

THE BARBEE & WALKER MINE AND MILL: A HISTORY

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The Barbee & Walker Mine and the Barbee & Walker Mill are arguably the most famous mine and mill in the Silver Reef Mining District. The beginnings of the mine can be traced back to 1875, when William Tecumseh Barbee was in the area staking mining claims. Two of the claims that he staked were the Barbee and the Walker claims, named after himself and the Walker Brothers, who were bankers from Salt Lake City that sent Barbee to Silver Reef. These claims were located right next to each other (the Walker to the north and the Barbee to the south), and eventually they were connected and became one mine, the Barbee & Walker Mine.

At this time, Barbee was sending the ore from the Barbee & Walker Mine to Salt Lake City; Pioche, Nevada; and the Book Cliff Mill (later Stormont Mill) on

the Virgin River. Although he was making profits despite the heavy shipping prices, Barbee decided to build his own mill, and in late 1877 construction of the Barbee & Walker Mill was commenced. The mill was to be a five-stamp mill operated by steam power, and was to be located at the northern tip of the White Reef, near the main portal to the Barbee & Walker Mine. Prior to the completion of this mill, Barbee sent ore from the mine to the Leeds Mill on the backside of the White Reef. The Barbee & Walker Mill was completed on March 20, 1878, and it immediately began milling ore from its namesake mine.

William Barbee made J. B. Van Hagen the superintendent of the mine and mill, and the two men worked to keep the mine and mill profitable. Initially, the mill employed twelve men and the mine employed eighteen men, and a bar of bullion worth \$2,000 was produced every four days. At this time, only twenty tons of ore rock were being crushed; however, when a forty horsepower engine and a few more hoisters were installed, the mill began crushing thirty tons of ore rock on a daily basis. At the end of 1878, Barbee ordered new machinery for the mill, and its capacity was further increased to between 35 and 40 tons.

In its first year, the mill processed \$125,811.20 worth of silver bullion, and had put out 73 bars of silver bullion. An article in *The Salt Lake Tribune* commented on the status of the mill and mine: “The incline shaft is down 325 feet on the ledge....Two hundred and thirty feet from the incline a winze is sunk on the ledge 100 feet deep. This makes the depth of the present workings 425 feet. The ledge in this mine is never less than three feet thick, while in many places twenty foot timbers were used in stoping.

“Over 4,000 tons of second-class ore, which had been lying on the dump, is now being worked up together with some first-class ore from the mine....There are in this mill ten pans and five settlers; the stamps are 750 pounds with a drop of five inches, and crush...six tons to the stamp every twenty-four hours....Above the mill is a water tank holding 17,000 gallons, which can be turned on the building in case of fire....there is hardly any possibility for much damage by fire.”

Unfortunately, the correspondent who wrote that article was wrong about the mill's chances of surviving a fire. In the early morning hours of June 23, 1879, a pile of wood near one of the mill's furnaces lit on fire, and soon the fire spread throughout the mill. The mill was in operation at the time of the fire, and the mill workers barely had time to escape as the wooden mill quickly lit on fire. The mill's stamps kept on running until the building collapsed on itself, which happened fairly quickly.

William Barbee's brother, Johnson Barbee, attached a hose to the water tank above the mill and tried to put out the blaze with the 17,000 gallons of water in the tank, but the fire was too far along by then and his efforts were in vain, although he did manage to save part of the dumping platform. To avoid being burned with the mill, Barbee jumped down and managed to escape with no major injuries.

By this time, the fire covered the mill completely, and tiny brush fires had been started in the gulch below the mill. Luckily, the wind blew northwest away from Silver Reef, and the town was unaffected by the fire. The fire was starting to creep over toward the mine entrance, which was just on the other side of the reef, and a brave rescuer dove into the mine by way of an air shaft to warn the miners on duty of the fire. He found them in a makeshift room eating breakfast, and got them safely out of the mine.

When the fire finally died, the mill had burned completely to the ground, as had its blacksmith and carpentry shops. The fire caused an estimated \$60,000 in damages and left dozens of men unemployed. Mining operations in the Barbee & Walker Mine were immediately halted since there was no mill to process the ore from the mine. Some of the mine and mill workers were convinced that this was the work of an arsonist, but regardless of who (if anyone) was at fault, the loss of the Barbee & Walker Mill was devastating to the mining district.

Plans to rebuild the mill were immediately drawn up, but replacement machinery would have to be brought in from Eastern suppliers, who were several thousand miles away. A contract to rebuild the mill was given to William Barbee by George Chaler in December of 1879, but by then many of the millers and miners had become impatient (they weren't being paid because they weren't working), so some of them had left. These men were replaced, but their loss was not forgotten by Barbee.

