

INDIAN JOE PETERSON AND THE PANAMINT INDIANS

Letter from Elizabeth Mecham to George Pipkin of Trona

George: "My story about Indian Joe which appeared in the Argonaut on April 18th, brought forth a very interesting letter from Elizabeth Mecham who lives in Bayside California. Mrs Mecham was raised at Millspaugh in Mountain Springs Canyon where her parents owned and operated a mine. She attended school in Darwin. Her family was friendly with the Indians and at an early age she took an interest in their welfare and helped them with their many problems. Consequently, she knew all the Indians in the Panamint and Death Valley country which included Indian Joe and his family. So little is known and written about the Indians of the area, that we are recording her letter for posterity. It would be tragic not to do so."

Elizabeth: (May 26, 1973) Dear George: "Thanks for the Articles. I first knew Joe Peterson in 1900. He came to our camp at Millspaugh while we were building. He liked us and we liked him. He came often during the following years. He stayed close to his and Mable's home at Indian Joe Springs on Sweetwater Creek. She came a couple of times, but stayed close to their camp. When our postoffice was established in 1901, his mail came here.

He was a big man, kind, with a clear copper colored skin. But that is not how he got his nick-name "Copper Skin Joe". In 1902, he brought over some good looking rock, streaked with copper, and showed it to us, a rare tribute then by an Indian. We went with him to take samples and locate the claims for him. My mother assayed the samples in our assay office, but it did not run high enough in gold to work.

Joe was a Panamint Indian. Tom's son (the renegade) claimed that he had killed eleven white men! We knew him in early 1900, before his death. He was a bad one alright. A small, white haired man, as was his brother Charley who became Panamint Charlie when Tom died.

We liked all the Indians, but my favorites were Indian George Hanson and his family, who lived at Warm Springs in Panamint Valley. They all had the freedom of our place and use of the blacksmith shop. I can still see George sitting at the end of the table. He would put his black Stetson hat under the chair, and tell of the old days . . . "and my wife 'he sick'." I have worked my memory and can not remember her Indian name. Do you remember it? If so, tell me. George always referred to her as "he". They were very devoted. I knew her and used to visit them when they were camped at our place or above us in the timber, where they cut pinion wood for us, and later at Tennessee Springs when Isabelle got the angora goats. She got the first few from Charlie Walker, and then "Uncle Sam" added to them. "Our Molly" was little . . . so cute and bright. We all loved her. They were a close-knit family. I made two trips on horseback to Warm Springs, their winter home, to get mules and have lunch with them. This was before "he", his wife, died.

Indian Joe cared little for John Searles, and was delighted when they got the spring, orchard and gardens back. I was there a couple of times, while hunting horses at the head of Mountain Springs Canyon. I went on over the malapai and around to their place. It was a delightful spot. At times, our stock ran with the Indian stock. If I couldn't find them and he did later, he would bring them along over to our place.

Can't you just see the Chinese cook and Searles' young son taking to the hills when the Indians raided their camp! Later, a few of Searles' Chinese workers went over the hill into Indian Wells Valley and set up a borax camp against the foothills on the east side of China Borax Lake. That's how China Lake got its name."

"In the 1880's and 90's, Landers had a big cow outfit in the Kern River Valley. He used the Indian Wells Valley for a winter range. The area was then known as Salt Wells Valley. Landers drilled a well in the south end of the valley and got flowing water. Fearing a rush of nesters, he covered the well so good that no one has ever been able to find it. Later, he ran horses over Mountain Spring Canyon into Junction Flat. When I was growing up, there were still some on the range with the running "L" brand. It was fine horse country, and when Cole from the South Fork brought his horses over to his homestead at Cole Springs west of Old Coso, he gathered a few of Landers' horses on the way.

Mable, Indian Joe's sister, outlived him and stayed on at the place for a while. We were saddened when word came of Joe's death. I think it was well before 1919 . . 1912 rings a bell with me 'though I could be wrong on this. There was some confusion with the family's names. All the years I knew them, there was no "Charlie" Hanson. Panamint Charlie, Tom's brother, was a relation on George's wife's side, her brother. So he was was George's brother-in-law and his name wasn't Hanson. When the little boy died in 1911 there was a big "cry". At the time, there was only one house at Warm Spring plus a few tents and wickiups, and the remadas. The dead in those days were carefully hidden away, each in their own territory - Death Valley - Panamint Valley - Old Coso - Saline Valley. When Mike, Indian George's son, married a Coso Indian - George Gregory's daughter, - that brought those two clans together. Although George and his family did not come to the Darwin vicinity while Bill Johnson, George's oldest son was alive, Mike spent a lot of time in Lone Pine. When Bill died, he came home. He was a bit wild when he was young, but settled down to be the fine man he was, after he married Annie.

