

Desert Reveals Death Mystery

(By Doris Cavanaugh, Assistant Public Relations Section, Nevada Department of Highways.)

CARSON CITY, Nev. — Again the desert reveals one of its secrets. After almost ninety years of mystery of the abandoned wagon irons on a bluff above the Bowers Ranch in Beaver Dam Wash about thirty miles from Panaca in southeastern Nevada has probably been solved, according to information contained in a letter received by the State Highway Department from Charles Kelly, of Salt Lake City, author of "Salt Desert Trails" and other books relating to the Emigrant movement in '49.

Kelly and two companions, J. Roderic Kerns, of Salt Lake City and Frank Beckwith, a newspaper man of Delta, Utah, over Labor Day followed the trail of the first Death Valley Party in 1849 to the Bowers Ranch, located about 4 miles from the headwaters of Beaver Dam Wash. Near this ranch they found "Osborn 49" carved on the rocks together with a few other names with a later date.

From a distance they could see another little meadow about half a mile up the canyon. Just east of the meadow on an exposure of white volcanic rock Kelly found the initials of Henry W. Bigler who was one of the Mormon members of the Death Valley Party. The date had been carved rather lightly and only a part of the figure "8" remained. There was no mistaking the initials however. This spot, according to Kelly, fitted the description given by Bigler in his journal, written in '49, and the wagons were on the bluff above the rock carving.

For many years ranchers had ridden every foot of this country. Several had seen the abandoned wagons, but they had never heard how they got there. Some of the ranchers thought the wagon irons were stark evidence of early Indian massacres.

But the first Death Valley Party was not massacred. According to historical records this party endured great suffering and hardship. Even death under the circumstances might have been a blessing.

Late in 1848 Jacob Stover living on a farm in Iowa decided to go to California. He organized a party and started for the west in 1849. The Stover party arrived in Salt Lake City in August and remained there two months to rest its stock and repair the wagons. When Captain Hunt, a Mormon, started for California in October, 1849, by a southern route Stover and his party decided to follow. At the same time preparations were being made in Salt Lake City by Elder John Smith to send a party of Mormons to California in search of gold. Captain Flake was placed in charge of this party which included the Mormon, Henry W. Bigler.

Before reaching Beaver Creek, and about 200 miles from Salt Lake City, Captain Flake's party overtook a "gentle" by the name of Smith who was captain of 20 men on pack horses bound for the California gold mines. Three days later the Flake and Smith parties caught up with a train of 113 wagons of gold diggers, besides about 50 packs.

The gold seekers had hired Captain Hunt to pilot them through to California.

For a week all three parties followed the Old Spanish Trail. Arriving at what is now Enterprise, Utah, Captain Smith spoke of Walker's cut-off which would take the emigrants to the gold mines in about twenty days by traveling in a more direct course. He argued that by keeping to the Spanish Trail they would reach Lower California by the time the rainy season started. And the diggings were hundreds of miles up country from there. With the exception of nine wagons and Captain Hunt, who opposed the plan, all three parties left the Spanish Trail next morning to travel a more direct course west without guide or trail.

At first the journey was pleasant. Then it commenced to rain. The rain was cold and disagreeable. Trouble began. The route was extremely bad. In ascending a very steep place some of the horses fell and rolled over with their packs. Others were helped over the barrier. This was done by tying ropes around them and hauling them up, and required the combined strength of eight or ten men.

When the Stover party reached the banks of Beaver Dam Canyon in southern Nevada it was impossible to take the lumbering wagons over the steep slopes. The canyon was narrow and virtually impassable. The Stover party split. Those with oxen took their wagons upstream to ford the river. Those with horses and mules abandoned the wagons, built pack saddles and followed Smith. The old wagons which had been seen near Bower's ranch are the remains of those left behind by the first Death Valley Party in the days of '49.

Stover had mules so he trailed Smith and Flake. The animals gave out for lack of feed. There was no water. Men endured extreme hardships. Little food remained. Mule meat was eaten by the starving humans. Concerning those conditions Bigler wrote in his journal. "I frequently scratched holes in the sand for water and chewed bullets to create moisture in my mouth and to some extent it did." The desert was taking its toll of men and animals.

Finally deciding there was no pass through the mountains, Captain Flake's party turned and traveled to the southeast, two of Smith's men joining them. Two days later they found Captain Hunt with a large train of wagons on the Spanish Trail at the Muddy River.

