

Arti-facts

The Newsletter of the
Idyllwild Area Historical Society

Volume V Issue 2

Summer 2005

Preserving the History of Idyllwild and Neighboring Communities in the San Jacinto Mountains

FIELD TRIP TO THE DESERT QUEEN RANCH JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK

Early the morning of May 23, members of IAHS met at the tree monument in Idyllwild to car pool to Joshua Tree National Park for a guided tour of the Desert Queen Ranch. Our tour leader was Ranger Kim and she thoughtfully kept all eighteen of us focused on her presentation. While the weather was quite warm (high 90's) she made sure that we were able to take advantage of the shade whenever possible.



Photo by Shiril Reid

Ranger Kim and IAHS Members

After the 1 1/2 -hour tour we traveled to a nearby picnic area to have a bite to eat and talk over all the facts we had learned. As we sat in the shade of the huge boulders we shared our lunch with the ground squirrels and scrub jays and marveled at the beautiful surroundings. After lunch, three members of the group planned to go rock climbing while the remaining people gathered up their belongings and headed home.

Here is a recap of the history of the Desert Queen Ranch:

A flurry of mining and cattle ranching activity first brought European Americans to the Mojave Desert in the 1860s. These prospectors and ranchers moved to and from mining districts and rangeland, gathering for water at natural springs like the Oasis of Mara in present-day Twentynine Palms, California. Permanent homesteaders did not arrive in the area until the 1920s. Under the Homestead Act, these settlers claimed 160-acre parcels of land just as thousands of families had done elsewhere in the United States in the 19th Century.

As Twentynine Palms evolved into a bustling community, a handful of homesteaders on larger plots of land maintained a way of life similar to that of the earlier pioneers. Nestled in a rock-enclosed canyon approximately seven miles from Twentynine Palms, but separated from it by impassable rock piles, one of those homesteaders—Bill Keys—carved out his own niche.

Born in Russia in 1879, Bill Keys and his family moved to Nebraska in the early 1890s. He left home at the age of 15 and began working at mills, mines, and cattle ranches.

In 1910, Keys arrived in the Twentynine Palms area where he began working at the Desert Queen Mine as custodian and assayer. After the owner's death, Keys gained possession of the mine as payment for back wages. In 1917 he filed on an 80-acre homestead under the Homestead Act and began to build a ranch. He soon married Frances May Lawton, who left the comforts of the city of Pasadena, Cali-

Continued on page 4

Harvest Home Tour

Saturday, October 22

10:00 am to 4:00 pm, \$20

Tickets at the totem pole the day of the event
Pre-sale tickets at Faux Ever After and Historical Society Museum
or by calling (951) 659-2717



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IAHS OUTREACH PROJECT ROTARY CLUB OF IDYLLWILD TOWN HALL KITCHEN PROJECT

The Town Hall kitchen is a long-standing landmark in Idyllwild and is used frequently by many local groups for everything from pancake breakfasts to barbeques.

As a result of many years of use the kitchen is generally in need of refurbishment. The local Rotary Club selected this task as part of its 2004-2005 centennial celebration. To raise funds for the project, the Club in cooperation with Earth-n-Fire is offering the community an opportunity to participate in the renovation as well as have a permanent memento in the kitchen. The purchase of a tile results in a design by Rotarian and artist Jan Jasper-Fayer. The tile will be fired at Earth-n-Fire, a pottery shop in the Fort.

IAHS has participated in the fundraiser as an Outreach Project. The IAHS tile features our logo and is one of the more than 136 tiles installed in the kitchen.

Rotary Club president Joanna Hoffman generously provided the information for this article. She states that over \$5000 has been raised towards their goal of \$10,000. There is still room for more tiles. For further information, please contact Joanna at 951-659-4658.

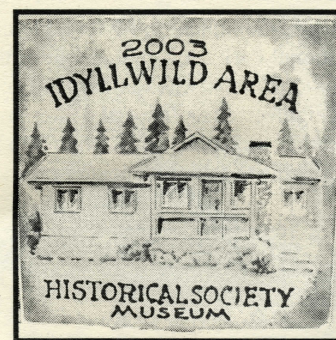


Photo by Lynnda Hart

Ceramic tile installed at Town Hall Kitchen

Upcoming Events

Saturday, August 6

Art Café (Art Alliance Outreach Project*)

Thursday, August 11

Board of Directors Meeting, 4p.m.

