

Dixie's Ghost Towns

Haunting tales of true life pioneers

by Wendy Epps

Haunting images come to mind when people think of ghost towns. Some may imagine two tall, slender figures facing each other holding pistols, 50 paces apart, the high noon sun blazing in the bright sky, dust carrying on the wind. Others may conjure up visions of old, dirt-smudged prospectors panning for gold.

But the truth is, a ghost town is inhabited only by the structures that still stand, and by the memories and stories passed down by descendants from generation to generation.

Two of the most popular Washington County ghost towns are rich with history, and many locals can trace their ancestry back to the pioneers who settled Grafton and Silver Reef. St. George resident and Utah House Representative David Clark can trace his lineage back to what was one of the wildest mining towns in the west: Silver Reef.

Clark's ancestors actually had a very hard time getting to Silver Reef. His great-great grandfather, living in Ireland, had a love affair with the daughter of an earl. Only the recognition that his family had worked for the earl for three generations saved him. In lieu of a harsher punishment, the earl gave him three days to leave Ireland. "What he didn't count on was that he took the earl's 15-year-old daughter with him," says Clark with a laugh.

The two took a ship and sailed to Brooklyn, where they later had three kids. When the gold rush in California broke out, he saw an opportunity to restore his wife to the life and status she had once been accustomed to. So he set sail for California, leaving his family behind. The ship hit rough waters and sank.

All died but two, and one of the survivors happened to be David Clark's great-great grandfather. He washed up on a shore in South America. "The gold rush was over by the time he made it back to the United States, so he made his way to Silver Reef to mine silver instead.

Eight-and-a-half years after he got on the boat to California, the family had a reunion in Silver Reef," says Clark.

The family thrived in Silver Reef. Their eldest son, Henry Clifford Clark, became a great card player, back then called a maverick. One December night in 1878, in the midst of a poker game, Clark and another man accused one another of being cheats. Stories regarding what happened next differ, but according to "Silver, Sinners and Saints," written by Paul Dean Proctor and Morris Shirts, "...each of the men accused the other of cheating, drew their pistols and simultaneously shot each other through the heart."

Local historian Bart Anderson explains that people were very superstitious in those days. Clark was a Catholic, and since the players couldn't prove for sure that he had

been cheating, they couldn't take the money. Rumor has it that the money was given to his mother, who sent it to St. Louis to purchase a statuesque grave marker and wrought iron fence for his grave.

Clark's youngest brother loved him dearly, and named his first son David Clifford Clark, a name that stuck for three generations and is still being used in David Clark's family today. Because David isn't the oldest in his family, he was named David Lynn.

The story has been passed down in Clark's family for generations, and the way his family tells it is a little different. They contend that the man who killed Henry Clifford Clark was shot dead about an hour later rather than during a poker game. His father was questioned about the death, and while he didn't admit guilt, he merely



Protestant cemetery in Silver Reef.

said that if it was your son, what would you do? He was acquitted, and it was never known if he had actually committed the dirty deed.

Ghost towns are full of interesting stories from another time, often another culture, and they seem to have lives of their own. They are born, they thrive, and eventually, they must die. There are many reasons ghost towns die out: crop failure, lack of natural resources, war, or because larger towns sprouted up that provided the people with an easier way of life.

Silver Reef was born because silver was found in the mines. This impossible silver discovered in sandstone brought jobs, improved the economy, and gave the miners' union much power. According to a thesis presented by Alfred Bleak Stucki in 1966 titled, "A Historical Study of Silver Reef: Southern Utah Mining Town," the town began to die when the miners went on strike, angered by a wage cut.

The price of silver dropped as the price of gold rose, and many of the miners began to look for jobs elsewhere. An 1890 census done by the Department of the Interior Census Office reported the population of Silver Reef at 177 persons.

Grafton, located just outside of Rockville across the Virgin River, has several buildings that still stand today. Grafton has actually been a ghost town twice, as the first location was washed away by a flood in 1862. The town was then rebuilt at a higher elevation. A restoration is currently under way to preserve the remaining

buildings. The town has been the set of many movies, the most popular being *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* in 1969, starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford.

Two stories about the people of Grafton came from Historian Bart Anderson. Old Grafton was settled in 1859 on the banks of the Virgin River. According to www.graftonheritage.org, "In January 1862, a raging flood destroyed most of Grafton." After about three years of life on the banks of the Virgin River, their town was washed away.

On Jan. 8, 1862, the water rose quite suddenly. The wife of town bishop Nathan Tinney was in labor inside their small wagon home. The book "Grafton, Ghost Town on the Rio Virgin," and Bart Anderson tell the story of a son who was born in a time of chaos, while the town in which he was conceived was being washed away. "...a son was born to the couple and was named Marvelous Flood Tenney in honor of the event."

