

Gordon Stuart on Palomar Mountain

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2024

Gordon Stuart self-published his memoir *San Diego Back Country 1901* in 1966. His book is largely centered in Poway, and Stuart travelled widely, with considerable text on San Diego and its back country. In 1904, Gordon Stuart stayed for a month at Samuel Striplin's place in Pedley Valley on Palomar Mountain. That section of Stuart's book follows with supplemental material.



Gordon Stuart

Up the Side of the Mountain

Leaving Escondido, one summer day, Charlie Wattson and I started out for Palomar. The rig was two horses on a buckboard. Our load was not heavy. The drive up through the lemon and orange groves was very pleasant. At the north end of the valley we left the groves and went over the ridge into Valley Center.

At the Valley Center store we met the proprietor, John Quincy Adams. He was a slight built man with a beard. ❖ After some conversation Charlie asked John to take a ride up the road with us. At the first clump of bushes Charlie stopped the team and produced a quart bottle of brandy and asked John to have a drink; which he did. Then Charlie asked John to have another drink; which he did. There was a bit of dialogue after that, and then Charlie said, "John we don't meet very often; you better have another one," Said John, reaching for the bottle, "Well, I - I don't want to run you short, Charlie." To which Charlie replied, "Oh that's all right John." John took another drink. (*Charlie did not take a drink. He was already five drinks ahead of John.*) John walked back to the store. After we had traveled some distance Charlie said, "Run me short! Hell! I've got two gallons under the seat." Charlie had met a distiller in Escondido (*by appointment*) and had prepared himself for the

journey.

That night we camped along the road. We had no tent; so we rolled our blankets on the ground. ¶ An Indian came along and stopped at our campfire. He was selling meat (*origin unknown*). Charlie started to negotiate for a piece of the beef; but the price was not right. Charlie gave the Indian a drink of brandy. The deal was soon closed. The Indian paid well for his drink. ☼ Later Charlie cautioned me not to mention to anyone that he had given the Indian a drink; because that was against the law. I knew that.

Next morning we came to the foot of Palomar, on the south side. A road went from there to the top of the mountain. This road was three and a half miles in length.

A new road up the north side of the mountain was twelve miles long. ❖ We walked all the way up the mountain, and the two horses had all they could pull; with the buckboard and our light load. *Going back down the mountain, later, we cut a tree and tied it to the rear axle to keep the buckboard from running onto the horses.*

Our stopping place was Sam Striplin's sawmill. At that time the mill was not in operation. Near the mill there was a large house made of rough boards, and unpainted. ♣ We arrived at noon. Charlie and I went into the kitchen and started to cook up a meal.

When it was ready Charlie went to the door and called out that dinner was ready. Into the kitchen walked a neighbor and six young huskies (*men*).

Charlie started dishing up, and I started slicing bread. Mrs. Wattson had sent a week's supply of bread for us. As soon as a slice of bread came off the loaf a huskie grabbed it. I never got a slice ahead.

Stuart and Wattson travelled up the Trujillo Trail which went up the south side of Palomar Mountain and was later replaced by Highway S6. The new road he mentions is the Nate Harrison Grade on the west.



Trujillo Trail up the south side of Palomar Mountain, August 1896. Percy Smith Cox photo

After the kitchen was cleaned out of food, and the huskies were gone; Charlie relaxed and looked at the empty dishes. "Well," said Charlie, "That was a battle." I asked, "Who were they?" He answered, "Hell! I don't know. I asked Chet Helms to come in for dinner, and I got more than I bargained for."

(That was mountain hospitality.)

We stayed a month at the saw mill. We slept on cots under the trees. Back of the house the pine trees covered a steep mountain, to the top. ~~W~~ There were several families camped near the sawmill, and other parts of the mountain must have had many more; considering the number of callers we had. Every day we sat out under the trees and entertained visitors.

As far as we knew there were no cabins for rent on the mountain. Tenting was common practice. Sam didn't charge campers for putting up tents on his ground, and I doubt if anyone else did.

Theodore Bailey had a camp and a store at the post office. We do not know what the set-up was at Bailey's but usually camp space was free and the store keeper made profit by selling supplies to the campers. *Sylvester Mendenhall, the cattle king, did not look benignly on campers. They were a double hazard. A camper might neglect to put out his campfire; thus causing a disastrous major fire; also an inexperienced gun toter might shoot through a steer unknowingly. The cattleman had everything to lose, and nothing to gain from campers. A city dweller would not believe it was his right to walk into a store; help himself to articles on the shelves, and depart without paying; but he would walk into an orchard and pick the fruit that a year's toil had produced. The city dweller would not carry a gun into his neighbor's back yard and start shooting.*



Striplin's Valley 3rd Saw-Mill - Palomar.