Saturday and Sunday, August 27 & 28

Jazz Festival Booth (Outreach Project*)

October 1

Art Alliance Wine Walk (Outreach Project*)

October 15

Living Free Booth (Outreach Project)

* Outreach Project - project in cooperation with other Idyllwild area non-profit organizations

Anton Scherman Descendants Visit the Museum and Dutch Flat Sawmill Site

Last December 24 three generations of Anton Scherman, an early Strawberry Valley businessman, paid a visit to Idyllwild and the Museum. Great, great, granddaughter Marianna, who had been to the Museum and seen the Anton Scherman exhibit, urged other family members to visit.



Photo by Carolyn Levitski

(l. to r.) Marianna - great, great granddaughter; David, great, grandson
Tom - great, great grandson; Michael - great, great, great grandson

IAHS members Richard and Carolyn Levitski led the visitors on a tour of one of Anton Scherman's sawmill sites that had been located at Dutch Flat. While there are no remaining sawmill structures, one lone apple tree, well over 100 years old, has survived and gives a reminder that a settlement existed. The tree is located on Pine Cove Water District property and with the District's permission Richard built a split rail fence around the tree to help preserve its location. Richard, a Dutch Flat resident, is a history buff and over the years has found a number of tools, cooking pots, and other items that are on display at the Museum.



Photo by Carolyn Levitski

Old Apple Tree at Dutch Flat

Another Anton Scherman descendant, great, great, great-granddaughter Linda Jager visited the museum last May.

The IAHS is grateful to the Scherman family for their generous donation of numerous family artifacts and for their continued interest in the Museum.

Excerpts from John Robinson's book, "The San Jacintos," give a clear picture of this early Idyllwild pioneer:

Anton Scherman, a giant of a man, was born in Wurttemberg, Germany, in 1845. He learned the engineer and machinist trades in his native land, then immigrated to the United States in 1863. He married Catherine Schumacher, also a native of Germany, in 1868 and from this union were born three sons and two daughters.

Just when Anton Scherman came to Strawberry Valley is uncertain. David Scherman, Anton's great-grandson who

has collected all he can find on his family history believes it was 1879. Other sources say it several years later. His first sawmill site was located in what today is Fern Valley. He had dismantled his sawmill the San Bernardino Mountains and hauled it, part by part, to Strawberry Valley. Grandson Joe



IAHS Archives

Anton Scherman

Scherman recalled "It took him three months to cart everything over here. He came up the old toll road, and it took him a couple of weeks just to get the steam boiler up the hill."

Joe said that Sam Temple, the man who shot Juan Diego and gained infamy as Jim Farrar in the play *Ramona* tried to prevent Scherman from coming to the valley. "He claimed he owned the property my grandfather bought from a Mrs. Hemstreet. Grandfather just rode up to where Temple was sitting in the road with his rifle and told him, 'Sam, get the hell out of the way.' Sam did." Scherman's big steam powered sawmill was soon cutting 25,000 board feet per day and shipping it down to the San Jacinto Valley.

Transporting the lumber from the mountain sawmills to the valley was a painstaking operation. David Scherman describes how it was done: "My grandfather used wagons with six-horse teams to bring cut lumber down the grade to the valley. They used wheel lock skid brakes on the back wheels to slow down the wagon on steep grades. These wheel locks were a strip of iron with sides that the wagon

Scherman Continued on page 5

fornia, to move to the Mojave Desert ranch and start a family.

The couple had seven children between 1919 and 1931, three of whom died during childhood. Together the Keys family tackled the hardships of isolated desert life. Eventually, the Keys' homestead included a ranch house, store, two schoolhouses, a home for the teacher, outhouses, sheds, a stamp mill, a corral, supply yard, orchard, cement dam and lake, windmill, irrigation systems, rock retaining walls, and a cemetery.

Bill Keys thrived in the desert because of his resourcefulness and the diversity of tasks he performed. He built a ranch house, work sheds, and guest cabins out of wood and he quarried rocks to build walls.

He raised goats, chickens, and cattle for food, and grew fruits and vegetables. He owned at least 30 mining claims where he mined for gold and gypsum. To make money, he operated a stamp mill (a machine that crushes rock in order to remove gold and other minerals.) Area miners brought their ore to Keys who crushed it for a fee. None of these activities alone could have supported his family, but combined, they provided for their needs.

