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Sardine Canyon: The name's a bit fishy

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The names a bit fishy.

Some locals believe that "Sardine Canyon" came from travelers eating packaged sardines on their way into Cache Valley. The packaging was left on the side of the road, marking the path for others. No one knows for sure, however.

Accounts from the **Utah State University**

Archives give more reasons; one states that nearby creeks were full of little fish packed in like sardines. Another account states the name came from being packed into the canyon like a can of sardines since the original road was steep and sometimes narrow.

But the Sardine Canyon story gets fishier the location isnt where most locals think it is. U.S. Highway 89/91, which runs from Wellsville to Brigham City, is commonly known to many locals as Sardine Canyon. But consult a map and you will find the canyon the road follows is actually Wellsville Canyon, and has been ever since its beginning.

There is a Sardine Canyon its just a few miles south of Wellsville Canyon and is nestled to the side of Mount Sterling. Sardine Canyon is the original canyon many early settlers used when coming to Cache Valley during the 1860s, which is why theres confusion surrounding the name. Sardine Canyon hasnt been used in years (it was officially closed down during the 1960s) and, today, its considered private land owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The road is worn and hard to travel on besides, theres no public access. Still, the name has stuck with the new road, even as it passes through Wellsville Canyon. John Stewart of River Heights said he cringes when Wellsville Canyon is called by the wrong name.

"So many people, even the media, still call the Wellsville Canyon the Sardine Canyon, which causes me to think about suicide," Stewart said with a laugh.

"Im so annoyed they continue to call Wellsville Canyon Sardine Canyon, and I guess people call it whatever they want to, but there is a Sardine Canyon that still exists, and if some day I decided to kill someone else instead of myself, it will be someone who refers to it as Wellsville Canyon. I will run him down and do him in." Wellsville Canyon has three other names (besides the name of "Sardine") attached to it. Location in Wellsville Canyon is crucial because its actually part of two other canyons: Dry Canyon and Box Elder Canyon. So, where you stand determines which canyon you are in. Dry Canyon is located in the middle of the canyon and is south of Sardine Summit, which is the highest point in the canyon. Sardine Summit also marks the dividing county line between Cache and Box Elder counties. In essence, drivers coming in from Brigham City enter Box Elder Canyon. After passing Dry Lake, the canyons name changes to Wellsville Canyon. To avoid confusion, a United States Geographical Survey map from 1998 (updated about every 15 to 20 years) calls the whole road Highway 89/91 and doesnt show canyon names on the map. Highway 89/91 is also the name the 2005 Utah Department of Transportation map uses. Larry Brunson at the county surveyors office said a map from Sept. 4, 1878, shows the old Sardine Canyon road in detail. On the same map is the route of Wellsville Canyon but there is no label attached to it. There are subtle differences on a map from May 4, 1877 the road of the future Wellsville Canyon highway actually goes to the west side of Dry Lake. On a different map, years later, surveyors drew the road creeping to the east side of Dry Lake. In "A History of Cache County" by F. Ross Peterson, the road still turned to the east of Dry Lake until 1950. Today, the road cuts through the middle of Dry Lake.

"By todays standards, the surveyors were really accurate," Brunson said. A map from **USU** Archives dated April 1931 shows

Sardine Canyon listed as usable but doesn't show a name or location for Wellsville Canyon. Visitors to Wellsville Canyon can still see the remnants of the old Sardine route on the west side of the hill by Dry Lake. Stewart says as a child, he remembers traveling through the Wellsville Canyon route with his mother and being frightened because it was in the wintertime and snow and ice covered the road. Because it had been known as Sardine Road for all those years, the name stuck.

One reason Stewart is such a stickler on using the correct name is that he is related to the man whose name graces this area in three ways: Wellsville, Wellsville Mountains and Wellsville Canyon.

The man is Daniel Hanmer Wells, and he came west after converting to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Wells became the first mayor of Salt Lake City. Through his community influence, his name became known throughout Salt Lake City and neighboring towns. Eventually, his influence came to Cache Valley and residents honored him by naming a mountain range, canyon and city after him. Wellsville City replaced the name of Maughans Fort.

In the book "History of a Valley" by Leonard Arrington, Sardine Canyon is referenced a few times as the original route settlers used to travel from Salt Lake City to Cache Valley.

According to the book, the winter of 1855 was the most severe winter the people of Northern Utah had experienced. Ranchers were afraid their cattle might die of starvation before the snow would melt. Cattle were rounded up and taken through Sardine Canyon, a steep and often dangerous route (which is why the main route was switched to Wellsville Canyon years later). The snow was 2 feet deep in places and only 420 cattle out of 2,000 survived the journey.

One of the first settlers of the valley was Peter Maughan. Maughan told LDS Church President Brigham Young that he wanted to help settle Cache Valley. With permission to form the northern settlement, Maughan and his party left Salt Lake City and got to Cache Valley through Sardine Canyon. The book states, "... through Sardine Canyon, which we found very rough and narrow in some places and a very steep hill to descend but we got down all right."

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