

Jack Swilling

Jack of All Trades: J. W. Swilling in the Arizona Territory

During the years 1856 and 1878, Swilling traveled throughout the Arizona and New Mexico territories, involved in a number of different occupations. His lifelong interests in irrigating, mining, farming, business and politics; his leadership in the founding of new communities and his joint ventures with many of the territory's influential people, form an important chapter in the American settlement of Arizona.

John W. (Jack) Swilling was born April 1, 1830, the eighth of ten children, in South Carolina. His father, George Swilling, was a plantation overseer and later a slave-owner, who grew cotton on land purchased from his father-in-law. During the 1840's cotton losses forced George to move his family to North Georgia. Several of Jack's brothers and sisters later moved west settling in Arkansas and Texas.

Jack first left home at seventeen with his brother Barry; he enlisted as a musician and left the country during the fall of 1847 to fight in the Mexican/American War. The brothers returned home and enlisted in the Georgia cavalry in 1848. In the summer of 1852, Jack met and married Mary Jane Gray and they settled in Alabama. Until recently, researchers were unable to account for Swilling's life during much of the 1850's. By August 1858 Swilling was reporting successful mining and when Col. Jacob Snively found gold along Gila River east of Yuma, he joined the rush to the gold field. The Yavapai Indians who lived in the mountains to the north began raiding the community. A 215-man unit was organized by the Overland Mail Company and Swilling led several expeditions against the Yavapai traveling as far north as Prescott. In 1861 there were over 1200 miners living in Gila City and by 1862 Gila City became Arizona's first ghost town due to heavy flooding and a depletion of the gold source. The exploration of the territory during the 1850's and 1860's and the resulting mineral finds are an important chapter in the settling of the American Southwest. Jack Swilling acquired a reputation as one of the premier placer miners of the period. His mining partners included noted early Arizonans as Pauline Waver, Joseph Walker, col. Jacob Snively and Henry Wickenburg. In 1874, the *Arizona Citizen* reported that Swilling had just returned from the mountains and had "found the biggest thing on God's green earth. . ." consisting of 8 well-developed gold ledges, fifty miles from Phoenix . . . with no signs of Indians, plenty of water and timber, the richness rivaling the Arabian Knights. By 1865 Swilling began selling his claims in several mines in the Hassayampa District and had built 1 of 5 stamp mills near Wickenburg to process gold.

Before coming to the territory, Jack was struck on the head with a revolver, fracturing his skull. Shot in his left side, he carried the bullet for the remainder of his life. These wounds caused him great pain, for which he was prescribed morphine. Swilling became

addicted to Perry Davis Vegetable Painkiller which contained both alcohol and opium as major ingredients. This combination of pain killers and alcohol caused changes in Swilling's personality. As the years passed his dependence on narcotics increased. When informed of his actions while under these influences, he had an affidavit sworn out stating he should be arrested and sent to an asylum if his behavior reverted.

In 1864 Jack Swilling married Trinidad in Tucson; soon after their marriage, they moved to Walnut Grove (north of Wickenburg) where he had a claim on Weaver's Mountain – there was too much water to work the claim and they left Walnut Grove; her mother lived with them until her death in 1865 and was buried at Camelback Mountain. In 1868 they moved into their first house was made of rock on the Agua Fria River near Black Canyon

Jack Swilling and other stockholders in the Swilling Ditch Company brought their mining experience to canal building, as can be seen in the use of *miner's inches* to measure the amount of water in canals. Miners lacking running water had to bring water to their claims and workings from live streams. The water ran through a small wooden waterway called a sluice which was often built by several miners. To measure the quality of water to which each was entitled small holes were cut in the side of the sluice and the flow of water through the opening was given the name "*miner's inch*". In Arizona, a *miner's inch* is equal to one-40th of a cubic foot of water. One Arizona *miner's inch* flowing one minute produces a little more than 11 gallons. It takes 325,851 gallons to make an acre-foot of water. The territory's early farmers considered one *miner's inch* of water sufficient to irrigate two acres of land.

During 1865 through 1867, Jack Swilling worked as an express rider for the mail traveling between Prescott and the Pima Villages near Tucson. Many of his trips took him through the Salt River Valley. Swilling noticed the patterns of the old canals and by the fall of 1867, he hit on a plan to form the first canal company owned by stockholders. In November 1867 Swilling and the other stockholders filed for water rights and the area claimed was "Opposite the buttes on Salt River, at a big rock about two miles above the point known as the hay camp and about twenty-five miles above the junction of the Gila and Salt Rivers." At a November meeting in Wickenburg, the Swilling Irrigating and Canal Company was organized with a capital stock of \$10,000. Each of the 50 shares were worth \$200, one fourth of a mile of canal, the amount needed to irrigate 160 acres (one homestead.) The next day, the company voted a levy of \$16 per share to raise money for the purchase of tools and provisions for construction.

