

Historic Benton Country  
Pioneer Days

12-10-81

All O. K.

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## PIONEER DAYS

## Historical Benton Country . . . a Diverse Land

by Adele Reed

There was a land of diverse use located in the southeast portion of Mono county that tempted early settlers. It included Hammil Valley, Blind Spring Valley, Benton Valley and Queen Valley, the latter now in the state of Nevada. Farming and livestock ranches began and mining became important in the surrounding hills and mountains.

The little settlement that began to grow near some hot springs in Blind Spring Valley became the hub of travel to and from Nevada and the Owens River Valley in Inyo county. It went by various names, Hot Springs, Bentonville, and Spring Valley until about 1865 when it became known as Benton Hot Springs. This was shortened to Benton as the years went by and a new little town named Benton Station was built near the Carson & Colorado Railroad and Highway 6.

According to notes from the Journal of Mines and Geology of 1940, the earliest mining in Mono county was that of the silver ores in Blind Spring Hill in the southeast section. "Discovery was made in 1862 and until about 1879 there was considerable activity from the Comanche, Diana, Kerrick, Cornucopia and Boraska Mines. The present camp and townsite owned by the Comanche Mining and Reduction Company are on their 240 acres of patented land along the line of the Railroad just east of Blind Spring Hill. This company acquired the property in 1921 and work was done on the Comanche and Kerrick Mines. The 100 ton per day mill was built on the northeast slope near the portal of the Ross Tunnel. Operations were suspended in 1930 due to the low price of silver."

Evidence was found in later years of the great activity on the hill. Crumbling rock remains of miners cabins, wooden remains, tunnels, big mine dumps as well as can and bottle dumps here and there made it very interesting, especially to collectors of aged and colorful bottles.

Five gallon kerosene cans were plentiful in remote camps such as this and it is told that the miners filled them with bullion (ore) to be hauled out by wagon and team. The route was by way of Aurora, Bodie, Bridgeport and Sonora Pass to Sacramento where they were loaded on ships as return ballast to England for smelting.

Benton Hot Springs supplies services for the mining camp on the hill, as noted in the Mammoth City Herald, April 17, 1880. James Waterson of Benton did extensive advertising as "a dealer of general merchandise of all kinds, the best assorted stock this side of the mountains, hay, grain and lumber received on consignment and stored in our immense warehouse, terms low."

Another ad: "Re-opening of the Old Corner Saloon, Main street, Benton, Calif., R.B. Alverson, prop. Wines, Liquors, Cigars, also a billiard table for the enjoyment of my patrons."

These businesses, a Hotel named the Waiwera, a school, the barn and corrals for relay stock, some ranch homes and a Paiute settlement nearby made the early town.

The following quotes are from historical notes found in pre-emption land and water claims, several papers and two maps, Lt. Geo. Wheeler's 1871 and the Adam Asher map, 1872. These records are courtesy of Marge Whitney of Round Valley who researched the files in the Esmeralda county courthouse in Goldfield, Nevada and the Mono county courthouse in Bridgeport.

"Montgomery City was an early mining camp northeast of Benton near the slopes of the White mountains. The rich looking float discovered on the mountainside brought miners flocking to the new silver discovery. The little camp grew overnight along a stream of cold, clear water. In time the usual frame buildings appeared, store, saloon, blacksmith shop, recorder's office and miners cabins. After much labor it was found there were not continuous

veins of silver and the camp folded overnight. The situation there was typical of most of the discoveries along the White Mountains. Pat Reddy was mining recorder at Montgomery City, he became Bodie's criminal lawyer in later years. A prominent mining company in Montgomery City named The Georgiana was auctioned off by two men named Wingate in October, 1864 on the steps of the courthouse."

"Whiskey Flat" as noted on the mentioned maps, was located on the eastern side of Blind Spring Hill, a settlement of 200 families."

