

The following is a lecture given by Wes Curtis at the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum in Price prior to a tour of the Swasey historical sites that was held on October 4, & 5, 1985.

.....We have enough Swaseys here that I wouldn't dare go too far out in left field, but let me begin like this:

As history unfolds it oft times reveals instances when time, place and people come together to produce something extraordinary out of what would otherwise be common plate and this is the story of the Swaseys:

The time we're talking about centers around the last quarter of the 18th Century. There was a time when the old west was still very much alive but its days were numbered. The railroad and telegraph lines had already spanned the continent and settlements and civilization was moving in rapidly and as it did so the American Frontier began to vanish. So this is the time perior we're talking about. The place of course, you've seen some slides of it, Castle Valley and the San Rafael Swell, one of America's last unsettled frontiers at the time. It was a very forbidding landscape and area that's why it was one of the last frontiers. It was for the most part a no mans land used by an occasional outlaw or Indians as they crossed them sometimes hiding from the white man. It was a place where people wanted to cross in a hurry not a place to tarry. It offered challenges that prudent men avoided. The people we're talking about in this instance are four brothers: Charlie the oldest, then Sid, then Rod and then the youngest of the four was Joe Swasey, who is Lee's great grandfather (Lee Swasey showed the slide presentation).

These Swasey brothers that came into the Swell were the third generation of a frontier family. It was a family that had for three generations not only faced the rigors of frontier life but actually seemed to prefer it.

We begin with Joseph Amos Swasey who was the grandfather to the Swasey brothers we're referring to tonight. We picked up his story in Vermont. And in the late 1820's he came west with the American Frontier to Iowa. In fact it is claimed he filed one of the first land deeds in what is now Des Moines, Iowa. We don't know a lot about Joseph Amos but we do know a little bit more about his son, Rodney Degrass Swasey or he was often referred to as R.D. Swasey. Rodney is the father to these four Swasey brothers and as you hear some of the exploits of these four brothers you know they came by it honestly when you get to know their father a little bit.

Let me go to the journals of John D. Lee that Dr. Dorchman referred to a few minutes ago and read what John D. Lee entered in his journal on March 10, 1847. He says, "Andrew Lawrence and Rodney Swasey arrived in camp from Charleston, Iowa. Reported that the mob had hanged eight of the brethren nye unto death. Little Rodney Swasey, he was 14 years old at the time, little Rodney Swasey they hanged by the heels in order to extort from him something as evidence against the rest of the company but found the boy knew nothing or was too true to reveal it. They let him down. President Brigham Young counseled me to take care of hit, fit and sent him as one of the pioneers and keep his peny to chase buffalo on."

That's the first mention we find of Rodney DeGrass Swasey. From there Rodney came west with the pioneers to Utah with one of the early ox cart team companies

but didn't stay long in Utah. The lure of the gold rush was more than he could stand. So in 1850 with his new wife, Lucy Loretta Scovil, they headed to California to the gold fields of Eldorado County. And here in California ~~the story is very vague~~ but one thing that does seem clear from this, and I might also mention as Rodney left for California his wife was pregnant, traveled the distance in a rather uncomfortable state, and not long after they arrived Charlie was born. But as I say the details are not real clear as of yet as to what exactly Rodney did in California, but we do know he came back with some money. Some stories say he did strike gold, but I think the more prominent and more reliable stories are that he made a small fortune selling horses to the cavalry out there in California but regardless he comes back to Utah in 1857 with his second son now in his wife's arms as she carries him across the desert. He comes back with a large heard of livestock, mostly cattle, and has enough money that he becomes a rather prominent and is a well-to-do man from this point on.

Other little facts that we know about Rodney DeGrass Swasey as he settled in Mona when he came back to Utah and they ran the family livestock in the house range out in West Millard County. I don't know if any of you are familiar with that country, but if you look on a map in the western portion of Millard County, you will notice that there are some land forms out there that still bear the Swasey name: the Swasey Mountains, Swasey Peak, which is the highest peak on the Swasey Mountains, Swasey Bottom and Swasey Wash. Also while in Mona Rodney built a large mansion large enough that it had a room that could accomodate local dances. And to this day in Mona there is a large, I estimate it to be ten feet tall, a large monument that covers the grave of Rodney DeGrass Swasey. The mansion I refer to they say it was large enough that after Rodney died three of his sons from his other wife, he had two wives, from his second wife the sons came and rather than try and live together in one large house they tore it down and built three houses. ?