Captain Hunt and party continued westward a day or two longer but were forced back for lack of water. One of their animals was killed and they ate its flesh and drank its blood. Backtracking they reached the old Spanish Trail. A company of emigrants gave them provisions and took them to California.

But Stover's party decided to push on across the desert southwest. One evening the party came across wagon tracks. After several days of marching and half-starved, they overtook Hunt's wagon train on the old Spanish Trail, which led to California.

Kelly in his letter gives the exact route of Bigler and the Death Valley party: "From the divide between Parowan and Cedar City (Summit Creek) the trail turned west and ran to Irion Springs. From there it continued in a half circle around the end of the Irion Moun-

tains where it turned south again. Within about three miles of Newcastle we found the actual old ruts in the volcanic rock made by the 49ers' wagons, the only place where the wagon trail (which followed the Old Spanish Trail) is visible, so far as I know is that circuit. The next camping place was at Newcastle. From there the trail ran west and a little south to Enterprise, which is the "Mountain Meadows" mentioned by some writers, not to be confused with the Mountain Meadows over the rim made famous by the Mormons in 1857.

"From Enterprise," Bigler says, "We left the Old Spanish Trail." He turned due west up a canyon where the Terry ranch is located. In 14 miles he struck Nephi canyon, crossed it, and in about 17 or 18 miles struck Whiterock canyon. He then followed Whiterock to its head, crossed the rim of the basin and dropped down into the head of Beaver Dam Wash, which is a very steep descent. He continued down about 4 miles to the place where he left his initials. He then followed down the Beaver Dam, encountering great difficulties because of the narrow canyon, and eventually struck the old Spanish Trail again at its junction with the Virgin.

"The Death Valley party could not get their wagons down into Beaver Dam canyon, so they continued on a mesa above the canyon about four miles to a point just east of the 50 acre meadow where Bigler cut his name. Most of the wagons turned back and found other routes, apparently down Glover Creek, which is more open, and through which the railroad now runs. They split and we did not have time to trace them further."

Henry W. Bigler, whose initials Charles Kelly found inscribed on a bluff above the Bowers Ranch on last Labor Day, later became governor of California. Lake Tahoe at one time was called Lake Bigler in honor of this emigrant pioneer who was with the first Death Valley Party in '49.

Kelly and his two companions took pictures of Bigler's initials, probably the first rock carvings by white men in the southern part of the State, and he said, "The abandoned wagons were on the bluff above where the name was carved. This corresponds with the account in Stover's narrative. * * We climbed the hill, but the top is covered with dense cedars and we did not find the irons. You can depend on

Pioneer Woman Is Ninety-Four

Last Saturday, September 10, Mrs. Nellie V. Davis of Carson City celebrated her 94th birthday anniversary.

Mrs. Davis is the mother of Mrs. Frank Waite of Las Vegas and will be remembered as one of the honor guests when the Mesquite Club entertained the state federation of Womens' Clubs, Mrs. Davis having been the first president of the State Federation.

The following is taken from the Carson City Appeal:

Mrs. Davis undoubtedly is the best informed person living on Nevada and its history through acquaintance with officials and persons prominent in the state's development. She has resided in Carson, capitol of Nevada, almost continuously since her marriage to Henry Rust Mighels in San Francisco on August 20, 1866. In 1868 Mr. Mighels was elected state senator of Ormsby county. In 1876 he was elected to the assembly and was chosen speaker for the 1877 session. He had served as state printer in the years 1869 and 1870.

Samuel Post Davis, to whom the widowed Mrs. Mighels was subsequently married, served as Nevada controller eight years.

Mrs. Davis' son, the late Henry R. ("Hal.") Mighels, was a member of the assembly from Ormsby county and later served as clerk of the Nevada supreme court under appointment by Governor E. D. Boyle to fill a vacancy.

Through her constant connection with the Carson City Daily Appeal and the prominence of members of her family, Mrs. Davis has always been in close touch with Nevada public affairs and has always taken a keen interest in the state and its progress.

Mrs. Davis has long been a member and officer of the Leisure Hour Club, is deeply interested in the club's activities and is remarkably regular in attendance when her advanced age is taken into consideration.

it they are still there. We exacted a promise from the cowboys at the ranch to locate them and let us know so we can photograph them. There should be irons and bits of wood from ten or more wagons that were abandoned."

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