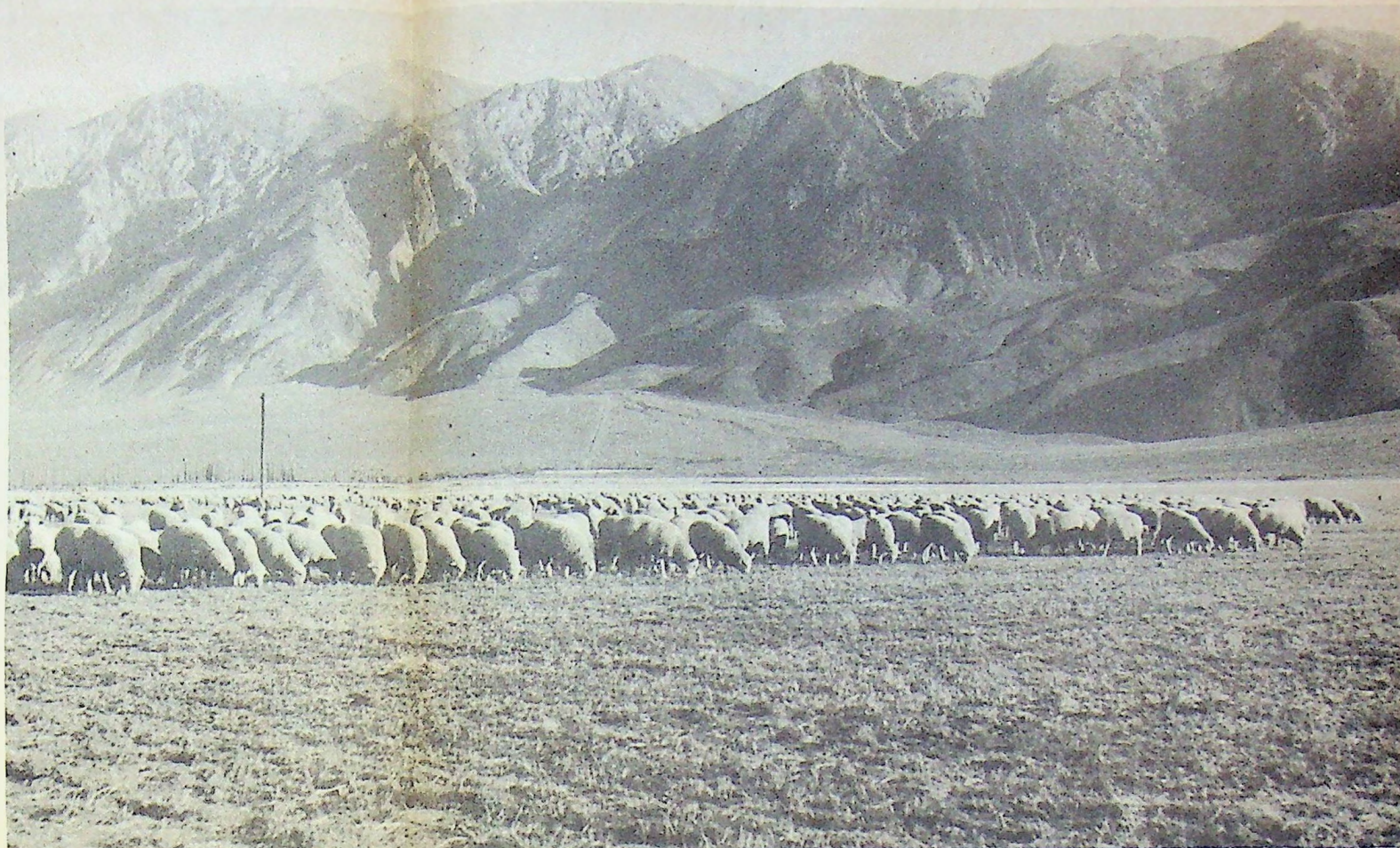
"Camp Enterprise" was noted in several reports as having quite a few residents, however the exact location is not known."

