



A panoramic photo of Grafton from 1929



Frank Russell, son of Alonzo H. Russell, standing in back of the Russell home, top, (date unknown). Frank and his wife, Ellen, moved into the house in 1910 and were the last residents of Grafton to leave the town. Robert S. Wright of Hurricane, middle, stands in back of the caved-in Russell home in October of 2002. The Russell home after restoration, bottom.

Grafton 'Rides' Again

Utah's most famous ghost town gets a new lease on life.

BY REUBEN WADSWORTH

You've seen it: the mud brick schoolhouse on a plot of bare red dirt, the cabin with the sagging porch and the desolate graveyard tucked into a valley between the spectacular mountains of Zion. You just didn't know the name of the place is Grafton, Utah. In his book *Some Dreams Die*, which chronicles the plight of Utah ghost towns, George A. Thompson says Grafton is probably the most photographed ghost town in the west because millions have seen it in the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. "Could a ghost town ask for more fame than that?" he writes. The "real" West and the "reel" West converge nicely in Grafton, which sits in the shadow of Zion National Park, just over three miles west of Rockville. The town's own history reads like a Western movie script, with natural disasters, Indian troubles and rousing dances.

In 1862, only three years after its initial settlement, the town flooded, forcing its residents to evacuate and start over, which should have given them an indication that the town's location was on "the wrong side" of the Virgin River, as many commentators later expressed. After the debacle, some sought their fortunes elsewhere, but most decided to rebuild upstream.

Paiute and Navajo Indians also raised hell. Settlers' cattle and sheep's overgrazing began ruining Indian lands, decimating the grass, the seeds of which the Indians used for food during

the winter. The Indians' resentment boiled over into hostilities, including the killing and stealing of livestock. Settlers organized military units to protect against theft and attacks.

At the height of hostilities, on April 2, 1866, Indians killed brothers Joseph and Robert Berry, and Robert's wife, Mary (all of whom Mormon leaders had recently called from Salt Lake City to settle the area) as they returned to Long Valley (today's Orderville) via Short Creek (today's Colorado City) after visiting Grafton. The Berrys were advised that if they took the route they would be easy prey for Indians, but they paid no attention to the warning. Today, their resting places hold a prominent place in the Grafton cemetery—the only graves surrounded by a fence.

Funeral fracas

At the Berrys' funeral, Paiute Indians stormed into town with faces painted and wearing war bonnets, laughing and saying *wino manik*, meaning "very good." James Andrus, a captain in the settlers' military establishment, quickly left the service to get his rifle, saying, "I will make them think 'very good.'" Lyman and Karen Platt recount the incident in their book about Grafton. Knowing who Andrus was, the Indians fled before he could use his rifle.

The so-called "Indian problem" prompted the consolidation of settlements, and Grafton's residents fled to Rockville for approximately two years, making the community a ghost town for the first time. Grafton's farmers commuted from Rockville to Grafton to tend their fields, and most moved back after a while. Grafton thrived again, for a time.

In her girlhood memories of Grafton, Mary Bertha Wood Hall recorded that dances were frequently held during this period, with people coming from miles around to attend.

"Grafton had more music than any place I have ever seen," she recounts. "Nearly every night and every few nights, everybody in town with music would get out there in front of the front of the school building and start playing. Everybody would sing and everybody would dance. There was really a lot of pleasure that we got out of the hours we spent there."

By the early 20th century, Grafton farmers and ranchers grew tired of fighting a losing battle with the Virgin River. Many Grafton residents worked on the Hurricane Canal, and when it was completed, much of Grafton's population moved to Hurricane. By 1930, only six families remained, the last one leaving in 1944.

Movie Town

The near-deserted town caught the eye of movie makers. The most famous movie filmed in Grafton was undeniably *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, in which Butch Cassidy, played by Paul Newman, rides a bike through town with Etta Place, played by Katherine Ross, on the handlebars. One of the most recent motion pictures to use it as a backdrop was *The Red Fury*, an independent film masterminded by director and producer Lyman Dalton, which tells the story of an Indian boy who overcomes prejudice and learns important life lessons with the help of a washed-up rancher, a school teacher and a horse.

Dalton said that when he was scouting locations for the film, Grafton became the obvious choice because of its incredible surrounding scenery, self-contained

location and existing buildings. The crew erected false fronts next to the old schoolhouse and the Alonzo Russell home—some of which were knocked down by a minor flood during filming. As Dalton said, the cast and crew learned firsthand what the original settlers experienced. The unfortunate part of filming in Grafton, for Dalton and his crew, was that just after they wrapped up shooting, looters descended on the town to haul off souvenirs.

"We took the guards off too soon."

Preserving the Past

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, with Grafton's remaining structures wasting away, some developers wanted to "turn the place into Knotts Berry Farm," says Shirley Ballard, who, with her husband, Jeff, owns 25 acres in Grafton where their 35 head of cattle graze. A group of preservationists formed to thwart the effort, convincing Rockville's Town Council to reject any such proposals. That group eventually became the Grafton Heritage Partnership, a non-profit organization formally established in 1997 to preserve Grafton for "the benefit of present and future generations."