Rodney also became a banker one of the earliest bankers in Provo. He and another fellow opened the Swasey and Martin bank. The interesting thing about this is that old Rodney could not read or write. But he apparently had a very shrewd business sense and was quite successful with his bank.

Now going back to the boys and their livestock in the western part of Utah, Sid and Charlie from a very early age spent their time with the livestock. They did not have any time for school like their Dad they could neither read nor write. The other two boys did spend some time in school but not a lot. In fact when Joe Swasey came to Castle Valley he was only thirteen years old. So he had not had a lot of time for schooling.

But these boys at an early age learned how to survive in the wilderness. They learned how to live in a very sparse desert area with little food, little water and they learned all the lure and skills of cowboying and horsemanship and every other thing that goes with that type of life. They became very adept at these sorts of things at an early age and so as you hear of their exploits later on in Castle Valley keep in mind that these boys grew up in this type of country and these types of adventures. It was nothing that unique to them though it is to us today.

For some reason, and the reasons aren't exactly clear, they left the western part of Utah. It is not hard to speculate why they left though because several others did the same thing about the same time. They simply over grazed the fragile and sparse desert lands out there so they were looking for new places to run their

animals. So some time between the years of 1872 and 1874 the Swaseys first come into Castle Valley. And it appears that they probably came first into the valley in what is now Joe's Valley and ran their livestock up there before they made it to the desert.

They built a cabin up in Joe's Valley which was one of the first cabins built in Castle Valley and of course from that advantage point up their looking over the vast terrain that lay down below their adventuresome spirits certainly could not resist coming out and exploring. And very early found the high grass ranges of what is now called the Sinbad Country. It was called the Sinbad Country then. And I did not slip when I said high grass ranges because then the grass was a very high and a very plentiful and some years it still is out here when it is not grazed. So there was good range in the Sinbad country, but let me point out at this point that you can't really consider the Swasey's to be early settlers of Castle Valley. They were more of a desert nomad type. They followed the cattle and camped wherever it was convenient. The cattle ranged everywhere from Joe's Valley to Green River and that's a lot of rough country out there to chase cows. But they did as Lee showed in the slides establish a headquarters at Sinbad in what is known as the Cliff Dweller. For those of you who go on the tour tomorrow I think will be very fascinated by this site to see where they laid the logs across the bottom for the floor, where they had the stream close by, the refrigerator where they hung their meat, the corral a very convenient location, plus the location itself was very convenient to what they liked to do best and that was chase horses.

The Swaseys were horsemen. They did not run many cattle. They preferred horses. They liked to chase wild horses but that wasn't all they also worked very dilligently at breeding horses. They purchased some very top notched blooded stallions to prove the stock and of course their livelihood was made in trading and selling horses and more than that they were also very skilled horsemen. In fact if you talk to an old timer who knew the Swaseys one of the first things he will mention is that they were excellent horsemen. And some of their feats on horses have become almost legendary among them.

But with that background let me stop just a second and refer back to my opening statement about how time and place come together sometimes to produce something that is extraordinary from what would otherwise be common place. Because the time and place was perfectly suited to the abilities of these Swaseys, their adventurous spirit and background we get, I should also mention their good humor, you put these things together out in that wild desert environment and we come up with some very intriguing and interesting exploits. In fact their exploits were such that they actually did become more or less folk heroes in their own time which is a very rare thing. The local folk of Castle Valley at the turn of the century were more apt to brag on about the Swasey brothers exploits than they were about those of the Wild Bunch.