"Recorded in an aged looking document of the Slate Mining District in 1864, the White Mountains were named the Slate Mountains, situated in the Slate Mining District of Esmeralda county (Owens River) Territory of Nevada."

"The East Fork of the Owens River" was noted on the maps as running south near the west side of Blind Spring Hill toward Yellowjacket. Other streams from the Whites carried the name "Owens River". They must have converged with the water from Yellowjacket and other streams to eventually join the main Owens River. In other words, the whole Benton area was the headwaters of the "East Fork of the Owens River."

"In 1876 G.A. Truman and C.R. Thompson built a mill on Morris Creek east of the Pedro homestead and the original arrastra stands today. Truman Meadows was named for G.A. Truman."

"From 1862-65, when claims were open for possessor rights, a list of the names found on water and, or, mining claims is extensive. A total of 250 acres of pre-empted land for homesteading and claims was counted as available on the White Mountains. The whole area was a beehive of activity. One Joshua Clayton was civil engineer in the Whites listed from 1854-64. Water, at that time, was brought by ditch from Moore's Creek (now Morris) and was conveyed to miners along the way. In charge were two men, Schlemmer and Shirley."



The picturesque old Hammil ranch is sheepled in fall. The tips of poplar trees seen on left side of the sheep lead to ranch headquarters, now known as the Harris Ranch. Adele Reed photo

"We find that two brothers named McBride, Mormon missionaries, came to Benton Valley in early days. William was a land surveyor for both Mono and Mineral counties and he and his brother became landowners by purchase of the E.S. Taylor ranch after Mr. Taylor was killed by Indians. Their place became a way station on the wagon and stage route to the north. It was named Bertrand Station for new owners and the log barn, cabin and corrals were seen for many years."

"Two men, A.J. Rhodes and F.T. White built a Toll Road north from the McBride ranch. Their map is shown on a pre-emption claim, but the date is not readable. It was named Wilson's State Line, Teel's Marsh and Columbus Toll Road. The map shows three stage lines leading from McBride's Station, one to River Springs, one to Owens River and Columbus and the main line, as named, went over the mountains to Teel's Marsh and the Station at Marietta. There were two branch roads leading toward Columbus and one going directly south to Fish Lake Valley and other points."

"Another pre-emption map of the Benton and Aurora Toll Road shows the route mostly in Nevada and leads into Aurora near the Wide West Mill. The date is not clear on this, it looks as if a very early one."

The above quotes and history gleaned give a picture of the network of trails and roads in the Benton area and along the Whites at one time. The use of prospectors burros, the mule and horse teams, stage animals all were so important in that distant era.

After studying the two maps of 1871 and 1872 it was not clear where the East Fork of the Owens River headed from. We visited the Mono county courthouse and found, in a pre-emption book, the following: "Wm. McBride and Peter Cyeehoed, on Dec. 22, 1877, claimed all the water rights of Black Lake, or to the extent of 1000 inches measured under a four inch pressure. To be used for milling and agriculture and other purposes in Benton, Mono county, Cal., and in the vicinity. To divert same by means of a ditch four feet wide and twenty feet deep."

Since Black Lake lies on the west side of the Benton Range of hills it seemed an impossible feat until we explored and found the natural opening in the hills that carried the water. It is near Dute. Pete's place is a re-creating that

the White Mountains from Fish Lake Valley to meadows and fields of the Benton area and the upper country. The Trail Canyon and the Queen Canyon routes became historical passageways.

The first ranching in Hammil Valley was attributed to William and Mary Hammil. They came all the way from Belfast, Ireland to find and locate their Promised Land. A large acreage in the Valley was homesteaded by Hammil and very important was his water right. From a pre-emption record we found in the Mono county courthouse we note: "Wm. Hammil located, appropriated and took possession of the waters of Birch Creek and also two small side creeks, the waters of all three to be used on his ranch for irrigation and domestic use." The above water rights were claimed in March, 1869 and in September, 1871 were recorded in the name of Wm. Hammil.

