with consecrated oil, and praying over him, calling upon the Lord to keep His promise that not one of the family should fall by the way in gathering to Zion. Tests were applied, but not a heartbeat or other sign of life was in the child. The father continued to administer, to chafe the limbs and body, and to call upon the Lord to fulfill His promise. After what appeared to be the sympathetic fellow travelers and sufferers as a very long time, the father thought he saw a slight flutter in the child’s throat; this encouraged further rubbing, chafing and administration until finally, by God’s power and blessing, the dear child unclosed his eyes and is now a resident of Salt Lake City, father of nine children and likewise a grandfather.

That word of the Lord, given by the gift of tongues, inspired a faith, an assurance, which prompted administrations and prayers in behalf of a child who was looked upon as dead by the scores present in that camp; and it is the father’s conviction that, if that promise had not been made the boy would have been given up as dead; and would have been laid with the hundreds of that company who were buried by the wayside in that trying journey.”

¹ Annie Hicks and Jemima Nightingale were two who helped get James Bleak to camp. See biography for Annie Hicks in this section of *Tell My Story, Too*.

James's suffering, as well as his typical positive attitude, is reflected in the following excerpts from his journal and letters to his in-laws:

(Trail diary): Monday 15th [September] We travelled 22 miles. I began to draw the Handcart this morning but was obliged to leave it. Br. Francis Webster very Kindly persuaded me to get on his handcart and drew me 17 miles. Elder Hunter and the two sisters Brown [Elizabeth and Jane] very kindly drew me about 4 miles. For which Kindness I feel grateful, and pray God to bless them with health and strength. Tuesday 16th [September] We travelled 9 miles. Through the blessing of God I was able to draw the handcart to day, but am still very ill. Sunday 9th November [leaving Martin's Cove after 5 days there] We travelled 5 miles. I have suffered very much to day with my feet, which are frost-bitten. I walked the 5 miles not wishing to burden the teams. Sunday 30th [November] I feel to rejoice greatly and give praise to God for my safe arrival in Zion with my wife and children after a journey of 6 months and 1 week.

(Letter to in-laws, December 3, 1856): We should not have been so long performing the journey but we were detained on the road in consequence of the snow falling considerably towards the latter part of our journey. The scenery across the plains is certainly not to be surpassed. We saw the prairie on fire several times and consider it one of the grandest sights in nature. While the weather was fine we had an abundance of excellent plums and grapes which grow wild in the woods - also cherries and gooseberries small, but of a nice flavor. Our health as a general thing has been very good. Betsy has enjoyed better health on the whole of the journey than she did at home. Mary is rather poorly at present and I have my feet frostbitten in consequence of which I am not able to do any thing like work and do not expect to be able for at least 2 months. But thank God I am consoled to know that neither my wife or children will want for anything, neither will they have to apply anywhere for relief. We are in a room by ourselves and are liberally supplied with food and firing which treatment will continue until I am able to work but of course no longer. Do not understand that I am running in debt and that I shall have to pay when I get well. Such is not the case. What is supplied to us is given - not trusted at the same time. I believe this to be about the worst place for idle or lazy people to come to.

(Letter to in-laws, May 1856): I have not as yet recovered the full use of one of my feet, but I am able to walk, and shall not be a cripple when I do get well. I have not been able to do anything towards maintaining my family yet, but thanks be to the Lord and our brethren, we have not yet wanted for food. We have experienced nothing but kindness since we entered the valley. At present we live in a house that has a large piece of ground attached to it planted with peas, cabbages, lettuce, radishes, squashes, pumpkins, vegetable marrows, water melons, mush melons, citrons, etc. for us. I have also some potatoes, onions, parsnips, etc. planted for me on a farm about a mile from where we live. When this quarter is out I am to be schoolmaster in this ward or as you say, parish. This will bring me in about 60 dollars a month ... which will enable me to obtain oxen, cows and farming implements which are necessary here. Then I can employ hands to farm for me while I am attending my school. Money is scarce here but we get on just as well without. For instance, if we want to buy anything we pay for it in wheat, oats, indian corn or butter, each of which have a settled price. Betsy and the children enjoy excellent health and look first rate. Mary is just beginning to walk alone. She is backward in consequence of so much riding. Richard and Thomas have just said they would like to see grandfather and grandmother here. This is a fine country and very productive. Seven crops of wheat have been raised on the same ground without changing the crop. ... We have no more to say at present but wish you to remember us to all friends and pray God to bless you.

Notes: James's trail diary can be found online in the Mormon Pioneer Overland Trail database. Other items of interest are also in the Church archives. Michael Landon wrote about James Bleak in *Trail of Hope: The Story of the Mormon Trail*, pgs. 131-133. James first made his home in North Ogden. He joined the Nauvoo Legion and participated in the Utah War. In 1861, he was called to help settle Southern Utah. In 1872, he was called on a mission to England. He served as editor of the *Millennial Star* during his mission. At this time he had also been called to enter plural marriage. Elizabeth had borne six more children to him, including twins who were just seven years old when he left for his mission. James eventually had four wives and 33 children who all honored and loved him. His obituary listed his posterity at about 250 people, including 160 grandchildren. After losing all his family as a child, he had certainly been compensated.

James's self-education served him well his entire life. He was secretary of the United Order in St. George and also private secretary to President Brigham Young when he was in St. George. In 1881, he was appointed a temple worker and in 1909, ordained a patriarch. He served as the temple recorder until he was incapacitated by age and also served as a counselor to the temple president. He was a clerk in the Tithing Office, a Stake clerk, clerk in the Co-op store, postmaster, historian of the Dixie Mission for almost 50 years, and a critic and coach of early dramatic clubs of the community. He served in the Bishopric and High Council. He belonged to the Board of Education which established the St. George Stake Academy, which is now Dixie College. James's and Elizabeth's pictures hang in the front office of Brigham Young's home in St. George. Brigham's walking cane was given to the Bleak family, but after many years it was returned to the Church and is now in a museum. For a time, Elizabeth worked as a telegraph operator for Brigham Young. Elizabeth was among the first women called to labor in the St. George Temple, where she worked until the very day of her death, which occurred six days before Christmas in 1899. James made a memoranda to the effect that she worked in the Temple as usual during the day and at night just went to sleep.