

# **“Who Killed Sarah Jane Kilkauskay?”**

**by Christian Wright**

**Adapted from personal research, “A History of the Fish Springs Mining District.”**

*“... store owner Walter Reid killed a Fish Springs miner named Kilkoski [sic] in a fight for the affections of Kilkoski's wife. But the prize proved difficult to hold onto. A short time later Reid was killed by another of widow Kilkoski's suitors. According to John Preezley, an old- timer who lived at Fish Springs during its palmy days, Mrs. Kilkoski was later knocked unconscious during a fight at the Utah Mine, and was buried alive by a bunch of drunken miners after an equally drunken doctor pronounced her dead!”*

- George A. Thompson, “Some Dreams Die: Utah's Ghost Towns and Lost Treasurers.”



*Above: Two unidentified women pose for a photograph alongside several miners inside a Fish Springs Mine. Who are these women? Could one be Sarah Kilkauskay? Very few women spent any amount of time at the mining camp. How did they live? Who did they love? Is there any truth at all to the sensational accounts of Thompspon? Photo Courtesy Ken Puchlik, Lithic Resources.*

Of the many unanswered questions Thompson's book has left us, his account of the death of Sarah J. Kilkauský at the Fish Springs mining camp is as convoluted as it is mysterious. But while all of those who were there in the summer of 1907 have long since passed away, research tools have in recent years become available to historians which allow a great deal of light to be revealed. There *was* a Sarah J. Kilkauský. She *did* die mysteriously at Fish Springs, and there *were* shootings and jealousies over her affections. While much remains unknown, the true story we can today piece together is at least as remarkable as any of Thompson's inventions.

Hardrock miner Louis Kilkauský was in his life also known as Ludwick, Ludwig, and by a seemingly infinite variety of alternate spellings of his last name. He arrived at Fish Springs in 1891<sup>i</sup> and became co-owner of the important Emma mine, as well as part owner in 6 additional properties. Kilkauský also opened a combination store and saloon in the mining camp and purchased a nearby ranch which he turned into residence. Subsequently he divided his time between the two enterprises.

A life long bachelor, Mr. Kilkauský in his 68th year made the acquaintance of his future wife, Sarah J. McBurney. Many years younger than Kilkauský, Mrs. McBurney's husband at the time had been imprisoned on a charge of counterfeiting. A rapid courtship ensued and in short time Sarah had a divorce secured and just as fast a new marriage to replace it. Sarah moved in with Kilkauský at his ranch but in the day worked at the mining camp running a saloon and boarding house. In early 1899 she was also appointed as Fish Springs' postmistress. She was apparently an attractive woman, a characteristic that would no doubt only increase in its effect upon the lonely and male-dominated setting of a remote mining camp.

On October 24th, 1899 it was reported by the *Salt Lake Tribune* that Kilkauský had shot at and injured Peter J. Reid, the superintendent of the Galena mine.<sup>ii</sup> The shooting was reported as the result of Kilkauský's suspicion of a romance between Reid and his wife. While the extent of this alleged relationship remains unclear, it was the case that a bullet had gone through Mr. Reid's leg from a gun held by Mr. Kilkauský and that the shooting occurred on the premises of the Kilkauský ranch. When

asked for details by the press, Reid claimed the shooting had been an accident and no charges were ever pressed.<sup>iii</sup> Whether this was indeed the case, or simply a gentleman's way of excusing those involved is unclear.

A month after the shooting Mr. Kilkauský arrived in Salt Lake City where he began divorce proceedings against his wife, claiming their relationship had deteriorated shortly after their marriage. Before he could make the divorce official he fell gravely sick the next summer. He was transported out of the district and passed away at Keogh Homer Hospital on June 8, 1900.<sup>iv</sup> His body was taken to American Fork for burial by James Chipman, a resident of that city and also since 1891 a part owner in the Emma mine as well as banker for it.

After Kilkauský's death much of his estate passed to the same Mr. Chipman, who Sarah then sued over its control in the Nephi court. In 1903 she won a judgement that her husband's deed "was executed when the deceased was in such a weak state of mind as to be utterly incapable of transacting business, and that the deed was obtained without his consent."<sup>v</sup> Sarah won back the estate, most significantly including her husband's shares in the Emma mine. She subsequently divided her time between a residence in Salt Lake City and Fish Springs, where she continued to operate the saloon until her death in 1907.

Louie Sutton Ridd, daughter of Utah Mine Superintendent Richard Sutton, spent summers visiting her father at the remote mining camp for many years. In 1975 at the age of 83 she was interviewed by historian John F. Bluth about her memories of the area. While there her father built Mrs. Kilkauský's casket and her sisters lined it. Her comments on Fish Springs' one saloon shed some light on one of miners' few diversions, and type of miner most likely to frequent it:

She used to run a kind of gambling place. Dad used to take us down there once in a while to buy some candy. But he would never let us go down there alone to get it. She would stay out there for months and months. Then she would come to Salt Lake... She was an odd woman, odd woman. We never had anything to do with her because she

used to sell booze and everything, anything to make the money... She was a very peculiar lady, and she had kind of the trash of the men that were working there, not the first class. There was a kind of a distinction between them.<sup>vi</sup>

The bartending career of Mrs. Kilkauskys ended suddenly in June 1907 when her dead body was discovered in the Emma mine's shaft.<sup>vii</sup> While it is likely that many details of what went on that summer at Fish Springs have been forever lost to history, from existing records a partial story can be pieced together.