During the next 12 years Wm. and Mary built their home, grubbed sagebrush, planted their fields and began their family. It was a rugged life in a remote country with their only travel and transportation by wagon and horses or mules. This meant either a trip to Benton Hot Springs or the longer route south to Bishop Creek for needed supplies.

There was a through stage operating from Bishop Creek by Chalfant Flat and Hammil Valley to points north which was a great help. A Way Station was located a mile or so west of the Hammil Ranch. The station was operated at one time by the Widow Moran or sometimes called Mother Moran according to memories and she served delicious home cooking to stage passengers and teamsters.

Along in the year 1883 the Carson and Colorado Railroad was built over Mount Montgomery and through Benton and Hammil Valleys and south. The Company built a Railroad Station at Queens, at Benton and the Hammil Station was located a mile west of the Hammil Ranch. Each Station needed ample water for the big wooden storage tanks.

The next paragraph, condensed, explains how the necessary water for Hammil Station



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Benton Hot Springs once had a Dude Ranch and this day in the twenties a rodeo was the attraction.

Frasher Photo  
 Rob't Brooks collection



Louie Cosner of Benton hauling a load of hides to Bishop in 1901. He was trapper of a large area.  
 Bob Pellisser collection

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Since Black Lake lies on the west side of the Benton Range of hills it seemed an impossible feat until we explored and found the natural opening in the hills that carried the water. It is near Dutch Pete's place and remembering that Black Lake was larger and longer in the early years, there was no doubt about the headwaters of the East Fork of the Owens River!

An early overland trail and road once brought travel into the Benton country from Nevada and eastern states. It came over the White Mountains by way of Trail Canyon and Queen Canyon and was much used by Indians before the settlers came. Being interested in the older passage ways, we joined the Eastern California Museum's field trip in August, 1975 to the Queen Mine area.

North of Benton we turned right a mile or so below the Queen Valley Cattle Company Ranch entrance and headed into the mountains. The Canyon is one of those rugged and beautiful, but remote places, reached by a narrow steep road. It followed along a willow lined creek where we noted remains of rock cabins. As the canyon widened we pulled in to a flat where the ~~the~~ who wished could camp overnight. The road was barricaded beyond as no travel is permitted unless by permission.

The owners of the Queen Mine, Mr. and Mrs. Larry Spohr, Al Taylor and Frank Night greeted the group who had gathered near the Larry Spohr residence. We were guided through the region and noted the old Indian graveyard, Queen Canyon was once an Indian stronghold, according to history. In the late 1880s the mine produced two million in gold. One tunnel was 2800 feet and another 3200 feet long. There has been activity off and on and mining is continuing today. Frank Night also has a turquoise mine and after the interesting walking tour we were each given a turquoise rock and a geode.

The Spohrs told of the wild horses coming in for hay they would put out when the winter snows were very deep. There is much of interest in the high country where pinons and wildflowers are seen and the air had a hint of chill even in August. One can scan the mountain tops where mining once beckoned to settlers. An old road is seen crossing a high pass that leads to Gold Hit, a mining camp on the east slope. The famous Trail Springs are east of the summit.

A 32 mile pipeline used to carry water from the Springs to a reservoir at the top of Pick-handle Gulch above Candelaria, Nevada. The spiral riveted pipe was shipped from England and mule transportation delivered the 18 foot lengths along the route.

Many herds of livestock were trailed over

of the Hammil Ranch. The station was operated at one time by the Widow Moran or sometimes called Mother Moran according to memories and she served delicious home cooking to stage passengers and teamsters.

Along in the year 1883 the Carson and Colorado Railroad was built over Mount Montgomery and through Benton and Hammil Valleys and south. The Company built a Railroad Station at Queens, at Benton and the Hammil Station was located a mile west of the Hammil Ranch. Each Station needed ample water for the big wooden storage tanks.