It is possible that Fred Gray of Ballarat wrote the letter that you have from the Indian. Our old friend, Billy Hyder was Gray's partner for many years. He would visit us. He had been a hat salesman at Silverwood's and later, the May Company in Los Angeles, when he fell in love with our wild country. Having wife trouble, he cut all ties and settled in Ballarat. He was a great guy, and good company.

It should have been Bill Boland (not Bolens). He and Hungry Bill would come up to Darwin and camp up at the end of Main Street. We kids would go up and see them and their kids would scatter like quail. There was a bunch of them. Them they would creep back and peek out from behind their mother's skirts, and finally come out and play with us.

I remember the Carrs who you wrote about, when they came in 1909 and took up their homestead in the Indian Wells Valley. The wells they drilled hit nothing but malapai. (Scribè's Note: - there is confusion here. It was the Schuette's well that hit malapai, not the Carr's. The Schuette Claim was three miles east of Brown on the "Straight Road" built by Schuette and Weisel. This is the trail ridden by Elizabeth going to Brown for the mail in 1910. The Carr's homestead was four miles off this line, to the south.)

We old timers laughed at all of them and resented "Our Valley" being fenced in. I carried the mail on horseback in 1910 to finish out the contract when the Shepherd Canyon road from Ballarat was completely taken out by a cloudburst in September of 1909. So we had it changed from Millspaugh to Brown. I went down Monday, up on Tuesday, etc. Mostly I went on horseback. Once a week or ten days, I would take the team and buckboard. I finished the contract July 1, 1910.

"Gus Hailzig (Haelsig) and wife opened a little store and had the post-office and I stayed nights with them in Brown. (Oliver) Smith had the saloon and George Brown opened a restaurant across the railroad tracks. He served good meals and was a go-getter, so the town was named for him. The Los Angeles-Owens Valley aqueduct was being built at the time, and their huge commissary tent, corrals, and barn were still there. The siphon pipes were being laid in Sand Canyon and Ninemile Canyon. The aqueduct boys came to town in the evenings, but the town of Brown had little to offer them. It soon withered on the vine and Inyokern went ahead.

Mr. Carr thought I was wonderful to ride forty miles a day with the mail, but it was no feat for me, as I grew up on a horse. We had a lot of "lungers on the desert in those days who lived to a ripe old age as Mr. Carr did and his wife still is.

The old "Nadeau" shotgun road straight as a string across the valley to Coyote Holes, soon disappeared (only short stretches were used after the homesteaders started fencing. The branch from Desert Well through Leliter survived longer). This road he built across the valley up to Modoc and Darwin was a landmark from the time it was built in 1876. Later, he built his similar straight road that turned out for nothing up Panamint Valley along the base of the Argus Range, from the Slate Range Crossing up to the Minietta Mine.

In 1907 I was aboard the six horse stage, enroute from Johannesburg to Ballarat. The stage was crowded and I was riding on the high seat with the driver, Dominique Estaban, who was an old friend. Coming down the grade on the north side of the Slate Range Crossing with the horses on a dead run over the narrow twisting road was one of the greatest thrills of my life. What a ride!

Are you still with me? And thinking, "Does she ever run down?" But how else can I share my wonderful memories? And you pay so many fine tributes to our old timers and all the memories you have of them and the good old days.

I am going home this summer to see the few who are left and to visit a while with those at peace in my Darwin cemetery. Only strays in my beloved old town now.

Take care and be good, from one old desert rat to another! Best of everything."

Elizabeth L. Mecham

George: - "What a beautiful letter and what wonderful memories! Let's give the little lady a big hand!"

This Scribe's comment: - "My parents, Henry F. W. and Johanna Marie and my older brother, George, four years old in 1910, were equally impressed with the 18 year old girl who rode alone 40 miles to Brown to pick up the mail. Their "tenthouse by the side of the road" was a regular stop for Elizabeth. They gave up that site because of "their well that hit nothing but malapai," and tried again with greater success across the line over in Inyo County at the Schuette Ranch still going strong in 1943 when the Navy bought us out.

Transcribed September 1988 for the Early Timers of the Indian Wells Valley.

Henry F. (Hank) Schuette