

Tour Tip: Tour #2 guests will enjoy a visit to Silver Reef and the restored Wells Fargo building

*Miners chiseled rock
and built towns as the
West continues to
grow....*

Silver Reef

By Dora Goulding Monson

Montana prospector John Kemple appeared in southwestern Utah in 1866 with a herd of horses and some mining equipment. There were several small settlements in that area, including Leeds, Harrisburg, and Toquerville. Kemple stayed the winter with Orson B. Adams in Harrisburg and did some prospecting in the surrounding hills.

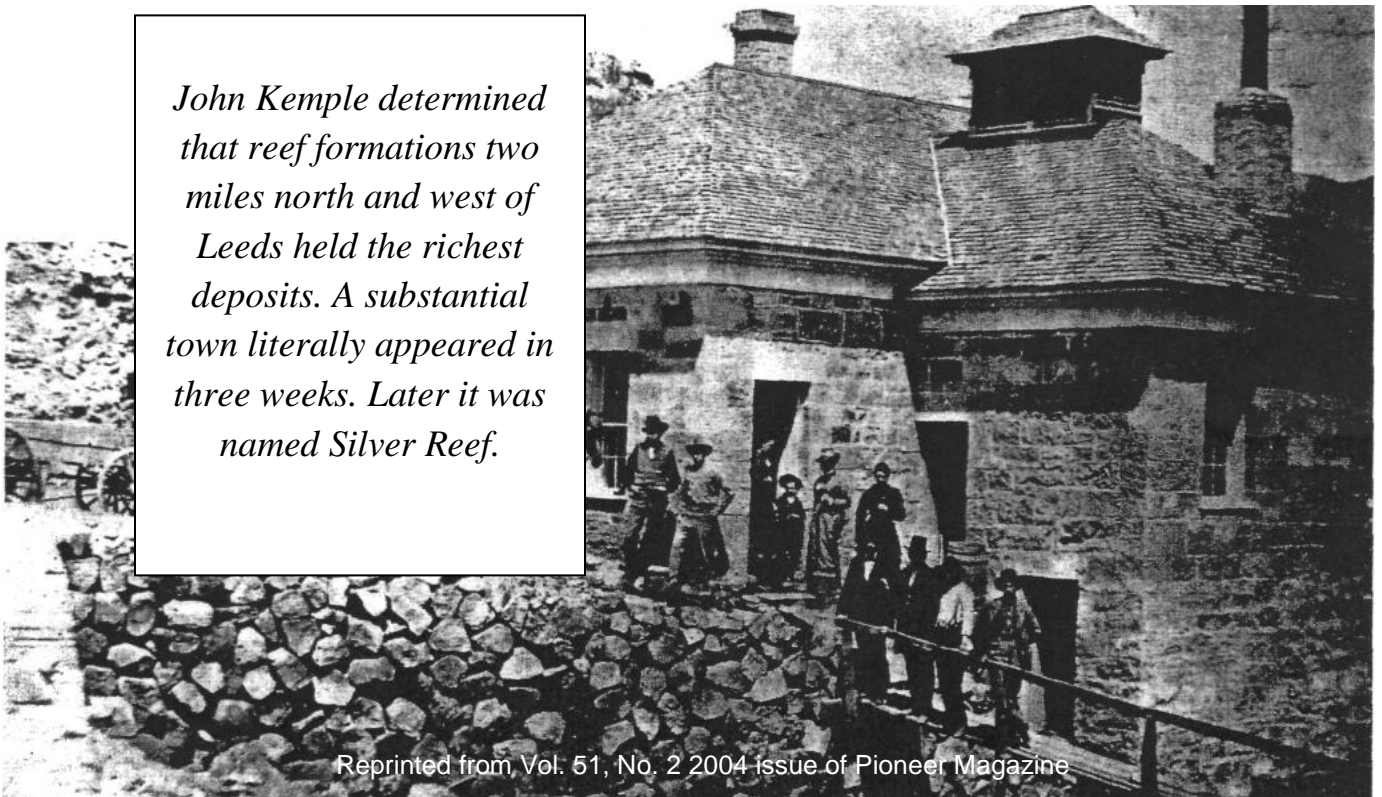
Kemple's experienced eye recognized silver in some colorful sandstone layers near Harrisburg. Using his own assaying equipment he analyzed some samples and was surprised at the results. Geologists generally believed that silver could not be found in sandstone. Still skeptical, Kemple sent samples to Salt Lake City, Beaver, and Pioche, Nevada. At first assayers as well as prospectors and miners were nonbelievers. Some refused to test the ore. "Kemple must be crazy to ask me

to assay a sandrock" Beaver assayer's response. However all their tests showed good results.