Lack of water was the first and most constant obstacle Keys faced. He dug deep wells by hand, constructed windmills, and dammed up the rocky canyons surrounding the ranch to create a lake. The lake irrigated the orchard and

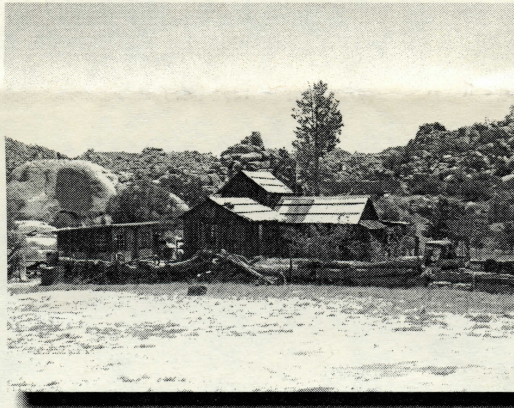


Photo by Shiril Reid

Desert Queen Ranch House

vegetable garden through a sophisticated system of piping and served as an emergency supply of drinking water if the wells dried up. It also provided recreation in the forms of fishing, swimming, and ice skating.

Keys' ability to repair machines and household items often came in handy. Since the ranch site was far from town, the family rarely threw anything away that they might use to fix a broken item. Keys scavenged abandoned ranches and mines for rails, wire, pipes, household items, old cars, and tires left behind by less successful people. He even purchased an entire junkyard and organized it into neat piles on the ranch to use as a supply yard.

The Keys family knew the importance of working as a team. With the nearest doctor more than 50 miles away, the family depended on each other for treatment of minor afflictions. They traded or bartered with local homesteaders or

business owners for items they could not produce on the ranch such as salt, coffee, flour, and sugar.

Most of the surrounding homesteaders and miners viewed Keys' ranch as the

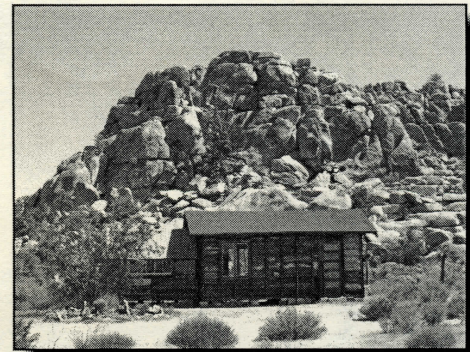


Photo by Shiril Reid

Desert Queen Ranch School

desert network and its owner as a helpful friend. Miners appreciated his knowledge of mines in the area and his milling capabilities. Keys built a one-room schoolhouse for his children and others in the area to ensure they received a proper education despite their isolation. He provided the teacher with a cabin on the ranch. The family also hosted many visitors at the ranch including well-known writer Erle Stanley Gardner, and famous botanists Phillip Munz and Edmund Jaeger. Jaeger, while identifying new desert plant species, named a flower "Keysia" (*Glyptopleura setulosa*) in honor of the kindness the Keys family showed to so many desert travelers.

Like the typical self-reliant 19th century homesteader, Keys adamantly protected the needs and interests of his family. This attitude sometimes caused him to be at odds with people around him. Disagreements over water rights led cowboys working for a nearby cattle company to label Keys a troublemaker. Keys acquired large sections of land surrounding public water sources. Access to the water was cut off once Keys fenced the land, but the cattle company still ran 300-400 head of cattle there causing damage of keys' fences and putting a heavy strain on the water supply. The cowboys further retaliated by cutting his fences, shooting his cattle, or driving them to market with the company's herd.

Another problem arose in 1936 when a citizen-led campaign to preserve the unique desert environment of the region resulted in the creation of Joshua Tree National Monument (which became Joshua Tree National Park in 1994.) This new unit of the National Park Service completely surrounded the Keys ranch. Keys had a volatile relationship with the Park Service personnel because new regulations limited his cattle grazing, opened his water holes to the public, and restricted his homesteading and mining activities. Keys, who had lived in the area for 25 years, resented the government regulations.

