

JOHN KEMPLE

Biography

1835 - 1918

By James E. Kemple

John Kemple was born in New Jersey on December 11, 1835. He was the son of George Kemple, and Hannah Foster. When John was six years old he moved with his parents to Marshall County, West Virginia, near Wheeling, where his mother died and his father married again. John's father purchased a large tract of land where the family lived. At the age of fifteen, John left home, after a disagreement with his stepmother. He traveled to California, in the hopes of striking it rich in the Gold rush there. John followed up every new camp that was started, but never found the big one. He joined the rush to Alaska and the Klondike gold fields, but was also unsuccessful there. One year in Alaska he was so far north that winter caught his party on the polar ice pack. They would have starved, except that he discovered a mammoth, frozen in the ice. They managed to dig in far enough to cut meat from the pre-historic beast and eat it. He told also of another, smaller figure, deeper in the ice, which he said looked like a human. A few years later he tried to lead a scientific expedition back to the place, but couldn't find it again.

Eventually, John wound up in Harrisburg, Utah sometime in the early 1860's. According to the Utah Historical Quarterly, he was driving a herd of horses from Montana, and stopped in Harrisburg because of an early winter with snow and bad weather. While there, John made a discovery of high-grade silver ore in a sandstone formation northwest of Harrisburg. Almost overnight a boom-town sprang up, called Silver Reef, with all the glory and infamy of western mining towns. The discovery of Silver Reef was not just a rich silver strike, but also made history. It was the first time that silver ore had been found in sandstone. For this discovery he has been written up in the journals of the Utah Historical Society, he has been the subject of a book-length feature in True Magazine, and his story was told on the Death Valley Days Television series.

There were several stories concerning the discovery of the silver in sandstone at Silver Reef. The most thorough and probably most correct account is recorded by Paul Dean Proctor and Morris A. Shirts, in their book "Silver, Sinners and Saints." This account reads as follows: JOHN KEMPLE - THE MAN WHO KNEW The most probably discovery tale is that of John Kemple. A long-time mineral prospector, with little former success, and now in his mature years, rode in the Leeds-Harrisburg area in the fall of 1866 with a small string of horses, apparently from a prospecting journey in Montana. He took a room with Orson Adams of Harrisburg for the winter. Whether the Adams' residence was a place for his and his horses for the winter, or a destination where he planned to prospect, is not known. He did however, come prepared with assay paraphernalia, even though the Harrisburg area was the least likely prospecting paradise-it was more a Dante's Inferno, or Purgatory, as the nearby area was called in the summer heat. The country lacked the flashy shows of gold in the stream gravels and sand, also the colorful gossans or altered rock ledges so conspicuous in famous mining districts of the West. Here, only brightly colored red sandstone and shale's of the St. George Basin greeted his practiced eye.

Not all mineral signs were absent in the area however, John Kemple claimed his discovery was purely accidental, yet he must have recognized some mineral signs along his prospecting trails during the relatively mild winter months of 1866. Even a less trained prospector would have observed the green and blue copper carbonates exposed here and there in the raised ledges of white and tannish brown sandstone so dramatically exposed west of Harrisburg and on to the north towards the Leeds area. In the ledge or reef sandstone the green malachite and the blue azurite copper-bearing minerals formed distinctive and beautiful replacements of ancient fossil reeds, rushes and even small fragments of trees enclosed within the sandstone ledges. A casual observer would have been attracted to them and stopped and examined the intricately replaced and colorful fossils within the rock. Thus it was doubtful that Kemple's discovery was accidental. With assay equipment, he certainly would have run many assays on samples from these mineralized areas. Silver would have been detected, since few such copper-bearing areas in the district were devoid of silver.

Some writers claim that Kemple first found silver in float material near Harrisburg, and that it assayed \$17,000 per ton in silver. Float or eroded material from a lode, often occurs at the base of a ledge or fragments may also be carried along by the stream and be deposited in the stream bottom. Quail Creek was the only stream near Harrisburg, and Kemple, an experienced prospector, would most likely have discovered such copper-bearing fragments between Harrisburg and the White Reef - a distance of less than a mile. Although he did not identify the so-called "Mother Lode" at this time, he must have suspected that the grayish silver-bearing sandstone float had its origin in the sandstones of the white Reef for all rocks upstream of the reef were red sandstones and shale's. He did send ore samples to other assayer to confirm his own findings one of how, H.H. Smith at Shaunty, Beaver County, refused to assay it, claiming, "Kemple must be crazy to ask me to assay a sand rock".