Many of the campers on Palomar came from Los Angeles and San Diego. A Stage line operated from somewhere up to Bailey's. It came up the north road, of course. The nearest railroad point was Temecula, we guess. If anyone has a better guess; let him out with it. One cannot just walk into a library and obtain information on early days, and it is almost hopeless trying to get any information from the few survivors. I start talking; hoping to draw them out. They listen. That is as far as we get. Happy Mendenhall could tell me what I want to know; but he is too far away. Wagon loads of campers drove up, as Charlie and I did. Horse feed for a week or a month was an item. Stop an engine and it uses no fuel; but a horse never stops eating — just like a man.

Nobody was in a hurry at the sawmill. Sam went about his work, and the place was ours. I don't know who paid for the groceries. I never gave it a thought.

Were Charlie living today I would attempt to reimburse him for a month's board. There were many good men and women who did so much for me when I was at the unseeing age. Now that I am able to see I would like to show them a little appreciation; but now they are gone.

Twice a week I rode a horse over to Bailey's to get a few groceries and pick up the mail. The post office was named NELLIE. It had been started by Nellie McQueen in 1883. At another location on the mountain there had been a post office bearing the name JESSEE. That was the name of a preacher who marketed Mendenhall's calves *without Mendenhall's consent.*

I refrain from writing Palomar history. Kathryn Woods and Marion Beckler have taken care of that — and well. Anyone who can obtain one of their books is fortunate.

There was a bit of grass land on Sam Striplin's place, and Sam had put up some hay. One day Chet Helms came over with his baler and crew. It was a small outfit. Chet, two Indians, and Jeff Frye made up the crew. I pitched hay up to the feeder. It took two days to bale Sam's hay. Charlie and I fed the men.

Jeff Frye was a half-breed Cherokee. His left hand was missing; but the joint was there. Jeff would put a cigarette paper in the curve of the joint, shake in the tobacco, and roll a cigarette as tight as one rolled by a man with two hands. *I wonder if the art of, "Roll your own," has been lost.*

Charlie Mendenhall said Jeff could "lass" (*lasso*) with the best of them. ♣ Jeff said he loved the old mountain, and he was not alone in that. I do not believe any nature-loving man ever spent a month on Palomar without coming under the spell. Of course, many have left the mountain; but they have always carried some of it away with them. It wasn't only the mountain; it was the history back of it. A rider, on a horse, could feel the presence of riders of the past. *I do not feel that I am laying it on too thick. Something there takes hold of men; if it isn't that, then what is it?*

On a clear day a rider could look west and see the Pacific Ocean. Not far from the mountain, on the other side, a haze showed where the desert began.

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One night there was a poker game in Sam's kitchen. Jeff was banker and sold matches at one cent each — redeemable at the end of the game.

None of the men had much money. The two Indians were silent players; they were playing for money; the other men were playing for fun. The Indians came out of the game with winnings of four bits each. They were happy but it didn't show on their faces.