The reconstructed Barbee & Walker Mill was finished on February 12, 1880. The next day, *The Salt Lake Tribune* reported:

“The whistle of the new Barbee mill gave out its first toot yesterday noon...the stamps will be clattering on Barbee ore, and big shipments...may be looked for.”

Following the completion of the new Barbee & Walker Mill, a group of investors in New York City began talking about organizing the mill and mine under a mining company, and by the end of 1880, this had been done successfully.

Exactly how much Barbee earned from this transaction is unknown, but he apparently earned enough that he left Silver Reef with his brother and became involved in mining affairs in Nevada.

The newly consolidated Barbee & Walker Milling and Mining Company was managed by J. B. Van Hagen, who had previously helped Barbee run the mine and mill. The newly elected President of the company was Milton Latham, a New York man who had served as Governor of California for only five days before being elected to the US Senate in the 1860s. Following his tenure as a senator, Latham moved to New York and became affiliated with the New York Stock Exchange, where he learned about the Barbee & Walker Milling and Mining Company and became its president. Under Latham, from 1880 to the beginning of 1881, the company prospered and the mill often put out over \$20,000 in bullion monthly. Many improvements were made to the mill, including the addition of a telephone connecting the lower parts of the mill with the hoisting works.

The beginning of 1881 saw a small decline in the value of silver in the Barbee & Walker Mine (as well as other mines in the district), so the company, along with the Stormont Silver Mining Company, another Silver Reef company, began to talk about lowering their daily wage rate from \$4 to \$3.50. Theoretically, this decrease in wages would make it profitable to mine and mill lower grade ore, and thus extend the lives of the mines, the mills, and the town of Silver Reef. This wage reduction was proposed to the employees of the company, but not in a very efficient way.

In February of 1881, the morning shift of the Barbee & Walker Mine approached the mine, just as they did every day. There they met the shift boss, who had been told of the wage reduction by the manager of the Barbee & Walker Milling and Mining Company. Instead of handing them their lamps like he usually did, the shift boss told the crowd of several dozen miners that their wages were being reduced from \$4 a day to \$3.50 a day, and that they wouldn't be let into the mine to work unless they accepted this wage reduction. Most of the miners were outraged and immediately stormed off, leaving the mine with only the few workers who accepted the wage reduction.

The miners did the same at the Stormont Mining Company's mines, which led the company to discharge all of its employees. The Barbee & Walker Company followed suit, and fired most of its mine and mill hands on February 4. Those who weren't fired continued work at first, until the workload became too much and the mine and mill were temporarily shut down. The employees who had been

discharged were members of the Silver Reef Miners Union, which had been formed in 1880. The Miners Union played a key role in the labor strike.

Members of the Miners Union held fast to their demand for \$4 daily wages, while the mining companies held fast to their demand of the acceptance of \$3.50 daily wages. Business in Silver Reef declined, and the Miners Union even went to the extreme of shutting down the only mine still operating under the Stormont Mining Company, the Savage Mine. Some of the men involved in this action were former employees of the Barbee & Walker Mining Company. These men met the former employees of the Stormont Mining Company at the Barbee & Walker Mill, and led by the president of the Miners Union, Matthew O'Loughlin, they walked in rows of twos to the Savage Mine and ordered the miners out of the mine.

The superintendent of the Stormont Mining Company, Washington Allen, was escorted out of town by the Miners Union, and immediately went to the Second District Court in Beaver and filed a lawsuit against the Miners Union. The miners being tried were arrested during a rare blizzard in March of 1881 by a posse of 30 men, led by Washington County Sheriff August P. Hardy. Most of them were incarcerated in and around the Rice building, and when it got too full a line was drawn around it and anyone who crossed the line was threatened with being shot.

The 25 Union members who had been arrested were taken to Beaver and were tried for riot, conspiracy, and false imprisonment. Arthur Brown, a noteworthy territorial lawyer, defended the miners in court, saying that the incident with the Savage mine wasn't a riot, and he indicated that all of the union members were very calm during the entire ordeal and that they weren't too forceful when they demanded that the mine be shut down. When the court found the Union members guilty, Brown made an appeal and the case was eventually taken all the way up to the Territorial Supreme Court. When even this court found the miners guilty, Brown admitted defeat.

Twelve of the twenty-five miners were able to pay bail and immediately left, but thirteen were convicted and sentenced to jail time. Matthew O'Loughlin, the Union's former president (who lost his position as president after being arrested), was sentenced to twenty days in the territorial jail and was fined \$75. Joe Car, another prominent Union member, was fined \$50, and the rest of the members were fined \$100 and sentenced to jail time. By this time, only about a month had passed since the shift boss had first told the miners of the wage change, but this month brought hardships to the mining district for months to come. The Miners Union eventually voted to accept the wage change, but by then over half of the

Stormont Mining Company's employees had already left Silver Reef, and almost half of the Barbee & Walker Mining Company's employees had left.