In mid July Mrs. Kilkauskys brother arrived to see after the affairs of her estate. He reported to the press upon his return to Nephi a suspicion that foul play had had a hand in his sisters' death. According to the *Salt Lake Tribune*, in the month prior to her accident two other violent deaths occurred at Fish Springs, with no inquest being held in either case.<sup>viii</sup> These two were reportedly buried on the same day as their death and no attempt had been made by any official to ascertain the cause. Fish Springs was notable for its lack of officials and it is unclear whether the rapid burials were a matter of prudence or a sign of some conspiracy. Frustratingly, the paper only reported on the two prior deaths several weeks after the fact and do so without mentioning any names.

To inspect these allegations Sheriff Gus J. Henroid of Eureka set out for Fish Springs on Tuesday, July 30<sup>th</sup>.<sup>ix</sup> He arrived and held an inquest that Friday where the jury returned a verdict of accidental death, believing Mrs. Kilkauskys must have fallen while descending a ladder in the mine. In his report to the *Eureka Reporter* he made no mention of the identities of the other two reported dead, nor any possible connection of them to the late Mrs. Kilkauskys.<sup>x</sup> Subsequent issues of the *Tribune* and the *Reporter* did not raise the question again.

With our interests piqued by the Sutton Ridd recollections, we can read our own suspicions and prejudices into Mrs. Kilkauskys martial history and construct any order of events we would like, with or without two preceding deaths to accompany her own. As one of the only women in an all male mining camp, and “an odd woman... who would sell anything...”, a woman who spent her evenings in

the company of “the trash of the men”, providing intoxicating spirits to largely transient, immigrant miners, surely it would not take the most imaginative of minds to read immoral behavior into her lifestyle. But of all things she may have been Mrs. Kilkauskys did not die a poor woman, and after her death it was found her estate qualified for appraisal under inheritance tax laws.<sup>xi</sup> Why would a reasonably well to do woman with residences in two cities and a profitable business get her self mixed up in the kind of recklessness the account related to Thompson suggests?

In the historical record the signs of a cover up appear everywhere a suspicious mind would like to see them. Very little follow up was done in the press the inquire of the Fish Springs death(s), and the report on the Sheriff's inquest contained few details. Mrs. Sutton Ridd's oral history was recorded 69 years after Kilkauskys death, and in 1907 Sutton was 13 or 14 years old. Thus she can alternately play the role of a lied-to innocent or a member of the conspiracy herself. Even the transcript of the Sutton interview that the author received was sent with page twenty one missing from it. Does the conspiracy about her death run so deep that it has reached all the way to the Special Collection's Department of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University?

Unfortunately, it is rare that conspiracies so vast and complex turn out to actually be true. Many miners more experienced than Mrs. Kilkauskys have fallen to their deaths in mines, including those better timbered and maintained than the intermittently worked Emma she had inherited. She was known to make frequent personal inspections of it, and the day she died she was planning to board the stage for Salt Lake City.<sup>xii</sup> It would not have been irrational for her to want to make a final inspection before departing. Frustratingly, the identities of the other two men whose deaths may have preceded Mrs. Kilkauskys have not yet been determined from available records. Were they to come to light, the circumstances surrounding them could reveal any tensions that may have existed at the camp at the time and possibly have been a contributing factor to the “foul play” reportedly suspected.

Certainly one of them was not Peter J. Reid, who passed away in 1915 at his home in Pleasant Green. Not a bullet from a jealous lover, but an infection from the bite of a wood tick, was believed to

have been the cause.<sup>xiii</sup> His Brother Walter Scott Reid, whose identity was confused by Thompson's source, did for many years live at Fish Springs where he kept books for the Utah Mine. But his death certificate has him passing away of pneumonia in Magna in 1933 and being buried in Salt Lake City.<sup>xiv</sup> No doctor ever lived at the camp who could have conspired to have Kilkauský “buried alive.” For years the closest medical help was Mrs. Kearney of Callao, was known to volunteer her services to periodically patch up the injured and the sick. Anyone requiring more advanced treatment was required to travel much further for help.

The imagination excited by either the false accounts repeated by Thompson or the very real questions posed by newspapers at the time of Kilkauský's death is as yet without factual basis with which to perpetuate any suspicions of a murder. Enough unanswered questions still persist keep the imagination guessing, and most likely the true story will never be known. Probably, far more dark and twisted than whatever happened at Fish Springs that summer is whatever our imaginations are capable of inventing. Until then, we may consider that a great injustice has been done by Thompson's sensationalism to the character of Fish Springs' residents. Certainly, according to existing records, they were colorful enough as they actually were. Yet it remains the incompleteness of the record that allows a touch of mystery to remain undefinatively rebuffed. Perhaps the continued work of Utah state historians, librarians, archivists, and digitization programs will in years to come bring to light fresh sources, allowing the ghosts of Fish Springs to at last be laid to rest.

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