

John Benson van Hagan

John B van Hagan was born about 1824 in Rossville, Knox, Ohio. He was the son of Isaac P van Hagan and Sarah Taylor.¹ In 1840, the family lived in Muscatine, Iowa.² John lived in Missouri and then went to California with the early pioneers. He was an “energetic, resolute young man, and took active part in the organization of the courts” there.³ By 1853, he was in Nevada County, California, and served as sheriff there for several years.⁴ On the 1860 census, he was listed as sheriff, living with nineteen other people: his brother James B and family, his brother Charles (a miner); a Musser family, a Mead family, and a deputy sheriff, in Nevada Township, Nevada, California.⁵

He was elected a member of the California Pioneers in 1869,⁶ but by 1870 was a miner in Treasure City, White Pine, Nevada.⁷ In 1875 he was mining in Lincoln, Nevada.⁸ He mined in Pioche and then moved to Silver Reef, Washington, Utah Territory, in 1876. He was the superintendent of mines with William T Barbee in charge of operations.⁹ As an “old Mexican veteran” John was appointed to a committee to solicit subscriptions for a banner to be carried at the Centennial Exhibition.¹⁰ He was president of the Silver Reef Jockey Club organized in 1877 at Capital Saloon. Horse races as well as foot, sack, and wheelbarrow races has purses of \$50, \$100, and \$250. John acted as judge for the horse races.¹¹

John was elected president of the Masonic Association in Silver Reef in 1879.¹² He and William T Barbee were partners in the Barbee & Walker mine, later known as the Barbee & van Hagan Mill & Mining Company.¹³ They had an office in Silver Reef¹⁴ but they managed their properties separately. For instance, Barbee sold one of his “sand banks”—the noted Tecumseh mine—to the Christy Company.¹⁵ In May 1879, fire was discovered when three men saw smoke rising from beneath the plank walk near Harry Wiest’s barber shop in front of the Palace Saloon and Restaurant. John was one of the men who tore up the board walk to give access, but the fire had spread to the rear of the building. He was later nominated for chairman of the fire committee.¹⁶

It was the fire of 25 June 1879 that burned down the Barbee & Walker mill northwest of town, causing \$50,000 damage. With no source of income, John and William T Barbee began to order supplies and new equipment to rebuild the mill. After months of delay and long shipping times, the new machinery, piping, and lumber arrived and reconstruction began. By the time the mill was completed, many of their best miners had left for employment elsewhere, but milling resumed in February 1880. On the

¹ United States Census, 1860, 1870, 1880; Massachusetts Marriage Records, 1840-1915.

² United States Census, 1840.

³ *Mohave County Miner*, 24 March 1888, p. 3.

⁴ Bean’s History and Directory of Nevada County, California, by Edwin F. Bean, p. 101; *Mohave County Miner*, 24 March 1888, p. 3.

⁵ United States Census, 1860.

⁶ *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 February 1869, p. 3

⁷ United States Census, 1870.

⁸ Nevada State Census, 1875.

⁹ *Pioche Record*, 22 November 1876; *The Barbee & Walker Mine and Mill: A History*, by Jonathon Alvey, pp. 2, 4.

¹⁰ *Reno Gazette-Journal*, 19 May 1876, p. 1.

¹¹ *Pioche Record*, 28 April 1877; *Pioche Weekly Record*, 5 May 1877, p. 3.

¹² *Silver Reef Miner*, 21 June 1879.

¹³ *Engineering and Mining Journal*, 1879, Vol 27, p. 115; Pacific Coast Directory, 1880-1881.

¹⁴ Utah Directory and Gazetteer for 1879-1880.

¹⁵ Memories of Silver Reef, in Utah Historical Quarterly, 1930, p. 109.

¹⁶ *Silver, Sinners and Saints*, by Proctor and Shirts, 1991, pp. 123, 126.

1880 census, John was miner, living in Silver Reef, Washington, Utah Territory. His brother and his nephew were also miners in Silver Reef that year.¹⁷

In August 1880, a man named Boyden was arrested by Sheriff Hoag and accused of stealing \$1500 in silver bullion (about 714 pounds) from the Barbee Mill. He was charged by William T Barbee for theft of \$1500 and by John van Hagan for theft of \$10,000 in bullion. Boyden was the mill foreman and in charge of bullion production. Speculation abounded between the accidental spilling of molten silver over time, or the purposeful pouring of silver to make his own bullion bars. A jury was called but could not agree on the verdict. A second trial was scheduled but never seemed to happen. This was the largest “theft” of silver in the history of the mines.¹⁸ The missing bullion was never found.

Judge J B van Hagan was a delegate for the national Democratic convention, returning from New York in July 1880. He was appointed to the Liberal territorial committee.¹⁹ John and Barbee were bought out by New York investors,²⁰ who knew of the mine from the report of George W Maynard. John departed Silver Reef in late June 1881 and went to New York City. He married Emily Theodora Thompson in 1881 in Quincy, Massachusetts.²¹ They had three children. About 1887, the family moved to Mohave, Arizona. John’s health had been declining for more than two years, and consultations with eminent physicians determined his disease was incurable. His long wasting illness gave him time to contemplate his shortened future.²²

John died of consumption on 18 March 1888 at Thompsons Ranch, Coara Springs, Mohave, Arizona. Left a wife and two small daughters. He was buried in the Hackberry burying grounds. His obituary noted, “Men always had respect for his judgment and the soundness of his convictions... He deliberately chose the straight path of rectitude... He was a kind husband and affectionate father.”²³ Emily and her small children moved to California and she lived there until her death in 1935.²⁴

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¹⁷ United States Census, 1880.

¹⁸ *Silver, Sinners and Saints*, by Proctor and Shirts, 1991, p. 74; *A Historical Study of Silver Reef*, by Alfred Bleak Stucki, 1966, p. 60.

¹⁹ *Salt Lake Herald*, 17 June 1880, p. 3; 14 July 1880, p. 3; 23 September 1880, p. 3; 23 September 1880, p. 3.

²⁰ *Silver, Sinners and Saints*, by Proctor and Shirts, 1991, p. 171.

²¹ Massachusetts Marriage Records, 1840-1915.

²² *Mohave County Miner*, 26 November 1887, p. 3.

²³ Arizona Deaths, 1870-1951; *Mohave County Miner*, 24 March 1888, p. 3.

²⁴ United States Census, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930.