Let me just ask right now how many people here have read the story of Joe Swasey and the Wild Cat? How many have actually read that story? I see some Swaseys have read it and Don over here has read it. That's unfortunate. How many have heard about the story? How much time do we have tonight Doc? ("We need to know it," says Doc). Well, we might come back to that. That's what first got me interested in the Swaseys and that was when I was in fourth grade. I heard that story and it was one of the most hilarious interesting stories I had ever heard. From that time on whenever somebody mentioned Swasey my ears perked up and ever since that I have wanted to know more about these guys. That's what started me on

this little trek of mine to find out more about them and I found they are very interesting. Besides roping the wild cat, this was Joe who did that, his older brother Sid, who was without a doubt the most carefree of the bunch, he went one better. He fought a young bear in hand to hand combat locked inside the cabin in Joe's Valley. And of course there is quite a story that leads up to this, but to make the long story short beings I am not the greatest story teller in the world, Sid and Charlie had a little deal going. Their always needling each other and egging each other on to this and that. Always making bets that one can do this or one can't do that. Well, between all the banner Sid finally ends up going in the cabin with the bear and of course as Sid goes in the cabin Charlie locks the door behind him and issues the following ground rules, "Fight him fair Sid, fight him fair". Now it is only fitting that Charlie issue those instructions because Charlie knew Sid and Sid was one with quite a wit. To end the story, I won't give you all the details, but he did win the fight as far as the story goes.

Another interesting thing about Swaseys that probably I ought to point out to you is they loved to chase horses out in the desert. They chased wild horses. They had their own horses that they brought in and they cross bred a bunch and so forth. To give you an idea of the toughness and the recklessness maybe of these guys. Most people when you are up on an unbroken horse you take every precaution to stack the cards in your favor. You put him in a nice corral. You have a saddle and a bridle or hackmore or whatever. You might have a snubbing rope on him. That wasn't the Swasey style. Every now and then for a good little adventure they would round up some desert horses into a corral or horse trap and then as the gate was open they let the horses run back out. You would jump off of the gate post onto the back of the horse and you quickly grab the mane with one hand and the tail with the other and then let the chips fall where they may.

The story of Sid's leap, this is another one I think you've probably heard a lot about. I am not aware of anything actually being written about this story as of yet. But again this was a situation where the Swaseys made a bet and they seemed to do just about anything for a bet. And not to cast any reflection on Lee here but in talking to the wives who have married Swaseys a lot of them will tell you that they have, the word they use is crazyness. They will do anything on a dare some of these people. This seemed to be the case with them. Sid's Leap a lot of people have wondered if he actually did it. Other people have wondered why he did it. There has been a story going around quite prevalant that he was trying to escape from a posse when he jumped that particular spot. I don't happen to agree with that because you can cross the river a lot easier less than a quarter mile up stream. No, I think Sid actually did jump the leap. In fact as Royal Swasey said, and this is not the Royal here tonight, but the Royal who was the son of Joe Swasey. He said, "Father told me Sid jumped it and I never knew father to lie." It was as simple as that. Sid jumped the leap. But don't think that's as far fetched as we might today because you have got to understand Sid and you have to understand the abilities of these men. Sid was a horseman and a very skilled horseman and he had a very good horse and horse and rider knew each other very well. They spent many many days in the desert. They had jumped many revines and washes larger than this one I am sure and so as Sid looked at that canyon there he just simply could not resist the challenge. That's the kind of guy he was and so getting a little bet placed on the out come of this was all the incentive he needed to take the risk and Sid jumped the leap. At least we have never known Joe Swasey to lie.

There are a lot of stories about the Swaseys and some of course are unverifiable, others I think have possibilities of being verified, but just in closing let me say

that the Swaseys were a very colorful and unique part of our local history. I feel they have been quite neglected. It seems the history of our local area begins when the settlers came over in 1877. That's when the stories seem to start. But there were many men in here before that time and the Swaseys being probably foremost among them. At least the most outstanding among them. And I hope that by things like this they can get the exposure that they really deserve and find their place in our local history and much more than that find their place in our unique and colorful western American history.

That's all I have got. (Dr. Dorkman; No, we want to hear the story of the wild cat.") Do you want to hear the story about the wild cat? (Everyone replies yes) I think if you haven't heard it we better do it.

He goes on to explain that the story which has been used many times as a humor reading is so well written.

This story was written by Harrison R. Merrill, who was an English Professor at Utah State University and also Brigham Young University. He wrote a couple books of Western poetry and folklore and this is one story that he wrote and it appeared in Juvenile Instructor and also found now in Castle Valley History Book.