

Hebron's Ralph Pike and His Violent Death in Utah

This is the story of a Hebron lad, Ralph Pike (1837-1859), who left home to enlist in Company I of the new U.S. Tenth Infantry at Manchester on 30 June 1855 and met a violent, famous death in Great Salt Lake City, Utah Territory on 14 August 1859.

The antagonisms of the 1850s in Utah were painfully slow in easing, so slow some carried over to the late 1880's. A perfect example is the Pike-Spencer affair, an abrasion between Mormon settlers and the frontier Army that erupted into attempted murder and murder charges that spanned three decades.

In 1859, the U.S. Army had taken possession of Rush Valley in Tooele County as a government reserve for pasture and hay for its horses and mules. A Mormon stock company, Spencer, Little & Co., owned a ranch adjacent to the reserve in the north part of the valley. Twenty-year-old Howard O. Spencer with one or two other men employed by the stock company were at the ranch on March 22 to make the spring roundup of cattle. They were stopped by a detachment of infantry from Camp Floyd and ordered off the "government's range."

Spencer argued his right to be on the property since he was one of the owners. Because of overriding agreements between Territorial officials, settlers and Brig. Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston on the part of the Army, the question of whether Spencer was right in arguing his position was never reconciled. And the versions of what occurred next are conflicting.

What is certain is that 1st Sgt. Ralph Pike, I Company, 10th Infantry Regiment, with men of his unit, confronted Spencer and his cowboys and ordered them off the pasturage. Spencer had a hay fork in his hand and responded to Pike's words with a few of his own. They argued. Pike, a veteran of the Utah Expedition and a career soldier, later swore that Spencer attacked him with the pitchfork, while the Mormon's companions claimed he tried to defend himself with it.

In any case, Pike, brandishing a musket, brushed the pitchfork aside and, swinging his weapon by the barrel, brought the gun butt down on Spencer's head with such force that the pitchfork handle was splintered into three pieces and the rancher's skull was crushed. It's possible that the pitchfork handle actually saved Spencer's life. The soldiers carried him to the ranch house and sent for a doctor, Army Surgeon Charles E. Brewer, who pulled several pieces of shattered bone from his head and skillfully patched the fracture as best he could. Spencer, drifting in and out of consciousness, was moved to the home of relatives where it was thought he would soon die from his fearsome wounds.

Incredibly, despite the loss of some brain matter, he began to recover. And with his recovery came thoughts of revenge. Under a doctor's care until June of that year, Spencer, with an ugly, livid trench high along the right side of his head, brooded about his lot in life. It was said that he and friend George Stringham in late summer discussed ways of decoying Pike from the camp to even the score.

At the same time Spencer had taken the matter to law and a grand jury indicted the sergeant for "assault with intent to kill." When the news was posted on I Company's bulletin board, Pike's comrades-in-arms were enraged. Lt. Louis H. Marshall, who had been in charge of Pike's detail, reported to Gen. Johnston that Pike was blameless, that Spencer's behavior was that of "a perfect bully" who was lucky he wasn't shot instead of having his head broken.

Going to Trial: Nevertheless, on Aug. 11 the sergeant, accompanied by a four-man military escort who also were to be witnesses in the case, along with Major Fitz John Porter, Johnston's assistant adjutant general, appeared before Associate Justice Charles R. Sinclair in District Court in Great Salt Lake City and entered a plea of not guilty. A noon recess found the defendant,

Major Porter and four soldiers in uniform strolling south on the east side of Main Street near the Salt Lake House [about 169 S. Main].

It was a crowded summer afternoon. Orlando F. Herron remembered there was an immigrant wagon, and about two dozen men on the street. Nearby, Trumbo's Elephant Store, a favorite gathering place in the late 1850s and '60s, was enjoying its usual steady business. Leonard Phillips was sitting in the Salt Lake House when he spotted a crowd coming down the street. In front of it were Pike and another soldier. A man came up behind the sergeant and tapped him on the shoulder. "He said, 'Is that you, Pike?'" Phillips remembered. "Pike turned around and the man shot him in the side."

The muzzle of the revolver was about two or three feet from Pike when it was fired; the man who pulled the trigger stopped for an instant, looking at Pike, with his pistol in his hand, Phillips said. "Bill Hickman came up and said, 'Git!'; the man went over the [irrigation ditch] and ran across the street into an alley," he recalled. Phillips also noticed that George Stringham was a dozen feet or so from the man with the revolver.

