

# CHINA RANCH

A Brief History



by Brian Brown

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About 12 million years before the present, the area in and around China Ranch was a landlocked basin, much like one of today's dry lakes. For the next three million years it was intermittently dry then filled, catching the run-off and sediment for the surrounding mountains. Over the eons more than one thousand vertical feet of sediment collected in the basin. Camel-like creatures and other large mammals browsed at its marshy edges, where thick reeds and grasses grew.

Like much of North America, today's Mojave Desert was influenced by the forward movement and retreat of successive ice ages over the next several million years. Although the ice sheets and glaciers did not come this far south, their run-off during the warming periods filled many of today's dry lakes and basins. Run-off channels connected some of these basins together. Lake Tecopa probably began drying and receding by 100,000 years ago, but Lake Manly still filled Death Valley only 10,000 years ago.

Other forces of nature were at work on the more ancient China Ranch lake bed. Minor uplifting occurred in some areas, while other portions of the sediment settled and dropped. Sometime between 1 million and a half million years ago nearby Lake Tecopa, which was the terminus of the Amargosa River, was breached. The resulting flow carved the dramatic Amargosa Canyon 1 mile to the south, and steepened the drainage from the China Ranch area. This in turn accelerated the erosion, carving this canyon and creating the spectacular topography you see around you.

Over at least the past ten thousand years the climate of the Mojave Desert continued to get dryer and hotter. Oases

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of water and greenery like China Ranch became cut off from each other, like islands of life in a sea of barren desert. In some places unique types of plants and animals evolved and adapted to the circumstances of their particular "island." These oases also became important stop over points, and sometime destinations, for many species of migratory birds. Here at China Ranch more than 225 species have been logged, some coming from as far away as central and South America. The ranch is also home to a large variety of other desert animals, including grey and kit foxes, bobcats, kangaroo rats and pack rats, coyotes, cotton tail and Jack rabbits, and, of course, the infamous horsefly. Surprisingly, polsonous snakes are rare, and several non-polsonous varieties are much more common here in the canyon. The normal varieties of desert insects are also abundant, including tarantulas, scorpions, black widow spiders, and solpugids, or vinegaroons. Though their bite or sting may be painful, with the exception of the black widow, none are truly dangerous to man. They're just trying to make a living too.

The earliest arrival of man in North America is still a subject of active debate among anthropologists. That we were here by 30,000 B.C. is well accepted; solid evidence of mans' arrival to the new world before that has yet to be conclusively proved. At any rate, early hunters and gathers were roaming the edges of Lake Manley (Death Valley) by 10,000 B.C. Bone chips found indicate that they hunted large game, probably deer or big horn sheep. Shell beads indicate that they had contact with groups along the Pacific coast.

The Shoshone and Paiute Indians migrated into the great basin sometime after 1000 A.D. Nomadic hunters and gathers, they undoubtedly used the various resources of this canyon for food and shelter. During the cooler months they frequented the hot springs in Tecopa, hunting small game and gathering mesquite beans and other plants. Like today's

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snow birds, most left for the summer and spent the hot months in the higher elevations of the local mountains, hunting deer, big horn sheep, and gathering pinyon nuts in the fall. Because they needed to be mobile, they travelled in small groups of a few families with few physical possessions. The village at Tecopa Hot Springs, known as Yaga, was the largest settlement in the area and had about 70 inhabitants when it was visited by New Mexican horse trader Antonio Armijo in the spring of 1830.