Partnership president Jane Whalen said the Grand Canyon Trust "did the heavy

STILL STANDING

GRAFTON'S REMAINS

ALONZO RUSSELL HOME (1862)—This adobe-walled home boasts a beautiful, handcrafted front porch where the family often met to socialize and sing. A blacksmith by trade, he supplied the town with farm tools and eating utensils and made hobbles for his cattle that Indians could not undo. Frank Stephen Russell and Mary Ellen Ballard Russell, who lived in the house from 1917–1944, were the last residents to leave Grafton.

JOHN WOOD HOME (1877)—A farmer and rancher, John Wood made horsehair ropes in his spare time. A historic split rail fence surrounds the property, which includes two other buildings, a large log barn and a one-room granary.

GRAFTON SCHOOLHOUSE (1886)—Quite possibly the most photographed ghost town historic structure in the west, the school was built on a solid foundation



John Wood home

of lava rocks quarried from a nearby hillside. The settlers cut the lumber for the building from Arizona's Mount Trumbull, 75 miles away, and made the adobe bricks from a clay pit.

DAVID BALLARD HOME (1907)—David worked as a cattle rancher, which had become Grafton's principal industry decades earlier because of the difficulty and unpredictability of growing crops.

LOUISA FOSTER RUSSELL HOME (1879)—Alonzo's third wife, Louisa raised her six children in this home. She owned one of the first weaving looms in Grafton, which she brought from New Hampshire.



The restored Grafton schoolhouse, front, and the Russell home during its restoration in June of 2004.

lifting” for the organization at first, but the trust was mainly interested in preserving the floodplain and animal habitat. With the help of Washington County, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and numerous foundations and private donors, the partnership raised enough money to purchase the Russell home and 150 acres surrounding it. Robert and Linda Attiyeh, a couple from the Los Angeles area with Utah ties, became vital allies as well, buying up other Grafton land to ensure its preservation.

“It is kind of a miracle we put it all together and saved the town from development,” Whalen says.

After securing ownership of the land,

The partnership chose to preserve Grafton as a ghost town, deciding not to provide electricity or running water to the site, which the town residents never had.

the partnership restored the Russell Home and Washington County restored the schoolhouse (which it owns). The Attiyehs restored the Louisa Russell home and the John Wood home. The partnership chose to preserve Grafton as a ghost town, deciding not to provide electricity or running water to the site, which the town’s residents never had, explains Doug Alder, former Dixie State College president and

founding partnership member.

The group also decided not to openly promote Grafton as a tourist attraction.

“It’s in every book in America about ghost towns,” Alder says. “People still come without advertising it.”

Grafton Today

Eight years ago, the partnership planned to construct a footbridge to Grafton for easy access to the town from Highway 9, figuring that people walking into town would do less damage than people driving in. That proposal failed because

the partnership found out “a beaver can’t even cut a log without the Army Corps of Engineers’ permission,” and the Corps, which is

responsible for easements on the river, felt like the partnership wanted to build the bridge for the wrong reasons, Ballard says.

To prevent vandalism and looting, the partnership would like a site steward to remain in Grafton full time, especially during the summer months. Once the interior of the Russell home is complete, Whalen says there are plans to allow visitors inside. [SL](#)



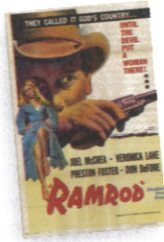
In Old Arizona, 1929

The first “talkie” filmed outdoors, it starred Warner Baxter (who won the Academy Award for this role as The Cisco Kid), Edmund Lowe and Dorothy Burgess. A sound truck breaking down forced much of the movie to be filmed in a frontier village backlot in Hollywood.



The Arizona Kid, 1930

A less successful follow-up to *In Old Arizona*, Warner Baxter played a character similar to The Cisco Kid. The film used Grafton as its sole backdrop. Filming was a boon to locals, who were paid handsomely as extras.



Ramrod, 1947

Known as “Utah’s Centennial Film” because of its year of production, it starred Joel McCrea, Veronica Lake, Preston Foster, Charles Ruggles, Donald Crisp and Lloyd Bridges. The movie, referred to as the “first adult Western,” included lots of violence and sexuality by 1940s standards.



Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, 1969

Easily the most famous movie filmed in Grafton, it starred Paul Newman and Robert Redford in the title roles. Commonly thought of as the birth of the “buddy film,” the movie garnered four Academy awards for best original score, best original score, best cinematography and best screenplay.



The Red Fury, 1984

Starring Wendy Lynne, Calvin Bartlett, William Jordan, Katherine Cannon and Juan Gonzales, this independent film was the last to use Grafton as a backdrop.

Source: *When Hollywood Came to Town: A History of Movie-making in Utah* by James V. D’Arc