Pike, clutching his side, wobbled and cried out, "My God! I'm shot!" Phillips sprang out and caught the wounded man and a corporal in the crowd helped carry Pike into the Salt Lake House. Pike had been wearing a gunbelt, but his holster flap was buttoned. The bullet struck the bone handle of a Bowie knife on the belt, and coursed upward entering just above the right hip and lodged behind the ribs. A bit of bone from the knife also penetrated his body.

As the soldiers moved Pike to a room in the hotel, Hickman, a lawyer with the reputation of a thug and desperado, was seen with a pistol in each hand, chasing the shooter west in an alley between blocks. At the same time he was warning others away from the scene, "Keep back, I'll drop him!" Some thought Hickman was actually hindering pursuit; the shooter jumped a fence into a lumber yard where a saddled horse was tethered, and mounting up made good his escape.

Pike lingered for two days, long enough to make a dying declaration to Justice Sinclair that Howard Spencer had shot him. Lt. G.A. Gordon said, "Pike, are you positive it was Spencer?"

"I know it," was the reply. Pike died on Aug. 14, despite the efforts of an Army surgeon to save him. He was buried at the Camp Floyd Cemetery.

Brig. Gen. Johnston took preliminary measures to keep the situation from becoming explosive, but his order regarding the death of Pike was scarcely calming: "It is with much regret the commanding officer announces to the regiment the death of that excellent soldier, First Sergeant Ralph Pike, of Company I, late last night, the victim of Mormon assassination, through revenge for the proper discharge of his duty."

After the funeral, hell broke loose in I Company. Capt. Jesse A. Gove, company commander, had always taken great pride in his men and was especially proud that among other units of the 10th Infantry Regiment, it was conceded that the "I's have it." On the night of Aug. 15, however, Gove lost control of his fiercely disciplined company. Lorenzo Brown, a Mormon, had quite a different view of the troops. It was the "grandest company of rascals in the command," he said, a bunch that gained for itself very justly the title of "the Forty Thieves - that being their number."

That night I Company roared out of the camp, despite orders confining all soldiers to the post, and descended on Cedar Fort, a Mormon settlement some five miles distant. Whooping and hollering, they set ablaze a number of haystacks. When the townfolk ran to extinguish the flames, they were greeted by gunfire. A horse was killed, no one was injured.

Consternation over the raid on Cedar Fort overshadowed Pike's murder. Although soldiers always kept an eye peeled for Howard Spencer, there was no other concerted effort by Utah authorities to arrest him and a grand jury after issuing an indictment for murder, ignored the

matter. Spencer lived in the Fourth LDS Ward in Great Salt Lake City, and in 1862 joined Col. Lot Smith's Utah volunteer battalion to protect the Overland Mail route against Indian depredations. In 1874, Spencer moved to Kanab in southern Utah to live. His was a life of relative obscurity until August 1888 when U.S. Marshals swooped down on Liberty Park in Salt Lake City to round up a number of Mormon men on warrants charging "unlawful cohabitation," one of the several legal devices used to nab polygamists.

Outstanding Warrant: Among those snared was Howard O. Spencer. Prison Warden Arthur Pratt, who also was a U.S. Marshal, not only slapped him with the cohab warrant but also with the indictment on the 29-year-old murder. Pratt arrested George Stringham at his ranch on charges of being an accessory to murder. Spencer posted \$6,000 bail; Stringham was held on \$5,000.

Trial was scheduled for May 6, 1889, before Third District Court Judge J.W. Judd. A 12-member jury, nearly all non-Mormons, was to hear the case. Spencer's lawyers sought and were granted a separate trial; Stringham was to face the music the following week.

Defense counsel LeGrand Young argued that no one actually saw Spencer pull the trigger, and even if they had, "Would it be strange if Spencer was fired by the torture of his wound, and in his demented condition grew frenzied and brought retributive justice to the boastful sergeant who had committed the cowardly assault? And when Pike was brought in, he was permitted to go on parade with his subordinates, an armed man flaunting in the face of his victim the position he was in, and boastful of what he had done. Would not a sane man have become uncontrollable under such circumstances? In those days men carried pistols because the law did not afford them protection ----."

At that point, Judge Judd cut him off. "Stop that. Keep within the evidence!" The prosecution contended there was no reasonable doubt that Spencer fired the fatal shot and argued that Stringham, Hickman and a number of others since deceased had conspired to protect Spencer's escape from the scene of the crime.

Not Guilty: After three days of testimony, the jury brought in a verdict for acquittal. It was a decision that sent The Salt Lake Tribune straight up. In a stinging editorial, the newspaper railed at the verdict: Hickman, [Jason] Luce, Stringham and the rest, while pretending to be trying to arrest him, were really keeping the crowd back until the murderer should escape. The whole business was as plain as sunlight.