Armijo's visit is the first known recorded visit by a European to this immediate area. He established what came to be known as the Old Spanish Trail, which was the route from Santa Fe, New Mexico to the Spanish settlements in California. It followed a winding route from water hole to water hole across the desert, and so was known as the "longest, crookedest, most arduous trail in the west." From 1830 until 1849 the main customers on the trail were a ragtag group of American, Mexican, Canadian and Indian horse raiders known collectively by their victims as Los Chaguanosos. The large and fertile ranchos of California had an abundant supply of horses and mules, but in Santa Fe and points east a scarcity of animals drove the prices extremely high, a fact that did not go unnoticed. The raiders would steal all the animals they could find from the Spanish Ranchos in California, and then drive them as fast as possible into the desert and east along the Spanish Trail. Often there would be a posse in pursuit only a day or two behind them. The animals were driven hard until they reached nearby Resting Springs, by which time the posse had usually given up. The largest raid took place in 1840, when over 3,000 animals were stolen and started up the trail. By the time the group reached Resting Springs over half the animals were dead, and the Spanish posse was less than a day behind them. The raiders hurriedly fled up the trail to Stump Springs near present day Charleston View, but the posse pursued

them no further. The horses were eventually driven to Santa Fe and some on to the Missouri River, where they fetched premium prices. That one raid made an estimated 100,000 dollars from the sale of the surviving animals, making it an attractive venture for others. A decline in fur prices and the lure of big profits to be made drew many of America's most famous mountain men into the horse "trading" business along the Old Spanish Trail. Among these were Jim Beckwourth, Pegleg Smith, Bill Williams, Walkara the Ute raider, and Dick Owens, for whom the Owens Valley is named. The gold rush in 1849 created a ready market for horses in California, and effectively ended the horse stealing business along the trail.

John Fremont travelled on the Spanish Trail in the spring of 1843, on his way east after heading a reconnaissance expedition to California. On April 29 he passed the confluence of China Ranch Creek and the Amargosa River, about 1 mile to the south. Although his expedition did not come up this canyon, he notes it in his journal. Two days before two of his scouts, Kit Carson and Alexis Godey, travelling in advance of the main group, had shot and killed two Indians here in China Ranch Canyon. The Indians had been involved in a raid at Resting Springs in which two Mexican men had been killed, two women carried off and several dozen horses stolen.

During the fall and winters of 1849 and 1850 dozens of parties of 49'ers bound for California gold fields used the trail, and their journals contain numerous notes about the Amargosa Canyon. Although this route took them far to the south of the gold country, it was warm enough not to present the risk of freezing to death, as the story of the Donner party was already well known.

Little is known about activities or people here at China Ranch from 1850 until the turn of the century. According to


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available sources, a Chinese man named either Quon Sing or Ah Foo came to this canyon after many years of work in the Death Valley borax mines. He developed the water, planted fruits and vegetables, and raised meat for the local mining camps. It became known as Chinaman's Ranch. Sometime in 1900 a man named Morrison appears, and, as the story goes, he ran the Chinese farmer off at gun point and claimed the Ranch for his own. Morrison eventually sold out, but the name had stuck. Since then the canyon has had many owners and worn many different faces, including a fig farm, cattle ranch, hog farm, alfalfa farm, and others. In 1970, the property was purchased by Charles Brown Jr. and Bernice Sorrells, the son and daughter of area pioneer and long time State Senator Charles Brown of Shoshone. It remains in these families today.

The date grove was planted from seed in the early 1920's by Vonola Modine, youngest daughter of Death Valley area pioneer RJ Fairbanks. Approximately half of the trees are male and produce only pollen. The females bear in the fall, yielding from 100 to 300 pounds of dates in a season.

The adobe house was completed in 1991 after 5 years of work. It is built from over 18,000 hand made adobe bricks, manufactured from native materials here in the ranch. It has four bedrooms and three bathrooms, and encompasses about 4500 square feet. It is reinforced, completely up to building code standards, and did not suffer any damage during the string of earthquakes in June of 1992.

China Ranch remains a unique and fascinating place, and we hope this booklet has answered some of your questions. If you are curious about the local history, consider visiting the Shoshone Museum, which has a good selection of books on the greater Death Valley area. Enjoy your stay in the Desert.

*CHINA RANCH*   
*INTERPRETIVE NATURE  
WALKS*

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Guided nature walks through China Ranch are available. Walks are approximately 3 miles and last 3 hours. From October through April, Saturday and Sunday mornings and by special arrangements.



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