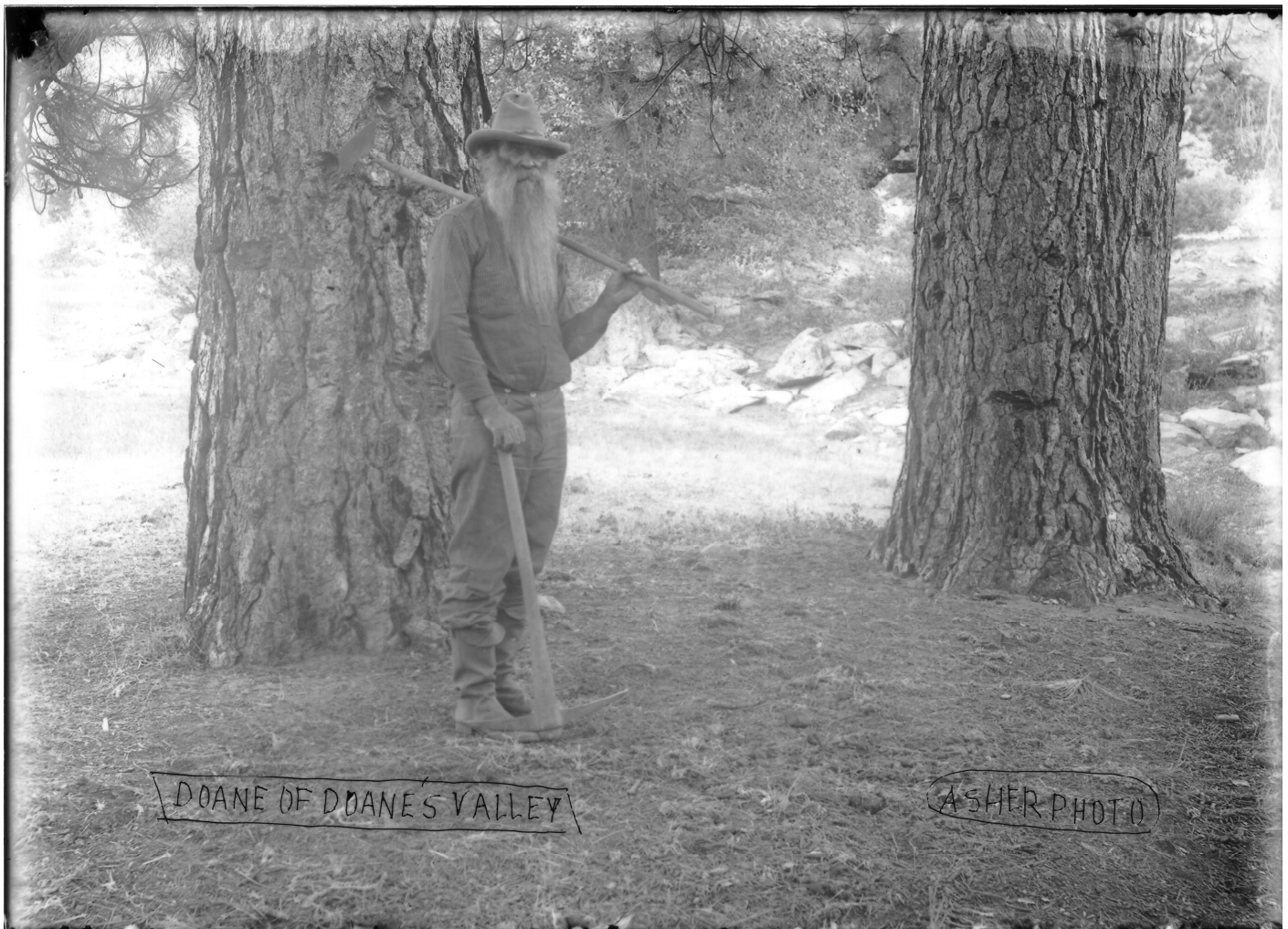
If only I had kept a diary in the early days. Today I can only write of the things I saw, and the stories I heard; but that is better than being a copy cat, and rewriting what other men have written. *Some writers never write anything of their own; they are afraid to; it might not sell.* ❖ I did not see Nate Harrison *I dare not put down the name by which he was affectionately called. Nate said he was an escaped slave; but records showed that he had been freed by his owner in California. Nate claimed he was, "The first white man on the mountain."* (see Marion Beckler's book).

I did see George Doane with his flowing gray beard. Doane was a legend, and much campfire conversation was about him. Whenever a wagon load of young people met Doane on a narrow road they demanded that he sing his anthem. Only after the song was given would they let him pass. The song was a parody on a church anthem, in which Doane took all the parts. The song had this, "Oh bring to me that 'anspike." It was supposed to be very funny; but only Doane knew what it meant. *A handspike was a bar used as a lever, as in a capstan.*

One man on the mountain came from a notorious family. This man was what we called a wise guy. He was very brazen, and I often wondered if he knew that we knew about his family. *We will call them the Pudge family.* They lived a few miles out from town, in a neighboring state.