Kemple determined that reef formations two miles north and west of Leeds held the richest deposits. The place would later be named Silver Reef. Word spread to Pioche and Salt Lake City. Silver mines at Pioche were playing out, and miners were eager to find new sources. Consequently many miners came from Pioche. They camped in tents along the reefs.

Walker Brothers, miners and merchandisers in Salt Lake City, sent their agent William Tecumseh Barbee to check prospects for their company. His reports were glowing, but the company decided not to participate. Barbee decided to stay on his own, and he became one of the most successful miners. Large quantities of rich chloride and horn silver were taken out. Hundreds of claims were filed by newcomers as well as residents. Several mining districts were soon formed. It became evident that mills were needed in the area to avoid having to ship the ore. Several mills were constructed along Quail Creek and the Virgin River,

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and at least one Pioche mill was moved to the area. Even the stage company changed its route from Pioche to include Silver Reef on the way to Salt Lake City and then returned the same way.

In December of 1875, Barbee bought land nearby to establish a separate town that he called Bonanza. A hotel and general merchandise store were in business there by February 1876. However, most of the growth was in Silver Reef and not Bonanza. Many came, not to mine, but to start businesses. Pioche business owners dismantled buildings, hauled them to Silver Reef, and reassembled them. Homes sprang up. A substantial town literally appeared in three weeks and continued to grow the following year. By 1877, Silver Reef was booming. At its peak Silver Reef reached a population of about fifteen hundred, with most of the activity between the years of 1876 and 1890.

The economic boost from Silver Reef helped surrounding residents immensely. In the mid-1870s, Washington County's small communities were struggling. The St. George Temple had been completed, as well as two other large building projects: the tabernacle and the courthouse. Those projects had employed many citizens in construction. Now having to rely solely on agriculture, the economy was looking bleak. With the growth of Silver Reef, surrounding communities had cash customers for fruits, vegetables, wine, dairy products, livestock, and timber brought from Pine Valley and Mt. Trumbull. The town of Leeds profited most because of its close proximity to Silver Reef—only two miles. Almost all the freighting of ore and other materials was done by locals, which provided another boost to the economy.

Silver Reef was a typical mining town of the era with the usual problems of drinking, fights, a few murders, race problems, and property disputes. But there were many positive aspects. Several churches were organized, and at least one erected a building.

A school and a small hospital were built, along with business buildings for most services of the day. Social events included plays, programs, dances, horse races, and other activities. Three cemeteries were established—one for Catholics, one for Chinese immigrants, and a general plot. All three have been restored and are being maintained today.

The decline of Silver Reef began with a strike in 1881. Miners arrived at work one morning only to be told they would be paid less. They refused to work. A strike ensued that lasted four months. Many miners simply left during that time, and things never got back to normal. By then the price per ton of silver had gone down considerably, the surface ore had been depleted, and mining was not as profitable as it once had been. Several companies stopped operating. Mines and mills changed hands frequently. Over the years, attempts were made to continue

operations or revive mines, but resulted in very little success.

As Silver Reef gradually became a ghost town, nearby communities benefited from dismantling and moving its buildings. Leeds used the Catholic church for a recreation hall, and the school building continued as a school in Leeds. Houses, barns, bridges, and fences were built from other demolished buildings. After years as a ghost town, Silver Reef is now a popular tourist attraction. The Wells Fargo building has been restored and is in use as a museum. The Rice Bank building has served as a gift shop, and the restored powder house contains a model of Silver Reef in its heyday. A replica of the original Cosmopolitan Restaurant is again a popular restaurant. There are about forty up-scale homes in Silver Reef that have been annexed by the town of Leeds. Plans are currently in the works to build a mini-subdivision. Some ruins of mills and mines remain along the reef; preservationists are closely guarding them to preserve the remaining history. 🍷