Somehow, Kemple must have thought his and other results were false leads, for he moved on to greener pastures for himself and his horses, namely the White Pine district in Nevada. Here a rapidly developing mining boom of silver deposits and abundant base metals was underway. This eastern Nevada mining district, centered around Ely, Nevada, was destined for a discovery of an immense treasure of porphyry copper, and even later, gold. Still, with all John's travels, the Harrisburg area of Utah held a fascination and attraction for him. His prospecting experience in the Utah hills must have left a deep and favorable impression of its mineral potential for the reef sandstone area.

In 1868, Kemple returned to his former temporary residence in Harrisburg. A local newspaper just a few years later reported, after the event, that John made his original high-grade silver discovery near Harrisburg town and another find in 1870. Both discoveries were on or near the prominent white ledge sandstone west of Harrisburg and northward. Good silver ore in place on the outcrop must have eluded him, for it was not until February, 1871 that he claimed any mineral land. Five years had passed since his first sojourn at the Adams' house in Harrisburg.

In February 1871 John Kemple and others organized the Union Mining District in Washington County. Samuel Hamilton of Harrisburg became the official recorder. Between February 1871, and October 12, 1872 only 16 claims were recorded. The lack of more claimants suggests either that the sandstone reefs were very poor in visible silver mineral content, or that the claimants

maintained a well-kept secret of silver discovery from other residents in the area. Burchard, a government writer, records that in 1871, the Union district was organized and that mining claims were approximately 600 and 1500 feet in size, each covering approximately 20 acres.

The locator of a claim could add the names of any co-claimant he desired; their physical presence at the time of discovery was not required. Original claim holders in the new mining district included John Kemple, William Robb, Orson B. Adams, (son-in-law of Priddy Meeks), Elijah Fuller, William Leany, close friend of Priddy Meeks, Brigham Y. McMullin, and E. W. Ellsworth. These represented most of the family heads of Harrisburg at that time, though it is interesting to wonder why Priddy Meeks was not included. Of special interest, some of the leaders of St. George were also listed, including E. G. Woolley, Richard I Bentley, James Andrews, and Erastus Snow, an apostle of the LDS Church. What happened to Kemple's Union Mining District was not recorded, though Burchard states the claims were all later abandoned.

Kemple returned to Harrisburg in 1874, after the new mining laws of 1872 had become fairly well established in the western mining districts. At this time he and his friends reorganized the old Union Mining District as the Harrisburg Mining District in conformity with the new law.

John Kemple recorded the first claim in his name as follows: "said location commencing at a monument and notice placed on the ledge about three hundred yards southwest of O.B. Adam's house (Harrisburg) and running from thence in a northerly direction (1500) feet. This ledge shall be known as the Pride of the West Ledge and the Kemple Company. Location June the 18th, 1874. Recorded June 26, 1874. Locator - John Kemple "

In approximately 1972, James E. Kemple and Thomas LeRoy Kemple went to the site described in the paragraph above. They were able to find the Shaft and rubble that are identified as the Kemple location. Subsequently, on a return visit in 2003, James E. Kemple and his grandsons visited the site and found the shaft had been filled, probably for the safety of those who use the site for recreational purposes to avoid anyone accidentally falling into the shaft.

In the book "A History of Washington County", by Douglas D. Alder and Karl F. Brooks we read this account of the silver discovery: "Brigham Young strongly advised the Latter-day Saints to avoid the mines. He did not want the faithful to take up residence in mining boomtowns where the lifestyle was much different from their 'Kingdom of God'. He also saw in mining a boom-and bust-cycle that could draw people from agriculture, ruining farms that could not easily be reclaimed when the mines came to their inevitable bust.