Many weary travelers passed by the Pudge ranch and many of them stopped to feed and water themselves and their horses. Many of the travelers came into town with the story that they had been waylaid and robbed after leaving the Pudge ranch. A number of travelers had been traced as far as the Pudge





**George Doane** Robert Asher photo

Gordon Stuart refers to George Doane's anthem, which is referred to as Doane's Hay Hanthem in Robert Asher's memoir "My Palomar." It is an old joke about two British sailors who were talking over their shore leave experiences, and George Doane was evidently famous for his spirited rendition; Asher says Doane "always brought down the house." The story goes that one sailor had been to a cathedral and had heard some very fine music, and was commenting on an anthem which had given him much pleasure. His shipmate listened for a while and then said, "I say, Bill, what's a hantham?" "What," replied Bill, "do you mean to say you don't know what a hantham is?" "Not me." "Well, then, I'll tell yer. If I was to tell yer, 'Ere Bill, giv me that 'andspike,' that wouldn't be a hantham; but was I to say, 'Bill, Bill, giv, giv, giv me, give me that, Bill, giv me, giv me that hand, giv me that hand, handspike, spike, spike, Bill, giv, giv me that, that hand, handspike, hand, handspike, spike, spike, spike, ah-men, ah-men. Billgivmethathandspike, spike, ah-men!' why that would be a hantham."



ranch — and no farther. Too many unidentified horses appeared on the Pudge ranch.

Good citizens of the town put all the evidence together and decided to act. Lots were drawn to select a citizen to serve notice on the Pudge family to move.

The lot fell on a Swede named Ole. He did not visit the Pudge ranch. ¶ One day Ring Pudge came to town. After a few drinks, at his favorite saloon, he sauntered over to the barber shop and seated himself in the chair. The barber draped the apron over Ring and tied it securely. Ole appeared at the door of the shop. He did not enter the shop; but delivered his message with his head in the door. "Ring, I have been appointed as a committee of one to tell you that you have got twenty minutes to leave town." ❖ Ole did not tarry at the barber shop; he seen his duty and he done it (*good timing*).

Ring got his haircut, and shave (*bad timing*) and walked out of the shop. His twenty minutes was up.

Outside the door he was met by a party of citizens. They asked Ring to mount his horse. Said Ring, "Ah, come on fellows; I know you are just joking." They assured Ring that they were not, and to convince him they placed him on his horse; then all horses and men rode out of town. It was not a gay procession. Only fanatics or determined men could take a neighbor, and fellow countryman outside the town and hang him from a tree.

Ring's horse did his part unperturbed. He walked out from under the tree; leaving his master dangling there. (*The horse looked about for a bit of grass to nibble*.)

News travels fast by horseback, and the Pudge family soon learned of Ring's departure. Soon they made their own, and took up residence near Palomar.



One day Sylvester Mendenhall and a cavalcade stopped at the sawmill. To me it was impressive; this party, made up of dogs, horses, and men. The riders wore cowhide chaps, with the smooth side in and the hairy side of the cowhide showing.

Cattle men were alert by nature and by training. They did not ride around for pleasure; although to many of them riding was a pleasure. *Happy rode the length of the state on a horse.*

Sylvester Mendenhall was a Cattle King and looked the part. There was something about cattle raising, in the old days, that boosted a man up and made him feel like a king. *Something he couldn't get selling sewing machines.*

#### At the Sawmill

At night some of the old timers would sit around and tell of things that happened in the back country forty years before 1904. Many of the stories didn't give a very good name to some of the old timers who were still living. The story tellers at the sawmill would caution me against repeating some of their revealing narrations of earlier days. *These could be tales about stately dames of 1900 who were too gay and cut up too much in 1880 — and believe me when I say that some of the boys and girls did cut up a bit in 1880. ❖ That old musket above the door wasn't used only for squirrel hunting. Many times it was used as a persuader to convince some cagey youth that he should do right by our Nell.*

#### Tall Tales

Charlie Wattson had lost an arm at the Battle of Shiloh. He was a good story teller, and if, at any time, details or facts were lacking he supplied them.

Sam Striplin was a Kentuckian. He had taken up a homestead on the mountain before Mendenhalls



arrived. Sam raised race horses and tall mules at various times. He had been in California when law was the do-it-yourself kind. Men were too busy creating. They couldn't waste time on trials and juries, and most elected officials were corrupt. Sam told of attending a lynching party farther north; but he did not make it dramatic. It was commonplace to him. He said an Indian was one of a party of horse thieves captured. It was not a brave Indian, and he did not wish to hang. I can tell you what happened to the Indian mentally; but not being a modern writer; I cannot tell you what happened to him physically.

The Indian whined, "Me tell, me tell." That was all Sam told and I wasn't wise enough to ask for more.

Sam was of such a slight build that he could have been a jockey.

