

Jack Swilling and the Walker Exploratory Party

By Al Bates

The role of famed Joseph R. Walker in opening the central Arizona highlands to settlement by non-Indians in 1863 is well known. Also well known at the time, but today almost totally forgotten, is the vital role that John W. (Jack) Swilling played in that historic event.

Walker's band of adventurers had been looking for gold, first in northern Arizona and then in Colorado and New Mexico while the American Civil War raged on. After encountering Jack Swilling in New Mexico they set their sights on an unexplored wilderness above the Gila River, despite the high risk of Indian attack. Part of the reason for Captain Walker to make that choice was personal: this would be his last chance to see—with his now failing eyesight—a place he had never been. Swilling provided an even better reason for the rest of the party, the indications of gold he had seen there three years earlier.



Captain Joseph R. Walker

Joseph R. Walker's Background

“Captain” Joseph R. Walker was one of those fortunate men who spent his adult life doing exactly what he loved: hunting, trapping, trading and, especially, exploring into unknown places. He gained his honorary title not from military service, but in recognition of his decades of successfully leading expeditions into the wilderness west, often into areas previously unknown to white men.

Born in Tennessee in 1798, Walker's first adventures in the far west were in New Mexico

as a trapper and trader and later as hunter and guide for the expedition that formally surveyed the famed Santa Fe Trail from Missouri to New Mexico. After a brief term as a county sheriff in Missouri and dabbling in several other occupations, Walker found his lifetime calling—and first national notice—when he joined

with U. S. Army Captain Benjamin Bonneville on a four-year beaver trapping expedition that produced few pelts but brought back extensive knowledge of the land beyond the Rocky Mountains. His fame later grew to near-mythic status after his involvement with Army Captain John Charles Frémont's well-publicized expeditions.¹

Jack Swilling's Background

By contrast, Jack Swilling was a little known young man who first came to public notice in 1860 as captain of the “Gila Rangers” militia company that pursued Indian raiders deep into the unexplored central Arizona highlands.²

Swilling was born in South Carolina in 1830 and spent the first 14 years of his life there. He lived in Georgia until he was 17 when he became an under-age enlistee in a volunteer

Georgia mounted volunteers battalion during the Mexican War. After service in Mexico he was honorably discharged and moved to Alabama where he lived until 1856 when he left to pursue adventure in the southwestern U. S.

Swilling came to the Gadsden Purchase area in the late 1850s as a teamster working for the Leach Wagon Road Company. He moved on to the Los Angeles area where there had been a gold discovery, but returned to begin washing gold at Gila City and working for the Overland Mail Company.³

On January 7, 1860, Swilling led his “Gila Rangers” (who were aided by an auxiliary force of Maricopa Indian warriors) in pursuit of Tonto Apache raiders who stole stock from miners and the Overland Mail Company. The unexplored area they entered covered over 14,000 square miles, an area larger than the state of Massachusetts, but shown only as a blank spot on then current maps. This unknown area was bounded on the south by the Gila River, on the east by the Verde River, on the north by the Bill Williams River and on the west by the mighty Colorado. Trappers and explorers—Spanish, Mexican and American—had been on the edges of the area outlined by the four rivers but had not penetrated the interior.

The Rangers obtained a share of revenge on the Indian raiders, but ultimately more important than this “successful chastisement” of the Apaches was the discovery of “... *the finest indications of gold of any they have ever seen.*”⁴ However a more thorough investiga-

tion of the mineral potential would have to wait since the area was considered too remote and too dangerous to exploit at that time.

Swilling moved on to Pinos Altos, a new mining community located in what is now western New Mexico, where he became first lieutenant of a militia group called the Arizona Guards formed for local protection from Apache raids. This group was soon absorbed into the Confederate Army where Swilling served until the Rebels were forced to withdraw from Arizona and New Mexico. Like several of his companions in the Arizona Guards, Lt. Swilling chose not to continue the fight in the East but to return to civilian status and



Jack Swilling

to remain in the Southwest both mining and serving the US Army as a dispatch rider and guide, all moves that ardent southern sympathizers never forgave.

Formation of the Walker Party

By the spring of 1861 Joe Walker shared with relatives a prosperous spread called Manzanita Ranch south and east of San Francisco Bay and, over 60 years old, was thinking of one final adventure. After being approached by a Canadian miner named George Lount, Walker agreed to head an expedition to test out Lount’s theory that there was gold on the Little Colorado River in Arizona.⁵ Walker began with a nine-man party that included Lount and two of Walker’s many nephews (one named Joseph R. Walker, Jr., to the confusion of later historians and archivists). At Grapevine Springs, California, they merged with the seven-man Miller party (brothers

Sam and Jake Miller and their father John plus four others).⁶ Their exploration of the Little Colorado proved fruitless and they moved on to Colorado Territory.