All the insanity in the brain of Spencer was there long before he received that blow on the head. He was born with the same insanity that the wolf feels when he is hungry and meets a lamb in his path. And The Tribune was not alone in its disappointment.

Judge Judd had a few words to say on the subject when the jury announced, "Not guilty." He quickly gaveled down an attempt at applause in the courtroom, and turning to the panel, intoned: "I want to say to you in reference to the verdict you have rendered, that you have doubtless followed your oath according to your own consciences, and you have doubtless done it honestly. But if this is not a case of murder, speaking from a practice of over twenty-three years, then I have never seen one in a court of justice. I am now of the opinion that [LeGrand] Young was exactly right when he said in his argument to the jury that the law and courts of justice in this country were no protection to anybody." You may now be discharged, Judd told the jurors.

A little Bit of the Ralph Pike Genealogy

Descendants of Joseph Pike

Generation No. 1

1. JOSEPH⁷ PIKE (*DANIEL⁶, JOSEPH⁵, JOSEPH⁴, JOSEPH³, JOHN², JOHN¹*) was born 07 Jun 1757 in Dunstable, MA, and died 1802 in Hollis, NH. He married ABIGAIL SAWTELL 27 May 1778 in Mason, MA, daughter of EPHRAIM SAWTELL and ABIGAIL STONE. She was born 03 Nov 1758 in Groton, MA, and died 1817 in Mason, MA.

Children of JOSEPH PIKE and ABIGAIL SAWTELL are:

- i. PERLEY⁸ PIKE, b. 20 Sep 1778.
- ii. NEWHALL PIKE, b. 1780.
- iii. BETSEY PIKE.
- iv. LUCY PIKE.
- v. HANNAH PIKE, b. 1785.
- vi. ABIGAIL PIKE.
- vii. JOSEPH PIKE, b. 15 Mar 1788; m. MARY HOYT.
- viii. MOODY PIKE.
- ix. ELI PIKE.
- x. NATHAN PIKE.
- xi. DANIEL PIKE.
- xii. LUTHER PIKE.
- xiii. WILLIAM PIKE.
- xiv. MARY PIKE.
2. xv. RALPH PIKE, b. 11 Apr 1796, Hollis, NH.
- xvi. RUFUS PIKE, b. 12 Nov 1802.

Generation No. 2

2. RALPH⁸ PIKE (*JOSEPH⁷, DANIEL⁶, JOSEPH⁵, JOSEPH⁴, JOSEPH³, JOHN², JOHN¹*) was born 11 Apr 1796 in Hollis, NH. He married MERIBAH F. HOIT 29 Nov 1821, daughter of NATHAN HOIT and MERIBAH PERKINS. She was born 11 Mar 1799 in Ellsworth, NH.

Notes for RALPH PIKE:

He moved to Hebron prior to 1817. In Hebron he settled on Plymouth Mountain on what is now Pike Hill Road. Pike Hill, in Plymouth, is named after him, and hence so is Pike Hill Road. All of his children were born on at the farm on Pike Hill Road, Hebron, NH.

Children of RALPH PIKE and MERIBAH HOIT are:

- i. ABIGAIL SAWTELLE⁹ PIKE, b. 23 Apr 1823.
- ii. PRISCILLA WEBSTER PIKE, b. 06 Jun 1824.
- iii. SYLVESTER MONTGOMERY PIKE, b. 24 Nov 1825.
- iv. CALVIN PIKE, b. 05 Dec 1826.
- v. AUGUSTA WHITE PIKE, b. 21 Aug 1829.
- vi. CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS PIKE, b. 03 Aug 1832.
- vii. MERIBAH FOGG PIKE, b. 02 Sep 1834.
- viii. **RALPH PIKE**, b. 03 Jun 1837, Pike Hill Road, Hebron, NH; d. 15 Aug 1859, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Notes for RALPH PIKE:

"I do not know anything about Ralph Pike's background other than the fact that he was from Hebron, NH and enlisted in the 10th U.S. Infantry in Manchester on 30 June 1855 at which point he was 18 years of age (indicating a birth date in 1836 or 1837) and listed "weaver" as his occupation. He was described as being 5'9-1/2" in height with blue eyes, brown hair, and a fair complexion. A description of Sgt. Ralph Pike's personal effects recorded in 1859 immediately after his death described a Daguerreotype of two little girls.

ix. LUCY HOIT PIKE, b. 24 Apr 1840.