Silver Reef in Washington County was a case in point. According to Paul Dean Proctor and Morris Shirts, it was a Mormon, John Kemple, who originally discovered mineral riches in the Silver Reef area. He arrived at Harrisburg in 1866 with prospecting equipment and lived there off and on until 1871, spending a good part of that time in Nevada. Conventional wisdom at the time said that silver could not be found in sandstone, but Kemple, a seasoned prospector noticed coloring in the sandstone that convinced him to challenge that long-held view. He did not pursue the possibility immediately; in fact he went back and forth to Nevada before filing his first claim at Harrisburg in

1871. He included many of the local residents of the town as well as St. George leaders E. G. Wooley, Richard I Bentley, James Andrews, and Erastus Snow, in his Union Mining District, as he called his organization, but he did not begin mining at that time. He returned to Harrisburg in 1874 and reorganized his company as the Harrisburg Mining District, filed under the new federal mining law of 1872. Mormons claimed most of the land that later became Silver Reef, but they couldn't hold on to it.

It was here that he met Amelia Leicht, a young Mormon immigrant from England. They were married in Middleton, Utah on October 4, 1874, by Elder Orson Adams. The marriage was held in the home of Ben Paddock. Probably due to prodding from his Mormon wife, John joined the Mormon Church. They made their home in Silver Reef where John was employed in the mines. In 1879 he moved his family to South Star in Beaver County. They lived there for six years. By 1885 John and Amelia had 5 Children; John Orson, George, Ada, Emma, and Effie. The family moved back to Silver Reef where the children ran wild like Indians, and in summer the boys spent their time swimming, hunting, and trapping quail and grey squirrels. According to John Orson Kemple, fighting wasps was one of the children's pastimes. Sometimes they got stung, but that only served to make them want to get revenge. While in Silver Reef, Grover Cleveland Kemple was born on October 10, 1887.

In 1891 the family moved to the White Hills Country in Mohave County Arizona. It wasn't long before the gold fever was on him again and his fortune was soon squandered on new prospecting in Arizona and California. A typical western prospector, broke, begging for grubstakes, unable to support his family, his wife finally divorced him and married a Mr. More. Shortly afterward, he again struck it rich, this time in gold. Again a boom-town sprang up. This one was named Kemple Camp, Arizona. Never satisfied, though, this fortune was also squandered on more prospecting.

The following story is taken from "They Wore No Mans Collar, Memories of an Arizona Pioneer." By John Allen Ware.

Across from White Hills there is a mine about twelve miles away called the Kemple Camp where an old gentleman, Mr. Kemple, worked his claims and got out some gold and silver ore so he could provide education for his three fine daughters. He came to White Hills about twice a month for supplies. At night looking across the valley, you could see the lights in his cabin. One night there was no light. My father knew that he hadn't been to town so he was concerned. The next morning he sent Si Childers over with a horse and rig to see if everything was all right. Everyone had concern for neighbors at that time. Si found Mr. Kemple sick in his bed. He had been very sick. Si took a coffee pot off the wood burning stove and noticed the lid was up so it wouldn't sweat. He went outside and threw out the grounds. As he did, he noticed a little furry lump about the size of a big marble. He inspected it and found that it was a dead tarantula that Mr. Kemple had cooked with his coffee. It had gotten into the pot because of the open lid. Si brought Mr. Kemple into White Hills to stay at the rooming house and he improved rapidly. He learned one thing - to keep the coffee pot lid down.

About this time, John decided to make peace with his family in West Virginia, so he returned briefly to the Kemple plantation. He told of the trip, and said that his father commented that "you look terrible", and gave him a few

dollars to clean up and buy some new clothes. However, the family didn't seem to get along at all well, so he returned to Arizona.

John Kemple lived in several places in his later years, including San Diego, and Los Angeles, California, Yellow Pine Mine, and Goodsprings, Nevada, and Kingman, Arizona. He died in Kingman on October 24, 1918, and is buried in the Kingman Cemetery. John made two "big strikes" in his mining career, Silver Reef, Utah and Kemple Camp, Arizona but squandered his riches in further prospecting ventures. He died a poor man, but leaves a family of literally hundreds of "Kemple's" and their descendants.