

“The Mystery of Leroy Wilson”

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Mysteries draw attention and stir the imagination.

When tourists ask guides at the St. George Area Chamber of Commerce for directions to offbeat locations in southern Utah, the ghost town of General Steam is often mentioned.

General Steam is the place where Leroy Wilson lived and worked for the last 20 years of his life, before his murder in 1954.

Wilson's early years were what most folks would consider to be normal. Born in Midvale, Utah, a small suburb of Salt Lake City, Wilson attended and graduated from Jordan High School. He sampled college, attending what was then called Utah State Agricultural College (later known as Utah State University) taking physical science classes.

Wilson's course choices were early indications of his life's direction.

Before settling on a career, however, Wilson took a side trip and made a success of his military experience. He attended reserve officer's training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and was discharged as a second lieutenant after serving in World War I.

During the next several years, Wilson continued his personal development and exercised his mind. He applied for and obtained a number of patents on his inventions. He created items from water faucets to ore dressing processes and even a rotary steam car.

So, what happened to transform this basically “normal” guy into an adversary of most outsiders?

To the Forest Service, he became known as “an individual of a peculiar temperament,” but all Leroy Wilson ever wanted was to be left alone.

Between 1928 and 1931, Wilson established a mining operation on 1,400 acres in a rugged area of Bull Valley near the town of Veyo, in southern Utah. It was a lot of land to explore and prospect.

A claim for General Steam, as he called his operation, was registered in 1928, according to Wilson, and in 1931, according to the Forest Service. The claim was not actively worked, however, until about 1936, when Wilson decided to move to Bull Valley.

Almost immediately, disputes began between Wilson and trespassers, and inevitably, with the Forest Service.

Wilson disagreed with mining policies for the area. In addition, ranchers who allegedly continued to use parts of Wilson's claimed land for grazing and hunters who frequented favorite spots along the fringes of General Steam property further upset Wilson.

Wilson wrote letter after letter to the Forest Service asking for assistance in removing these trespassers, and for assistance in clarifying his use of the land. Signs and claim monuments were posted but when Wilson inspected his land, he found them destroyed.

One letter he wrote concerning livestock operators reads, "They are a decided nuisance and there is ample range they can just as well use, which has not had a critter on them for years.

The hunters destroy our fences and our monuments, destroy our signboards and notices, and in general have no regard for private property or rights. Our lives are not safe on our own premises if they are permitted to hunt in our vicinity. I ask that you use your police power to see that they do not trespass. Our roads are private roads and are not open to the public.

Most of the hunters are a drunken lot and highly reckless. Since several attempts have been made upon our lives, I am sure you will uphold us in this request."

In December 1940, Wilson received an answer to his stacks of correspondence. It wasn't actually an answer to his questions, but it was the first of the typical responses to come.

The Forest Service said it had no jurisdiction over game animals in national forests in Utah. He was also told the Forest Service would not and could not police the area for destruction of signs.

Wilson was furious. He felt that the Forest Service should not only police his lands but that the agency should put up fences to keep the trespassers out.

But he was told that wasn't going to happen, since he was a private enterprise.

Regional Forester C.N. Wood further informed Wilson that the occupancy of federal land on a national forest (under mining laws and until patented) entitled him the use of the land for mining and prospecting only.

The Forest Service didn't issue permits for grazing and hunting on a claimant's land without its permission, but the Forest Service would not assume responsibility to prevent it.

A few months later, Wilson and his business partner (Leland Rasmussen) were charged with assault with a deadly weapon.

According to the complaint, Roy Holt was attacked by the two in the foothills of Cove Mountain, the approximate location of Wilson's headquarters. Wilson and Rasmussen pleaded not guilty and successfully got the trial moved to Iron County, alleging they couldn't get a fair trial in Washington County due to conflicts with several prominent livestock operators.

The court agreed, but Wilson and Rasmussen were found guilty anyway.

Both Wilson and Rasmussen immediately filed an appeal, claiming their trial was handled in a prejudicial manner.

Wilson said Holt had threatened to kill him on sight. He also insisted Holt was after his claim.

He said Holt and companions cursed and defied him and Rasmussen and challenged them to shoot him, then rode further into Wilson's property.

“We were without the ability to injure them,” Wilson stated in court documents, with his unusual vernacular. “They were on horses and we were on foot. We picked up no rocks, we did not double our fists to strike at them, nor did we lift the guns to strike them, neither gun was cocked and neither can be fired without being cocked.”

Wilson alleged a number of prosecution witnesses perjured themselves during the trial. Finally, in January 1944, the Utah Supreme Court reversed the conviction in 5th District Court.

There was little celebration, only continued concern on Wilson’s part over encroachments on his land.

The Forest Service responded with a decision to conduct a mineral examination of General Steam to determine whether Wilson’s mining claims were bonafide.

Dixie National Forest Supervisor Albert Albertson and a Forest Service ranger, identified only as “Adair,” visited Wilson’s headquarters.

They found all of the buildings were constructed of poor material and most of the buildings and the yard were badly cluttered with second-hand equipment.

The scene is best described by two other individuals, Sam and Raymond Taylor from Salt Lake City [authors of *Uranium Fever or No Talk Under \$1 Million*, p. 168.]

They described it as the biggest junkyard in the world.

“There were old cars, buses, trailers, gigantic gears, rollers, castings, wheels, machinery scattered about and piled in great heaps. Almost hidden in the mass of junk was an unpainted frame house and in the middle of the jumble was a large building of corrugated metal, with a sign that read “Wilson Engineering Research and Exploration Company.”