Other explorers joined along the way in Colorado and New Mexico. Daniel Ellis Conner joined the Walker party as they traveled from Colorado into New Mexico in the fall of 1862. Conner, who was on the run from Federal authorities because of his pro-Confederate activities in Colorado, later provided the only detailed first-hand account of the expedition.⁷

When the Walker Party turned south from Colorado into New Mexico in late November 1862, still in the midst of America's Civil War, each man was required to sign a loyalty oath to the Union. Twenty-seven names appear on that document.⁸ Swilling's name is not included since he was not yet a member of the party.

According to Sam Miller in a letter written years later, "In September 1862 we started with 36 men into Arizona, through the mountains of New Mex., and in May 1863 we arrived on the Hassayampa River."⁹ Despite this laconic statement, it wasn't quite that simple. Much happened during those few months including the capture and death of the infamous Apache Chief Mangas Coloradas.

Capture of Mangas Coloradas

By January 1863 the Walker Party had reached the ruins of Fort McLane near the Pinos Altos mining region, after being followed and harassed by warriors they believed to be part of Mangas' band. Their objective at this point seems to have been to explore the "San Francisco" (now Verde) River of central Arizona. The Indian problem going westward towards Arizona would certainly get worse because Apaches controlled much of the route from Mesilla to Tucson and chances of attack at any time would continue to increase. Ac-

ording to Conner it was there at the ruined fort that a plan to capture Mangas was developed, and it was there that Swilling makes his first appearance in Conner's account.¹⁰

The Army had been making plans to eliminate Mangas and his allies, and Jack Swilling was already part of those plans. General Joseph R. West, by then commander of the California Volunteers in New Mexico Territory, considered Mangas "Doubtless the worst Indian in our boundaries, and one who has been the cause of more murders and of more torturing and of burning at the stake in this country than all others together..."

Mangas had been wounded seriously during the Battle of Apache Pass and was making sounds that, at age 70, he wanted to live out his days in peace. Few believed him because of his established reputation for breaking his word.¹¹ Hearing that the old chief had returned to the Pinos Altos area and that Swilling was mining in that vicinity (well before the Walker party arrived), General West wrote in November 1862, "Jack Swilling is at the mines and is available for service."¹²

Swilling's arrival at the ruins of Fort McLane in mid-January 1863 coincided with the planned arrival of Captain E. D. Shirland and 20 Army troopers, and there he encountered the Walker Party for the first time. Specifics of the plan to capture Mangas then were worked out, including the involvement of civilians to conceal the Army presence. Swilling led the capture effort because of his previous acquaintance with Mangas at Pinos Altos and his experience in leading small mounted groups.¹³ Captain Walker did not participate in the capture.

Conner's published account of the capture of Mangas states that Swilling led a mixed group of Walker party civilians and Army troops with the intent to keep the Army's presence

unknown to the Apaches. Not a shot was fired as the giant chief was surprised and captured by Swilling. The Army's official account did not credit Swilling or the Walker party with any participation in the capture, and General West kept all the credit for himself.

By the time Swilling's group and their captive returned to the Fort McLane ruins that afternoon, General West and the rest of his force had arrived. At that point, the Army took over custody of the huge Indian chief, and it was while under their control that Mangas was killed "attempting to escape," probably the night of January 17-18. As an eyewitness to what he considered premeditated murder, Conner forcefully and repeatedly denied the Army's official account of Mangas' death for the rest of his life.

Time Out at Fort West

The Walker Party left the soldiers and headed north and west towards Arizona. Near Gila, N. M., they were surprised to encounter an Army force (including Swilling as a civilian scout) there to establish a new fort, designed to protect area settlers from the Apaches, and named in honor of General West.

Most of the Walker party and some of the soldiers then made a five-week expedition to the San Francisco River of western New Mexico and eastern Arizona. It seems odd today that a group of soldiers would go prospecting in the midst of both the national Civil War and a local Indian War, but it made sense then given the need for gold by the Federal Government; thus the troops were permitted to go prospecting while on furlough. Swilling could not join in this expedition because of his contract with the Army as a civilian scout attached to the new fort.

Following that expedition the Walker party spent most of a month camped near Fort

West, and did not leave until after the close of Swilling's time of Army employment. That one-month layover may have been taken because Jack had convinced Walker that the gold in Arizona was not along Arizona's Verde River, but would be found up a previously unknown river he had discovered three years earlier while leading the Gila Rangers Militia.