The Barbee & Walker Mine and Mill resumed production on March 17, 1881, a little over a month after it had fired its employees that belonged to the Miners Union. To make up for lost employees, many local people who lived in nearby Leeds and Harrisburg were hired. These people were less experienced than the people who had quit, but the prosperity of the company was soon restored regardless. An article published in *The Salt Lake Tribune* on September 6, 1881 reads:

“The Barbee & Walker, which for a time was not doing well, has taken a new start, and now has plenty of ore on the dump...”

The mine and mill continued to prosper throughout 1881 and most of 1882. It was reported by the United States Mint in early 1882 that gold came from the Barbee & Walker Mill and was present in the Silver Reef Mining District, but this ore actually came from the Marysvale Mining District, another silver district, where gold *was* known to be located.

The Barbee & Walker Milling and Mining Company encountered a small setback when company president Milton Latham died on March 4, 1882. R. J. Gillespie replaced Latham and continued work on both the mine and the mill. As late as March 1882, new strikes were being made in the mine and it was expected that it would last for years to come. Use of the mill was cut back to 12 hours per day when the company was waiting for new machinery, but it was back up to a full day within a few months.

Near the end of 1882, the company began delaying paychecks, much to the dissatisfaction of its employees. Although local newspapers continued to talk about how rich the mine's ore was and how good the mine and mill looked, the company was struggling to stay in business. Some people speculated that the favorable reports of the mine weren't factual, which could easily be true. Regardless, the company filed for bankruptcy in the first week of December 1882. Upset that they wouldn't be getting their paychecks, the company employees placed a lien against the company. It is not known if they were ever compensated, but the company was listed as being \$35,000 in debt as late as 1886.

Soon after the Barbee & Walker Milling and Mining Company went bankrupt, Washington County put the properties of the company on its county auction list, and on January 16, 1883, both the Barbee & Walker Mine and the

Barbee & Walker Mill were sold at the county auction. The buyer was the newly incorporated Gillespie, Lund & Co., formed by R. J. Gillespie, former president of the Barbee & Walker Company, and Robert Lund, part owner of the Woolley, Lund & Judd Mercantile in Silver Reef. Development on the properties soon began, and by June 1883, eighteen men were mining in the Barbee & Walker Mine.

Gillespie soon pulled out of the company, and because Woolley, Lund & Judd didn't want to operate the company alone, they recruited the help of Wells, Fargo & Company, the office of which was located in the same building as the mercantile. For the remainder of the 1880s, the company operated the mine and the mill on a small scale, usually making a mill run once or twice every month. The mill was converted to a water-powered mill in April of 1893.

Although not completely involved, R. J. Gillespie and his brother, Tom, often checked on the status of the mine and mill. Their reports were always satisfactory, and usually reported that the mill had been run for a week or two weeks on end and had processed a few thousand ounces of silver in that run. One of the mill's runs was in the first two weeks of December, and during this fourteen-day run the mill processed 10,000 ounces of silver, "showing that Silver Reef is still worthy of consideration" according to the *Ogden Standard Examiner*.

In 1900, James Andrus, of Andrus & Sons in St. George, purchased the property from Woolley, Lund & Judd and made many improvements on the mill. In 1902 the mine and mill were purchased by T. L. Brundage, president of the Brundage Mining & Development Company of Cleveland, Ohio, and plans were made to enlarge the mill and deepen the mine workings. \$10,000 was spent on new machinery and other improvements for the mine and mill.

The Brundage Mining Company continued to work the mill and mine until 1908, when J. A. Crecilius and Francis Hartley made the last run of the Barbee & Walker Mill. By this time, silver prices were very low and the company wasn't making profits like they expected to. The story of the mine and mill don't end there, however. In 1916, Alexander Colbath, the son of New York mining engineer G. U. Colbath (who made a couple business trips to Silver Reef in the 1880s), organized the Silver Reef Consolidated Mining Company and purchased over 50% of Silver Reef's mines, including the Barbee & Walker Mine. He also purchased the Barbee & Walker Mill and demolished it with the intent to build a much better mill. Unfortunately, this never came to fruition. A few thousand more ounces of silver came out of the Barbee & Walker Mine before it, too, was permanently

closed.

Today, there's very little left of the Barbee & Walker Mill. A small section of the mill's foundation can be seen on the northern tip of the White Reef, and the chimney of the blacksmith shop can also be seen in the vicinity, but nothing else is left. Undoubtedly this view reflects what the area would have looked like following the mill's disastrous fire of June 23, 1879. The Barbee & Walker Mine's main entrance has caved in, but undoubtedly some of the mine workings remain unharmed underneath the White Reef. Although not much remains, what does remain tells the story of the district's most prosperous mine and its most interesting mill.

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