

THEY MADE THEIR WAY TO MENIFEE

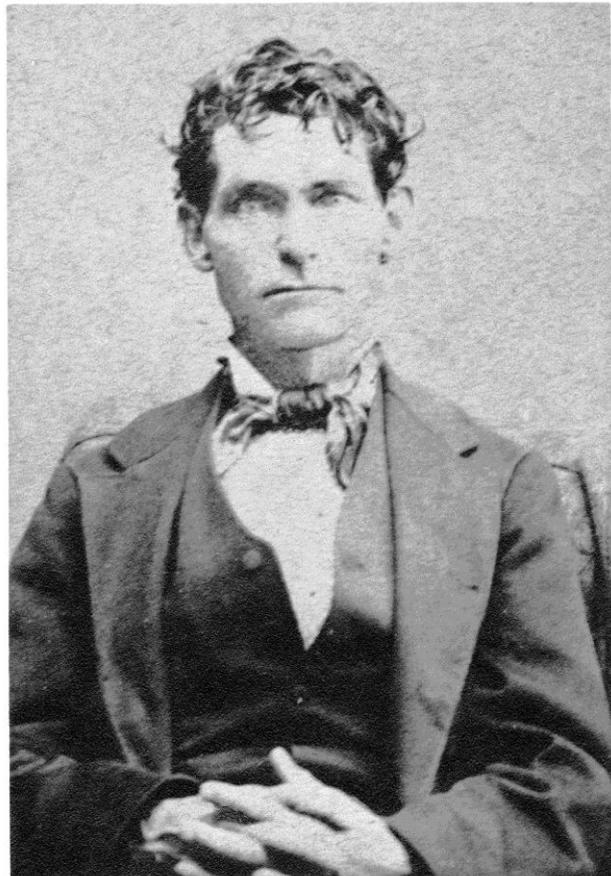
Luther Menifee Wilson Came Seeking Gold

When local elementary school children tour Menifee's history museum, they often ask "why is the city named Menifee, was he one of the early pioneers?"

He was indeed.

Luther Menifee Wilson was born in Mount Sterling, Kentucky in 1842. By the time he was 18, he was living away from home and worked for the railroad. He was at an appropriate age to be a soldier during the Civil War and several Riverside County newspaper articles referred to him as Colonel Luther Wilson, suggesting that he was a Civil War veteran.

He made his way to California sometime before 1870 and found work as a miner in Kern County. In 1872, Wilson married Mary Jane Clark, whose father operated several stagecoach lines, express wagons carrying gold bullion and 20-mule team ore wagons in San Bernardino. In 1879, Wilson was a hotelkeeper in Ivanpah, a small silver mining town located in the Mojave Desert. He was employed at the local mines in the area, and it was there he improved his skills at prospecting for gold.



In the early 1880's there were gold mining districts being formed in nearby Perris and Hemet. Wilson had separated from his wife, and his prospecting ventures led him to our area. In 1883, after initial discovery of a gold-bearing quartz ledge near present day Holland and Murrieta roads, Wilson filed a claim with the San Diego County Recorder's office for his "Menifee" mine. Government Survey maps of the time included labels depicting the Menifee Mining District, and the area was then being referred to as the Menifee Valley.

Wilson's gold bearing quartz vein was approximately three feet wide. There were four shafts on the vein, one reaching 125 feet deep. The main shaft had a 5' x 11' double compartment, which allowed two kibbles containing men, ore or water to traverse the shaft at the same time. A steam-powered 5-stamp mill was erected at the mine site that could crush 5 to 10 tons of ore per day. The sound of the stamp mill could be heard many miles away.

Wilson sold his claim for \$10,000 in 1884, and was one of the few miners who profited from the mines in the area. Most of the prospectors and miners were undercapitalized and had to borrow money for equipment and operating costs. The mines were frequently closed or inactive and changed ownership when lenders demanded payment. Compared to the mining history of Northern California, mining in Menifee started relatively late and lasted only a short period of time.

Although Wilson was primarily a prospector and miner, he also recognized the farming potential of the area. In 1885, he filed a claim for a dam site on Strawberry Creek near Idyllwild. The dam would be for the purpose of storing water for irrigation in the San Jacinto Valley. Wilson noted that his water claim will be "better than money in the bank" for his children. In 1887, Wilson and a cousin from Kentucky searched for potential agricultural land to settle several of their Kentucky kinsmen.

By 1893 the County of Riverside had just been formed, and Wilson and some partners were working new mining claims at the "King Wilson" or "Alice" mine, which was located just south of present day Scott and Leon roads. It was described as containing a gold-bearing ledge, which cropped out of a barley field and could be traced over 2,800 feet on the surface. At the west end of the ledge an 80-foot shaft was excavated. A few years later the mine played out, and the equipment was sold to a company in Mexico.

By 1895 there were many prospectors working the hills in the Menifee Mining District and adjacent areas. At that time, Wilson was generally considered the local expert on mines. When Wilson said "dig" it was pretty safe to figure on there being pay dirt near. Luther died in 1899. He was destitute, had a number of outstanding debts, and buried in an unmarked grave in the Riverside Olivewood Memorial Cemetery.

Although named for the area's first gold miner, the Menifee Valley was actually settled by grain farmers seeking land and a place to raise their families.

We appreciate the research and narrative provided by Mr. Bob Kent to compose this article. For more information about Luther Menifee Wilson and other pioneer settlers, please visit the Menifee History Museum, which is open Sundays from 1 to 4pm. Admission is free. Also visit menifeehistory.com