The next paragraph, condensed, explains how the necessary water for Hammil Station was obtained, as we researched in a book of "Deeds" in the Mono county courthouse.

"On Feb. 15, 1883 a deed was drawn up and signed whereby Robert Hammil, Wm. Hammil and Mary Hammil, in consideration of one dollar and other considerations . . . such as an agreement to repair and renew water flume when needed, etc., etc. . . granted the right to the Carson and Colorado Railroad Company to take the water from Willow Creek and also divert water through a one-inch pipe from Birch Creek, for Railroad purposes." The three Hammil signatures were affixed Feb. 19, 1883.

The railroad was a great help to the farmers of the Benton country, they could ship hay, produce and stock to the towns in the Owens River Valley or into Nevada to the mining camps. They also had a speedier way of travel. The ranch was identified by a row of stately poplar trees along the entrance and has been called the Cinnamon Ranch for many years. It has gone through several owners, now known as the Harris Ranch. The Hammil family numbered seven children as recalled by grandson, Robert Pellissier. His father Frank Pellissier came from Ancelle, France and married a Hammil daughter named Maggie. They raised two daughters, Ellen Theresa and Dorothy May, and a son, Robert was born while the family was living on the old McBride Ranch in north Benton Valley.

As a youth Bob roamed a great area and became familiar with the old trails and stage roads. He also became an ardent fisherman and hunter. Bob and wife Ruth (Welch) now live in Bishop and we are indebted to Bob for family and other history.

Another Hammil daughter named Theresa married Peter Minaberry who came from France. They lived close to Benton Hot Springs and Pete was in the sheep business. Their two sons, Pete, Jr., and Richie are deceased, their daughters reside in Bishop. Theresa married the deceased Otis Clark and Ella married the late Phillip "Pid" Butler.

William and Mary Hammil would be proud of their several generations of offspring and the extensive acreage they once homesteaded. The irrigation of the broad green fields of alfalfa has graduated from flume and ditch to deep well and the sprinkler system. The White Mountain Range with its lofty crags, deep canyons and the light to dark shadow patterns makes a unique backdrop for the historic Hammil Ranch.



6. Historical Benton

Dec 10, '81

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no. 6.

Historical Benton Country--Captions

1. Wheels that came to the southeast portion of Mono County.

check on  
wheels

Adele Reed photo

2. Benton Hot Springs once had a Dude Ranch and this day in the twenties a rodeo was the attraction.

Frasher Photo

Rob't Brooks collection

3. Mules were used to haul a supply wagon for a wood camp.

Collection of Lulu (Creasy) Bigelow

4. Louie Cosner of Benton hauling a load of hides to Bishop in 1901. He was trapper of a large area.

Bob Pellisser collection

5. Laurence and Elsworth Taylor once hauled wood from Black Canyon to their ranch below Benton Station. They sometimes camped overnight near Dutch Pete's place on the way home.

Collection of Laurence Taylor

6. Bob Pellisser, a great hunter, was born on the McBride Ranch. Bob was a grandson of William and Mary Hammil .

Bob Pellisser collection

7. The picturesque old Hammil ranch is sheepled in fall. The tips of poplar trees seen on left side of the sheep lead to ranch headquarters, now known as the Harris Ranch .

Adele Reed photo



into the said parties of the second part, the right of diverting water through one such pipe for Rail Road purposes, from a point on Birch Creek, about five hundred (500) feet east of the residence of said Wm. Hammill. In consideration of which, the said parties of the second part, guarantees to flume the waters of said Willow Creek to the Ranch of said Wm. Hammill, and to renew said flume when necessary, and the said parties of the first part, further agree to make all temporary repairs to said flume at their own expense.

Together with all and singular the tenements, hereditaments, and appurtenances thereto belonging, or in anywise appertaining, and the reversion and reversions, remainders and remainders, rents, issues, and profits thereof:

To have and to hold, all and singular the said premises, together with the appurtenances, unto the said parties of the second part, and to their heirs and assigns forever.

