

History Question of the Month

One of the many dangers facing the early settlers of our city who worked in the Canyons during the winter was avalanches. What early resident of Butler was killed in an avalanche in Big Cottonwood Canyon?

Answer

William Christopher Ritter was born in Marion, Alabama, February 19, 1824. In 1845 he married Sarah Ann Lowry in Monroe, Mississippi. In the spring of 1846 he and his wife were among a group known as the "Mississippi Saints" that left Mississippi planning to meet up with Brigham Young's group on the Platte River in Nebraska. The group ended up spending the winter in Pueblo, Colorado, before following Brigham Young's group into the Salt Lake Valley the following year, arriving July 29, 1847.

In 1862, he married Janet Bland, who had two children from a previous marriage. Both of these children, Jeanette (Nettie) and Robert, took William's name. They had six other children, Charles, Kathleen, Adelia, William, Franklin and Mary.

The family lived in various places in the valley. William worked in the lumber industry until mining took off in Big Cottonwood Canyon. At that time he became a miner. While working in the mines he met Margaret Ann Bailey, who was working in Silver Fork, and she became his plural wife on April 22, 1868. They had one son, named William. Margaret lived in the canyon and Janet lived in the valley. The marriage with Margaret didn't last long.

In 1869, William, Janet and their family settled on a homestead on the Butler Bench. During the winter of 1875, William was working at the Richmond Mine in Big Cottonwood Canyon. About one o'clock in the afternoon on January 26, 1875, a huge body of snow on the mountain above the Richmond Mine broke loose. In the gulch below were a group of men and teams engaged in hauling ore on skins for the Richmond Co. The descent of the avalanche was so quick that they were caught up in it and buried. The slide was estimated to be about 200 feet wide and half-mile long and reached depths of 80 feet. A large portion of the slide flew up the opposite mountain burying the black smith shop of the Wellington Mine. Two men in the shop barely escaped with their lives.

One of the eight men, who had been caught in the slide, was able to dig himself out and then after about an hour's time, was able to dig out one other man, He suffered severe injuries, but ended up surviving. Miners from the Richmond, Prince of Wales, Wellington and Stella mines all rushed to the scene in an effort to rescue the other miners, they

were unsuccessful. When William Ritter's body was eventually recovered, he was buried in a "Miner's Cemetery" in Silver Fork.

William's wife Janet, sold off much of their homestead and with the help of her children farmed the remainder. She died in 1897. Their daughter, Nettie, was said to be the first teacher of the Butler School that was built in 1880-81. She married Edward Newcomer October, 1894. He was a miner and they moved to Mercur, Utah. He died August 18, 1903. Nettie returned home to Butler to live with their 3 children. Her sister Delia Clays and her brother Frank also returned to live with her. Her brother, William, also lived in Butler.

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