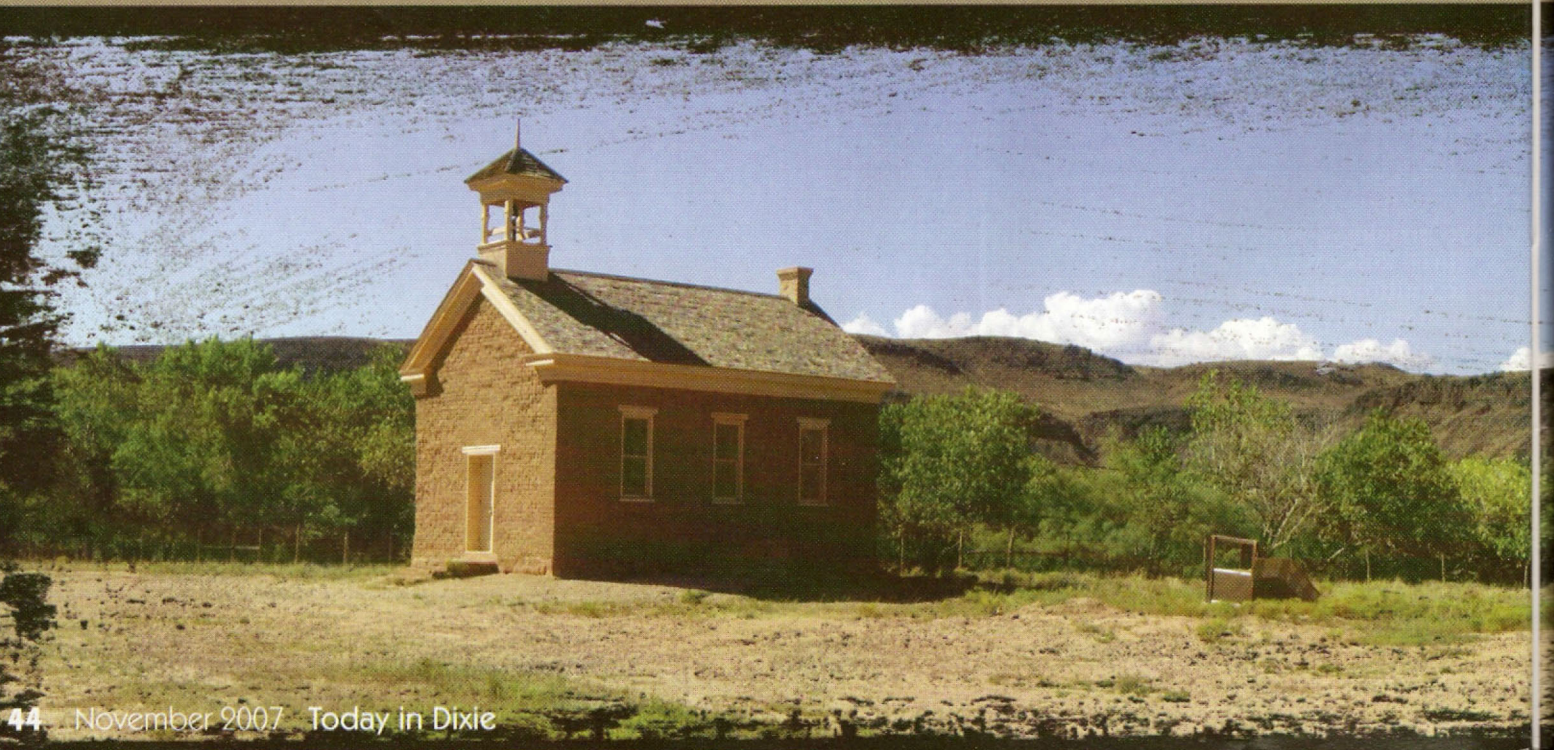
A folk story related by Anderson follows the life of Mary Parker. Sometime in the 1890s, she left the Mormon faith but remained in Grafton. "The strange thing was that she still stayed in that town. You didn't have that happen in Southern Utah in those days, there were no other people except Mormons." Shortly after, Parker was branded a witch. A young boy in the town came down with whooping cough, and the illness was blamed on Parker.

In those days, it was rumored that witches couldn't move if there was a steel object above their head. One rainy afternoon, Mrs. Spendlove saw

a cold and wet Mary walking down the street and promptly invited her in. She placed a knitting needle in the rafters above Mary's head, and according to her diary, Mary could not move. When Mary, who was sitting very close to the warm fire, began to burn, Mrs. Spendlove removed the knitting needle and Mary ran out of the house. She was eventually stoned to death, and her killers served about five years in prison.

According to a pamphlet distributed by the Grafton Heritage Partnership Project, by 1945 the town didn't have "enough children to warrant a school, and lacking culinary water and electricity standard in other communities, Grafton gradually became a ghost town for the second time."

While Silver Reef and Grafton are no more, the legacies of those who lived there may live forever in the hearts of their descendants -- or anyone else who appreciates haunting tales of Utah's historic past. ■



Clockwise: Louisa Russell home in Grafton; the Grafton Cemetery; Alonzo Russell Home; Grafton School House

