

Stephen Edwards

Stephen Edwards was born about 1850 in Wales. He immigrated to America and is probably the quartz miner living in Grass Valley, Nevada, California, on the 1870 census.¹ It is also likely that he is the assayer living in Storey, Nevada, on the 1875 census.² It is certain that he was a miner in Silver Reef, Washington, Utah Territory in 1880.³

In 1880, Colonel Enos A. Wall, owner and operator of the Kinner Mine on Buckeye Reef at Silver Reef, was unable to meet his financial obligations, including pay for his miners. The desperate miners incarcerated him in the Harrison House; but he escaped. This situation brought about the formation of a miner's union. Stephen Edwards was elected Conductor for the Miners' Association of the Harrisburg District.⁴

On the morning of 5 February 1881, as the miners of the Stormont Company in the Buckeye Mine came to the station house to begin work as usual, they were informed by the mine superintendent that they would receive a reduction in pay from \$4.00 to \$3.50 per day. The miners promptly refused to work and called a strike.⁵ A special meeting of the union was called and 250 union members marched to the Buckeye mine. They drew the fires from the engine and closed the mine, placing a guard over it until the men were paid. It was all done quietly and without disturbance.⁶

The company said the reduced wages were a result of running behind in their expenses. The union claimed it was mismanagement and accused the company of sending eastern capitalists who knew nothing of mining to take charge, and then hiring their family members in top positions. In addition, a company boarding house required miners to eat and pay for their meals there, regardless of their family status. If a miner refused, he was discharged at once.⁷

Since the miners generally lived on credit and settled when they received their pay, there was an immediate problem for miners and businessmen alike. Stopping bullion shipments injured the whole territory. The closed mines started filling with water and the pumps were useless. If it continued for three weeks, it would cost \$120,000 to put the mines back in working order.⁸

Colonel W J Allen, resident manager of the Stormont mines, discharged all the miners in his employ who refused to work for \$3.50 per day. He refused to recommence work until the men consented to the reduction in pay. He explained that he was simply carrying out company orders from New York in reducing wages.⁹ On 29 February 1881, a procession of about 150 union miners called on Colonel Allen in his office. The union officers entered and told him he had five minutes to leave town and thirty days to consider the matter. Allen asked for three hours to arrange his personal affairs, but was

¹ United States Census, 1870.

² Nevada State Census, 1875.

³ United States Census, 1880.

⁴ *Silver, Saints and Sinners*, by Proctor and Shirts, 1991, pp. 150-1.

⁵ *Salt Lake Herald*, 1 March 1881, p. 3.

⁶ *Salt Lake Herald*, 8 February 1881, p. 2

⁷ *Salt Lake Herald*, 5 February 1881, p. 3; 8 February 1881, p. 2; 9 February 1881, p. 2.

⁸ *Salt Lake Herald*, 5 February 1881, p. 3; 6 February 1881, p. 3; 13 February 1881, p. 3.

⁹ *Salt Lake Herald*, 1 March 1881, p. 3.

denied. He saddled his horse immediately and rode away, accompanied eight or nine miles out of town by seven or eight mounted men from the union.¹⁰

Allen made his way to Beaver, where the court assembled a grand jury. Allen took the train to Salt Lake City.¹¹ Judge Twiss of the Second Judicial District in Beaver advised the jurors that it was their duty to indict those “violating the law by maintaining a terror surveillance” over the camp. Fifteen miners were indicted. On 16 March 1881, Deputy Marshal Pratt and Sheriff Hardy arrested all the officers and leaders of the miners’ union.¹² Stephen Edwards was one of the twenty-two miners arrested and put in jail overnight.¹³

The next day they were taken to Beaver by wagon, escorted by Deputy Marshal Pratt and twelve mounted men. The prisoners were cheery and sang at the start; they thought they had committed no offense and that it was all a farce. They expected to return in a few days with the union stronger than ever.¹⁴ Deputy Marshal Pratt and posse arrived in Beaver with the Silver Reef prisoners, all of whom were arraigned and pleaded not guilty.¹⁵ The miners were defended in court by Arthur Brown;¹⁶ thirteen were found guilty of riot, including Stephen Edwards.¹⁷

Thirty-three prisoners were taken from Beaver to Milford in five wagons with ten mounted guards; thirteen of the prisoners were Silver Reef miners. A special Utah Southern train car was chartered and the prisoners were placed in it overnight before continuing to Salt Lake City. When the car arrived, an omnibus drove up to the end of the train car and the prisoners were marched out. When the omnibus was filled, a band wagon drove up and was filled. The whole group were taken to the penitentiary.¹⁸

Back in Silver Reef, stores and saloons were closed and all the men were on the streets, but there was no violence.¹⁹ The union held meetings every night and the citizens organized a safety committee against the miners’ union.²⁰ All the strikers were expected to make bail, but only three did and were released. A newspaper reported: “In the case of the Silver Reef miners was the verdict especially important. Had it been otherwise, the persons now imprisoned would have returned to Silver Reef triumphant, would have continued their course, keeping the camp in a state of terror, and going to greater excesses. Not only would it have had this effect there, but in every other camp in Utah miners’ unions would have spring up; when anything did not suit them, they would strike and run the town to please themselves, and the result would be the utter ruin of the mining interests of the entire territory.”²¹

¹⁰ *Salt Lake Herald*, 8 March 1881, p. 3.

¹¹ *Salt Lake Herald*, 1 March 1881, p. 3.

¹² *Salt Lake Herald*, 17 March 1881, p. 3.

¹³ *Salt Lake Herald*, 20 March 1881, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Salt Lake Herald*, 24 March 1881, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Salt Lake Herald*, 20 March 1881, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Salt Lake Herald*, 8 April 1881, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; 10 April 1881, p. 3; 12 April 1881, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Salt Lake Herald*, 20 March 1881, p. 3.

²⁰ *Salt Lake Herald*, 23 March 1881, p. 3.

²¹ *Salt Lake Herald*, 12 April 1881, p. 3.

On 21 April 1881, the pumps started removing water that had accumulated in the mine shafts.²² Only a few men were hired at this stage at the reduced rate. In addition, a steam-powered lift was installed, taking a few months to complete, before the mines were reopened.²³ Even when the men started working again, it was a month before they were paid. Many miners have returned east to their homes or have gone on other fields of labor. It is estimated that less than half the number of miners are still here than at the time of the strike.²⁴

There has been no information found on Stephen Edwards after his arraignment.

Research by Elaine Young, PhD, 2016

Please email eyoung@youngzones.org for additions and corrections

²² *Salt Lake Herald*, 21 April 1881, p. 4.

²³ *Salt Lake Herald*, 15 May 1881, p. 6.

²⁴ *Salt Lake Herald*, 26 April 1881, p. 4; 15 May 1881, p. 6.