

History Question of the Month

What was the “historic” name of the canyon located between Big Cottonwood and Little Cottonwood Canyons, known today as Deaf Smith Canyon?

Answer

The canyon known as Deaf Smith Canyon was originally called Little Willow Canyon, named for the willow trees that grew along its creek banks. As the population in the Salt Lake Valley grew, there was a need for new sources of lumber. Little Willow Canyon was one of the areas looked at, only to be disregarded due to the terrain which made obtaining the trees and building an accessible road difficult if not impossible. In 1865 a man named, John Thayn, obtained a permit to control the canyon and charge a toll for each load of lumber taken out of the canyon. This was with the condition, he build and maintain a road in the canyon. Within six months he returned the permit, because, as those before and after him found out, it was too difficult a task. In 1875, Henry Standish hauled a saw mill up the canyon. It is not known if it was ever put into operation. Three years later it was abandoned and totally rundown.

In 1877 Standish filed a mining claim in the canyon, but it wasn't until after 1893 that there was any real interest in mining in the canyon. After that date more than 200 claims were filed in and around Little Willow Canyon. Big Willow Irrigation Company records indicate that there was still some mining activity taking place in the canyon in the 1960's.

About 1895 a group of people in the Danish Town area dug a ditch, diverting water at the mouth of Little Willow Canyon to water their farms. They incorporated in 1900 as the Big Willow Irrigation Company. The Company's diversion facility is still located in the canyon.

During the early 20th Century, Little Willow Canyon was a popular place for groups to camp and then hike to Twin Peaks.

The 1962 USGS map of the area showed that the name of the canyon had been changed to Deaf Smith. It is not known for sure why the change, other than the fact, that there was another Little Willow Canyon located south of Bell Canyon. The duplication in the name of the canyons did cause confusion among those owning water rights in those two canyons.

Why the name was changed to Deaf Smith is a mystery. Some have wondered if it was named after the Deaf Smith who played a big role in the Texas Revolution. However, that Smith died in 1837. This was long before the pioneers migrated west and no connection has been found to connect him to Utah history.