Not all of the party liked what was eventually proposed, and several of them stayed behind either at Fort West or elsewhere along the way to the new diggings. Nine who had signed the loyalty oath at Santa Fe the previous November were not on the roll of the "original prospectors" who formed the Pioneer Mining District some five or six weeks after the departure from Fort West, but there were seven replacements.

When the Walker party finally left the Fort West vicinity about the first of April 1863 and headed into the newly created Arizona Territory, Swilling was returning to the unexplored area above the Gila that he had entered with his Indian-fighting militia just over three years before. As A. C. Benedict, of the Walker party wrote in a letter a few months later, "[Jack] Swilling is the man who first conducted us to the stream [Hassayampa] on which we found gold on our first trip."¹⁴

The Walker party's route took them through Apache Pass (at night, since the Apaches after Mangas' death were even more aggressive than before), then stopped briefly at Tucson and proceeded to the Pima Villages near the juncture of the Salt and Gila rivers. From there they traveled north and west past the White Tank Mountains, and then followed up the Hassayampa River to near its headwaters a few miles below today's Prescott. There on May 10, 1863, 25 "original prospectors" formed the Pioneer Mining District and filed two placer mining claims apiece.¹⁵ George Lount and five other members of the expedi-

tion were not present for formation of the Pioneer Mining District but straggled in later and filed new or bought existing placer or lode claims.

Formal registration of the initial claims was delayed until June 12, following a trip to Ammi White's flourmill and store at the Gila Villages to restock the miners' depleted supplies of tobacco, flour, salt, coffee and other essentials. It may be that another purchase at that time was the ledger book that they used to record events at their new mining district and is now kept in the Yavapai County Recorder's archives.

Another Exploring Party Arrives

On their way back to their claims on the Has-sayampa the Walker party was surprised to discover that they were not the only ones exploring for gold in the central Arizona highlands that spring. A mounted band they first feared to be Apaches turned out to be a group guided by Paulino Weaver, like Walker an aging mountain man and explorer. They had come into the central Arizona highlands from the Colorado River near La Paz and found gold traces near Antelope Mountain (between today's Wickenburg and Prescott). They too ran short on supplies and a cross-country trip to the Pima Villages was necessary. (Weaver was in unknown territory but knew that if they headed south they must come to the Gila River and thence to the Pima Villages.)

Exaggerated claims about the gold finds were broadcast back to the "States" and, as a result, a rush of miners and merchants followed them into the mountains. As Governor Goodwin's party of Territorial officials neared Santa Fe in late 1863 the news of the gold discoveries led him to change their intended destination from Tucson in southern Arizona to the new diggings in the central Arizona highlands. When a special census was completed in April 1864 the non-Indian population in the highlands had grown from the original 25 to 1088.¹⁶ By

June 1864 a new town named Prescott had been formed next to Granite Creek and the territorial government was settled there for the first of its two stays.

A few months later Captain Walker officially disbanded the party of "original prospectors" with the words that "We have opened the area to civilization, now it is up to civilization to do the rest."¹⁷ He was right. Civilization had arrived in the central Arizona highlands and there was no turning back, even though it would take another half-century for the granting of Arizona statehood.



Portions of this article were adapted from the author's newly published book "Jack Swilling, Arizona's Most Lied About Pioneer."

End Notes

¹ Bil Gilbert, *Westering Man, The Life of Joseph Walker*.

² *Weekly Arizonian*, January 26, 1860.

³ Gila City was a brief-lived boomtown located on the Gila River a few miles upriver from Yuma.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Gilbert, *Westering Man*.

⁶ Letter from Sam Miller quoted in *Echoes of the Past, Tales of old Yavapai County, Vol. 2, p. 7.*

⁷ Conner, Daniel E., *Joseph Reddeford [sic] Walker and the Arizona Adventure*.

⁸ National Archives, Records of U. S. Continental Commands, Department of New Mexico Volume 13, p. 185.

⁹ *Echoes of the Past, Vol. 2, p. 7.*

¹⁰ Conner, *Walker and the Arizona Adventure*.

¹¹ William F. Scott paper presented to the Society of Arizona Pioneers in 1894.

¹² West letter, November 2, 1862.

¹³ Scott paper.

¹⁴ A. C. Benedict letter to Judge Kirby Benedict, E. D. Harris collection, SRP.

¹⁵ Journal of the Pioneer and Walker Mining Districts

¹⁶ 1864 Arizona Territorial Census.

¹⁷ Conner, *Walker and the Arizona Adventure*.