Keys had more serious problems with another neighbor, Worth Bagley. Keys had built a road leading to one of his mining claims on land Bagley later purchased. Despite repeated warnings by Bagley, Keys believed the road belonged to him and continued to use it. To retaliate, Bagley set up an ambush for Keys one day in 1943. Keys proved to be a better shot, however, and the confrontation ended in Bagley's death. Believing he had acted in self-defense, Keys turned himself in to the authorities. He was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to five years in San Quentin prison. After his release from jail in 1948, Keys worked to earn a pardon, which finally came eight years later.



Photo by Shiril Reid

Garden and Orchard Area at the Desert Queen Ranch

Bill Keys returned to the ranch at age 69 to resume the active life he had left behind. In his 70s, he built two more dams behind the house, enlarged the orchard and garden areas, assessed his mining properties and temporarily reopened his mill. He even played the role of a prospector in the Disney Company's film *The Wild Burro of the West*.

When his wife died in 1963, Keys sold the ranch to Henry Tubman, who traded the property with the government for federal land elsewhere. Thus, the ranch became the property of the National Park Service. Keys lived on the ranch until his death on June 29, 1969. *

**The preceding information is summarized from National Park Service documentation.*

Requests from the Curator

We're always interested in expanding our collections and these items would help us immensely. Take a look in that old trunk to see what you can find.

- Photos of old-time campfires at Town Hall
- Seasonal pictures with people in them
- Photos of horseback riding and the stable in town
- Skiing and sledding photos
- Early photos of the schoolhouse in the center of town
- Snow pictures with buildings in them

Please remember that copies of your photos can be made and the originals safely returned.

wheels were driven up on; a chain connected the skid with the bottom of the wagon to keep the brake in place and stop the wheel from turning. On very steep grades they would stop to cut a tree and chain it to the wagon so it would drag behind, thereby slowing the loaded wagon to a crawl."

By the early 1890's, teamsters were steering eight-horse teams, rather than oxen teams, down the mountain with their loads. The strong but slow oxen were used primarily to drag the cut trees to the mill.

Scherman moved his sawmill at least seven times, possibly more, during his twenty-three years of cutting timber in the San Jacintos. From his first location in Fern Valley, he apparently moved to Saunders Meadow. A photograph dated 1884 shows the mill there. In March 1889 he joined with George Hannahs and two others to form the Strawberry Valley Lumber Company. The new company purchased 1,300 acres in the Dutch Flat-Pine Cove area, north west of Strawberry Valley. Although Scherman was a partner in the company, he apparently continued cutting on his own, and he moved his sawmill to Dutch Flat, a mile above Strawberry Valley. Dutch Flat took its name from Scherman's German (Deutsch) ancestry.

In 1902 Anton Scherman turned his sawmill over to sons Anton Jr., Joe and Henry, and left with his second wife, Anna, for six years to his native Germany. He returned in 1908, but never returned to lumbering. Instead, ever the entrepreneur, the 63-year old Scherman bought an interest in a Los Angeles paper mill. His end came in 1910 when he fell off the machinery and broke his back, dying a few days later.

Membership Update

Welcome to our new members since the last newsletter. We look forward to seeing you at our *gatherings* and on our field trips. Your support is greatly appreciated!

Individual Memberships

- Connie Cowan, Indio, CA
- Idyllwild Garden Club, Idyllwild, CA
- Charles Carey, Reston, VA
- Edward & Fiona Hernandez, Huntington Beach, CA
- Milford Wayne Donaldson, Sacramento, CA
- Doriane McCord, Malibu, CA
- Poppy Gauss, Hemet, CA
- Don Anderson, Idyllwild, CA
- Dennis and Gail Therieau, Cathedral City, CA
- Dick and Sherry Hibbard, Prescott, AZ
- Bruce and Wendy Wachtel, Riverside, CA

Business Memberships

- Idyllwild Realty, Idyllwild, CA

Membership Information

Give a Gift Membership and they will receive . . .

- Arti-facts Newsletter
- Field Trips
- Gatherings
- Volunteer Opportunities
- Support of historical research and documentation of photos and artifacts
- Support for the Idyllwild Area Museum
- 10% discount in the Museum Shop

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Lifetime membership and plaque in museum
Installment plan available - \$100/year for 10 years

Send this membership form and check to:

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– We appreciate your support –

All dues and contributions are tax deductible

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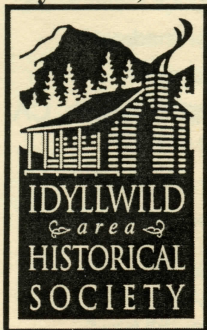
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