In Witness Whereof the said parties of the first and second parts, have hereunto set their hands and seals, at the County of \_\_\_\_\_ State of \_\_\_\_\_ this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 18\_\_.



In Witness Whereof, the said parties of the first part, have hereunto  
set their hands and seals, the day and year first above written.

The words "And for other Considerations hereinafter mentioned, of Rich. Burr,  
One inch, and, to census, said 'I flume when necessary' were interlined  
before signing St. Daniels J.P. -

Signed, Sealed and Delivered }  
in the Presence of }  
H. H. Doane }

Robert Hamil (Seal)

William Hamil (Seal)

Mary Hamil (Seal)

State of California

County of Mono, } ss.

On this 19<sup>th</sup> day of February one thousand  
eight hundred and eighty-three, before me, St. Daniels, a Justice of the  
Peace, in and for the said County of Mono, personally appeared Robert  
Hamil known to me to be the same person whose name is subscribed  
to and who executed the annexed instrument, and he duly ack-  
nowledged to me that he executed the same -

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed  
my Private Seal, (having no seal of office) the day and year in this



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In Witness Whereof I have hereunto set my hand and affixed  
my Private Seal, (having no Seal of office) the day and year in this  
Certificate first above written,

St. Daniels (Seal)

Justice of the Peace



Part 2

"DEEDS" BOOK "J" PAGE 471  
APR 24-78 Mono County

wife of said William Hammill, residents of Mono County, State of California, the party of the first part, and the Carson & Colorado Rail-Road Company, a Corporation, the party of the second part, Witnesseth: That the said parties of the first part, for and in consideration of the sum of One Dollar, Coin of the United States of America, to them in hand paid by the said party of the second part, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, and for other Considerations hereinafter mentioned, do by these presents, remise, release, and forever quitclaim unto the said party of the second part, and to their heirs and assigns - The right to use the Water flowing through Willow Creek, which is situate about One mile South of Birch Creek, County of Mono, State of California, and bounded and particularly described as follows, to wit: North half (1/2) of north West quarter of Section nineteen (19) Township number three (3), South, Range number thirtythree (33) East, and East half (1/2) of north East quarter of Section number twenty-four (24), Township number three (3), South, Range number thirtytwo (32), said land being known as the Hammill Ranch, and the said parties of the first part further grant



©

1

Robert Hammill & Co

to

1

Carson & Colorado Rail Road Co.

} Bond,

This Indenture, made the Fifteenth day  
of February in the year of Our Lord One thousand eight hundred & eighty three  
Between Robert Hammill & William Hammill & Mary Hammill.

Return to Adele



Apr. 24-78

Yellow Jacket Springs  
December 24<sup>th</sup> 1876.

Water Right  
J. E. Lewis

Yellow Jacket Springs  
Dec' 24th 1876.

*Race*



California, to a point fifteen miles more or less in a southerly direction, via Yellow Jacket Springs, on the road now travelled from Benton, to Bishop Creek in Inyo Co., Cal.  
J E Lewis.

Yellow Jacket Springs  
December 24<sup>th</sup> 1876.

Recorded at request of J. C. Mitchell, Jan'y 6<sup>th</sup> 1877, at 9 O'clock P.M.  
W. J. H. B. County Recorder.

Water Right  
J E Lewis  
Notice of Location.