While the visitors were curiously looking around, Wilson strode from the house. He was a huge man, almost six and a half feet tall, and massive in girth. He was 61-years-old with thick, straight, pure-black hair, and his face

was unlined except for a few marks from a lifetime of brawling, the Taylors finished.

He told his visitors from the Forest Service that the company had about 130 mining claims on the forest. He said they had constructed 25 miles of low standard road over forestland to get to their “far-flung holdings. They had also gone to considerable expense in developing water for use at some of their claims and at their headquarters.

In addition, he said they were milking 17 cows, which grazed on the claims, to provide milk and butter for company employees and their families. The occupants of General Steam were also gardening. The thought occurred to Albertson that this helped explain Wilson’s strenuous objections to range stock drifting onto his claims because they might mix with his dairy stock.

Although congenial during the visit, Wilson later complained one of the Forest Service officials had refused to go anywhere that required any walking and had only looked at a few outcroppings he could see from his pickup.

Wilson said one ore vein had no less than 2–million tons of iron ore down to observable depths and that there were acres that could be profitably mined. He, again, warned the Forest Service there were large mineralized zones in Bull Valley and “They’ll have to forget about grazing cattle on it.”

The problem between what Wilson wanted and what the Forest Service perceived needed to be done, did not result in agreement. In a February 1946 letter from Albertson to Wilson, Albertson said he felt the Dixie Forest has had considerable trouble and dissatisfaction because of the encroachment by mining interests on forest lands that were previously used for grazing and had been since the forest was created.

He fumed that both Wilson and the livestock operators had done everything possible to bring the Forest Service into the controversy. Then, when a Forest Service ranger discovered one of Wilson’s employees constructing a road across Forest Service land, the ranger was told General Steam owners planned, and had state engineer approval, to build a reservoir in the area.

Albertson was not pleased. In his opinion, construction of the reservoir and manufacturing building blocks from cinder ash seemed to be entirely out of line with the mining laws.

He also said the grazing of livestock and the use of land and water on mining claims to produce food for employees and their families also seems to be far-fetched.

And if such practices became legal and were continued there seems to be no limit as to how far this type of use might go in the occupancy of forestlands.

Albertson's supervisor, A.G. Nord, embarrassed him by disagreeing. He said Wilson was within his rights to build roads or reservoirs on his claims.

By mid-July 1947, Forest Service officials, however, came up with the decision to use a mineral examiner to examine five or six of Wilson's claims, where the greatest conflict with other forest uses seemed to exist.

Albertson was happy to tell Wilson the examiner would be at General Steam in five days.

In a follow-up letter to the Forest Service, Wilson expressed wonderment as to what good the inspection had achieved.

We came here in 1928 and built our own roads," he said. "We have never had a cent or any help from anyone. The cattlemen have fought us and never helped yet they use our roads by trespassing and tonight one of them insulted Mr. Rasmussen and tried to engage him in a quarrel. The more I think about your 'routine' check-up, the more resentful I become," Wilson expounded. "I appreciate an enemy who comes openly as such but I detest one who comes arrayed in sheep's clothing."

And he accused the federal officials of being fearful that General Steam would open up immense ore bodies before the government could kick them off and hand it over to the steel trust.

Some time elapsed, and by July 1948, the Forest Service found it prudent to back off active communications with Wilson, noting that much of the

correspondence with Wilson could be ignored because Wilson was an individual of “peculiar temperament.”

Government officials later told Wilson he had nothing to fear from the agency as long as the mining claims were held and developed in accordance with U.S. mining laws.

That winter, heavy snowstorms wreaked havoc on the Dixie National Forest, especially in the mountains near Wilson’s headquarters.

Marvin Jones, who grew up in Gunlock, recalled that an airplane noticed a distress signal coming from Wilson’s location and the plane’s occupants reported they saw drifts between six-and seven-foot deep.

As a result, the Washington County Sheriff’s Department launched a rescue effort and enlisted help from Gronway Parry, a local man who owned a snowcat with a sleigh.

On a Saturday morning, Parry and an unidentified sheriff’s officer went into Gunlock to ask for additional help to clear the Bull Valley Road leading to General Steam.

Graciously, a number of men and youths joined the rescue group, among them was Marvin Jones. When the rescuers got close to Cove Wash, they found the wind had laid a blanket of snow over the road blocking all passage.

They had to remove it to make a track for the snowcat. Successful, they entered General Steam by late afternoon.

They found no one hurt. They found no one in distress. Irritatingly, the first thing Wilson said when he greeted the rescuers, was “Well, did you bring my mail?”

Some of the adult members of the rescue group were extremely upset with Wilson’s comment, unable to believe they’d made the dangerous trip, risking everything, for absolutely nothing, for a joke.

Amazingly, many became appeased when Leland Rasmussen’s wife, Veola Rasmussen, invited the group to stay for dinner.

Not everyone stayed, but Jones said he remembers the experience as one of the highlights of his youth.

If there was one thing Leroy Wilson had always wanted while mining his claims on Dixie National Forest, it was to be left alone.

On May 18, 1954, he was.

Wilson was found dead in Kanab, Utah, 115 miles from his headquarters, with five bullets in his back.

Today, tourists and local residents continue to visit and explore the General Steam area in Dixie National Forest. Letting their imaginations drift back, they attempt to satisfy their curiosity about the man who was the victim of one of southern Utah's great unsolved murder mysteries.