In 1872 Swilling led an expedition to settle the Pueblo Viejo Valley near the present day towns of Safford and Solomon. They began to dig irrigation canals, but the valley was declared an Indian Reservation and the attempted settlement was abandoned and they returned to Phoenix.

Soon other ditch companies were being organized on both sides of the Salt River and an early edition of the *Salt River Herald*, the Valley's first newspaper, called the farmers "Ditch Mad." By 1878, the canal builders had claimed more than 450,000 miners inches,

or more than the states of Arizona, California and Nevada are now entitled to per year out of the Colorado River. On July 4, 1870, Jack Swilling Thomas Barnum and John T Alsap published intent to begin the Phoenix Ditch Company above the head of the ditch owned by the Swilling Irrigation Canal Company.

From Fall 1866 through late Spring of 1867, Swilling served as an express rider from Prescott to the Pima Villages, carrying mail between Tubac and Prescott.

The Pima and Maricopa Indians began a ditch in the Valley soon after the arrival of the Americans. The Americans and Mexicans farming upstream on the Gila River had diverted the water from the reservation. Although ordered to return to the reservation, the Pima and Maricopa completed a canal and planted about 1,200 acres of crops. Repeated attempts were made by many of the American settlers to have this group removed back to the reservation. When in 1878 a few Americans attempted to file for homesteads on the Pimas and Maricopas cultivated acres, the resulting Army investigation led to the creation of the Salt River Indian Reservation.

A settlement called "Phoenix" was formed in the northwest part of the township during the winter of 1867-1868. By the Fall of 1868 100 people had settled in the vicinity of Swilling's Ditch and the Phoenix Settlement near what is now 32nd Street and Van Buren. By the next year, about 1,000 acres of land were under cultivation.

In 1869 Swilling served as the community's Justice of the Peace. In the summer of 1869, he was appointed the Phoenix townsite's postmaster until his resignation in 1870 – the settlement received weekly mail..

When the Territorial Legislature created Maricopa County on February 14, 1871, it provided for a special election. Jack Swilling's home was chosen as the polling place and he served as inspector. He made every effort to win the county seat for Mill City which surrounded his homestead. According to early settlers and the newspapers, he wanted his homestead to become the site of the future city's offices and bribed the ballot taker to report the first election vote in favor of Mill City. His rivals discovered the plan and paid the ballot taker to declare the western townsite the election winner.

In 1872, 5,000 acres were under cultivation and the settlement's population was 700. The settlement was named Phoenix by the Swilling Ditch Company and from the settlement, the town of Phoenix received its name. The site was selected by the inhabitants of the valley and surveyed in 1870 – nothing could be raised without irrigation. Principal crops were barley, wheat, corn, sorghum, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes and peanuts. There were some experiments with fruit raising which were very successful, but seldom done.

Swilling's reputation as a desperado was carefully cultivated by himself – he reported the number of men he killed as between 2 and 14 during civilian life. In the Spring of 1878, while drinking he identified himself and two friends as robbers in a Wells Fargo stage robbery which had occurred near Wickenburg in late April. They were all arrested and secretly taken to Prescott the next day; they were then transferred to Yuma and went to

trial. The SRP Museum contains a letter written by Swilling addressing a letter to the public in which he claimed he had been falsely accused. On August 13, 1878 Jack Swilling died while incarcerated at Yuma before bail could be met. His body was buried the next day in the Pueblo Cemetery at Yuma; the cemetery was later relocated in 1902 to provide right of way for the Southern Pacific train track, location unknown. Soon after his death, the US Marshall who had taken them into custody recanted his allegations toward Swilling and the others and arrested a second set of men in connection with the robbery. On October 5, 1878 the others were released from jail. Days before his arrest Jack had returned from a new settlement on the Verde River 30 miles north of Camp McDowell with the intent of moving his family to the area.

Jack and Trinidad had seven children, and adopted two Apache children. Many pioneers claimed that Hank Swilling, a member of the Clanton gang, was Jack Swilling's son. There is some dispute that Trinidad may have been the first white woman in the territory. The dispute stems from the fact that she was of Spanish/Mexican birth. After Swilling's death, Trinidad moved to Phoenix with her three small children and took in sewing. She retained her interest in the Swillings' ranch until after 1885 and later married Henry Shumaker. Upon his death in 1892, Trinidad again became a seamstress to support her three sons from the second marriage. She died in Phoenix in 1925.

1992 marks the 125th anniversary of the founding of the Swilling Ditch Company, the first canal company formed by stockholders in the Salt River Valley. The exhibit commemorates this important milestone while exploring the various aspects of Jack Swilling's life and his contributions to the building of the new territory. It is hoped that this exhibit will increased our understanding of Swilling's life, territorial lifestyles and the early history of modern irrigation. The complete exhibit can be seen at the Salt River Project History Museum.