

Short Story 5

He Loved His Anvil

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Sharkey Harsha was a steel driving man!

Unlike his legendary contemporary, John Henry, Sharkey has not been memorialized in story or song. No bronze plaque marks the place of his birth and no poets relate tall tales of his prowess with the single or double-jack. Never-the-less, Harsha was a real, live, "hunk" of a man who practiced the art of hand steeling in Southern Arizona mines and prospects.

Indeed, the Tombstone Hills echoed and re-echoed to the music of his hammers striking on steel against rock for the first half of this century. Whenever two or more ancient denizens of Tombstone Camp chance to meet on the benches of Whiskey Row and engage in swapping lies about the days when the mines were operating and silver was king, Sharkey and his exploits are certain to become topics of conversation.

Sharkey was a "character" in a camp populated by "characters". A big man, he had the long, bowed arms developed by many of the hand steel specialists in the course of laboring long years underground, drilling holes for explosives, usually in cramped quarters and from awkward positions. So pronounced was the curvature and length of Harsha's arms that combined with his ambling gait and continual swinging of these limbs, some of the town's boys nick-named him "The Gorilla".

Born Henry Clay Harsha on May 5, 1866, in Baaz, Wisconsin, Sharkey learned his mining skills in the Wisconsin lead and zinc districts before drifting to Southern Arizona where he found ready employment in the precious metals mines in the boom and bust days of the last quarter of the century.

As a youth Sharkey worked underground in his family's lead and zinc mines. Gifted with a large and strong body, he became competent as an all-around miner. He worked as a driller, mucker, timber man—just whatever the job required. Drilling, either single or double-jack, was his specialty, but singlejacking was Sharkey's long suit. He enjoyed his work and he loved the tools that were a part of his trade.

Silver mining, because of the drop in the price commanded by the white metal, had come almost to a halt by the turn of the century. Harsha, who by this time had reached his mature strength, made the rounds of the mining camps in search of work. He labored some

months at various mines in the nearby Santa Rita Mountains, then took a turn at work in the great copper camp of Bisbee. Bisbee and its giant mining firms and huge mines held little appeal for the miner. He soon realized that his drilling skills were not considered particularly valuable in mines where the most modern machinery was employed, so shaking the dust of Bisbee Camp from his feet, Sharkey crossed The Divide and arrived in Tombstone via Shank's Mare one afternoon in April of 1903. Finding work there was easy. Most of the mining was being conducted by small firms or individuals who were leasing from the owners of the shut-down major silver properties. The "leasers", for the most part, had not yet converted to pneumatic drilling and a man who could drill, load, blast and muck a round by hand found that his services were in considerable demand. Sharkey went to work right away.

As the years went by, Harsha labored in almost every hole in the Tombstone District. He was no stranger to employment by firms such as Tombstone Consolidated Mines Company, Old Glory Mining Company, Herschel Mining Company and the Development Company of America. Leasers who used his abilities included the Giacomina Brothers and Greenway Albert.

Sharkey and "Judge" John Ross—a lawyer with considerable interest in mining—had a long, if not particularly profitable, relationship. Ross owned a number of patented mining properties and spent several fortunes attempting to develop substantial mines. Harsha worked in every one of them, including the Side Wheel, Rattling Boy and the Sultana.

It was in the 1930s that Sharkey obtained a lease on the Sultana from Judge Ross. Located in the low hills only a couple of miles south from downtown Tombstone and just east of the Charleston road, the claim contained a number of narrow, almost vertical veins that carried considerable silver values in association with lead carbonates. The making of a mine on this property became an obsession to the now-aging hand driller and he devoted all of his energies to the project. First he sank a 56-foot shaft on a promising outcrop. When the vein pinched out, he drifted a few feet both ways but eventually had to abandon that effort.

Sharkey's next attack on the Sultana came by drifting

on a vein that outcropped in an arroyo a couple of hundred feet from his shaft. This he followed by gophering along the vein. His workings were small, barely two feet wide and about three feet high; but day after day, year after year, he drilled, blasted, and mucked, in the cramped diggings. The floor of his drift was worn smooth from the dragging of canvas and leather bags of ore from the working face to the portal.

Sharkey never made a mine of the Sultana, but he took a comfortable living from the development ore he produced in the course of his efforts. He also grubbed out numerous prospect holes in the vicinity of "T" Hill just west of downtown Tombstone. These failed to produce saleable ores.

Harsha followed a never-changing work routine: Monday through Friday he headed for his diggings at dawn, burdened by several hand steels and a lunch bucket that dangled from his hands. Late afternoon found him trudging homeward toting the same load. Arriving at his house on North Ninth Street he built up a fire in the forge and while the "steels" heated he carried his anvil and blacksmith's hammers from the house. When the drills reached "the right color" Sharkey sharpened and shaped them by hammering, after which they were tempered to a toughness that would cut through the rock he drilled. (Sharpening drill steel is an art he learned as a youth). Saturday morning was cleaning time. Dishes and clothes were washed, the floor swept, and upon occasion the bed was aired out or changed.

A bath followed and the miner was ready for a leisurely weekend with his friends on Whiskey Row.

Sharkey loved his tools and treated them with respect. The moils that were left over night at his diggings were wiped down with an oily rag before being locked away. He owned several sets of steels, all of which were kept inside his home. None were ever loaned to another miner. They were, he said, "his children".

Old timers in Tombstone still relate how when one evening Harsha's house caught fire, the volunteer fire fighters arrived to find smoke pouring from the dwelling and a distraught Sharkey standing in the yard. Suddenly he ran toward the blaze and before anyone could stop him he dashed inside. Moments later he emerged from the burning building with a big anvil in his arms. Queried about why he had chanced a fiery death to rescue a piece of iron, the miner said, "I didn't want to lose the temper from my anvil. It's my best friend and I love it"!

Eventually arthritis and old age caught up with Sharkey. Unable to work his lease on the Sultana he quit mining and for a few months was a habituate of an Allen Street bench—warming it while passing the time of day with others of his ilk. Harsha didn't take kindly to inactivity, fell sick and gave up the ghost in the Cochise County Hospital at Douglas in 1949. Burial was in Bisbee's Evergreen Cemetery.

His epitaph might have read: "Sharkey Harsha. He was a man of steel!"



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