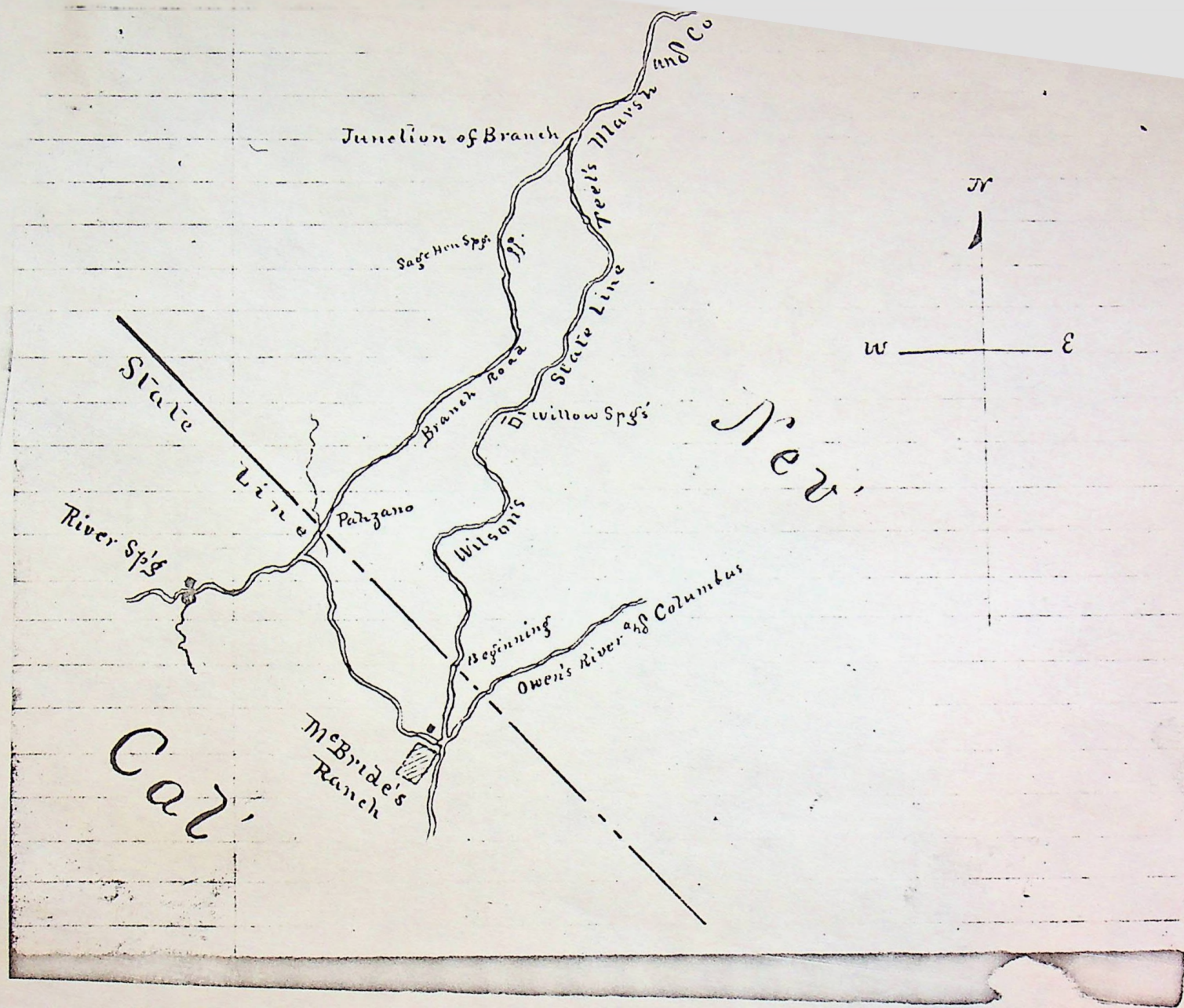
Notice is hereby given that the undersigned, claims the right of water flowing from this Spring for the purposes of irrigation, and water for stock; said Spring being situated about six miles in a southerly direction from the Town of Benton in Mono County, State of California, and commonly known as the Yellow Jacket Springs.

J E Lewis

Yellow Jacket Springs  
Dec<sup>r</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> 1876.

Recorded at request of J. C. Mitchell, January 6<sup>th</sup> 1877, at 10 min past 9 O'clock P.M.  
W. J. H. B. County Recorder.





Bottom