*In a month at the sawmill I did not hear a harsh word spoken; nobody had ulcers; no frustrations.*

Clark Cleaver had come to California in Gold Rush Days, and he said that several members of the party he came out with died with their boots on. Clark, like most of the old timers, did not put out any information on earlier days. He sat in an easy chair under a shade in front of his small house, and he let the rest of the world take care of itself. I did not ask Clark or anyone else about his income; or how much land he owned. Residents on the mountain did not appear to give much thought to incomes; they were more interested in living. ♣ Clark was small in stature and wore gray chin whiskers that were more than a goatee.

*A lot could be said for and against whiskers. They come out on a man's face naturally, and if not taken care of there is no telling where they will end up. A full beard is a time saver; and useful in covering up soiled linen.*





**Clark Cleaver** Robert Asher photo



## It Could Have Been Kit

In the year 1904 there was a "Hidden Cabin" on Palomar. Travelers could pass close to the cabin and not see it. Near the cabin was a spring, and below that a cienaga with wire grass sufficient to feed a horse.

Legend was that Kit Carson spent a winter there. That could be true; because Kit did get around; but considering the kind of scouting Kit did it is doubtful that he kept a horse. It would not have been easy to hide a horse from the Indians.

*At the battle of San Pasqual, during the Mexican War, Kit Carson acted as scout. When the United States soldiers were surrounded by the Mexicans on Starvation Peak thirty-five miles southwest of Palomar, and near what is, or was, Lake Hodges; Kit crawled through the Mexican lines and carried the message to the military base at San Diego. There were only a few hundred men in each army at the battle of San Pasqual; but it was important. ❖ A few little battles and skirmishes gained California for the United States, and a choice bit of real estate it has turned out to be.*

*now Mule Kill*

### DATE LINE 1936

Yesterday I met an Indian on Temple Street. He has a job, and is doing well. Goldberg lives in the front house, and the Indian lives in the back. 🌀 An uninformed person might ask, "What has that to do with Palomar?" The answer is, "Much." The Pala Indians lived on a reservation south of the mountain.

This Indian knew John Quincy Adams who owned the Valley Center store. He also knew the steep road up the south side of Palomar; the one Charlie Wattson and I climbed in 1904.



*The first settlers on the mountain had no money for road building; nor did the County. Much of the land was still "Government Land" and not taxable by local governments. The settlers built roads the quickest and shortest way. Climbing a steep road teams doubled up.*

I forgot to ask the Indian if he knew Bill Nelson; but of course he did. *And thus it was told to me:*

Forty years before 1904 a covered wagon train was coming out of Salton Sink. Bad water and Indian attacks had made it necessary to bury some members of the train, along the roadside. The parents of a baby had been killed; or died of fever.

General Nelson was in charge of the troops who came to the aid of the travelers. The general took the baby — less than a year old — to an Irish settlement below Julian. The baby was named after General Nelson and gained the name of Bill. *Charlie Wattson said some of the Irishmen in that settlement were so tough they grew hair between their teeth (I quote).*

Later on Bill drifted over to the more docile and refining environment of the Indian Reservation. Bill picked an Indian girl for himself, and lived with her people.

Bill came over to hoe potatoes while we were camped at the sawmill. Bill would hoe all morning, and then come in and peel spuds for dinner. Charlie said there was nothing small about Bill but his feet, and they would grow. *(Just a little joke.)*

One morning I rode the back trail with Bill. We were going over to the Helms ranch to bring back some fresh meat. Bill was companionable, raw-boned, sandy-mustached, over six feet tall, and well mannered. Bill rode mountain style, and so did I. That means we rode with the horse, and did not stand up in the stirrups and try to beat the horse there. Bill wore a blue denim jumper



and overalls. He said clothes were a nuisance anyway.

Sometimes Bill would take a job heaving rocks off the road. Sam told us that Bill had the strength of two men.

Bill would be heaving rocks with apparent contentment, and then some morning, about ten o'clock, the wandering spirit would beckon, and Bill would take off from the job and hit the road.

Weeks or months might pass, and then some noon Bill would enter Sam's kitchen and plant his feet under the table and carry on as if no time had elapsed.

Charlie Mendenhall said it was sudden headaches that sent Bill off on his wanderings, and only much strong coffee would give him any relief. *I quote.*

Bill's Indian girl had died leaving him with a daughter. After graduating as a nurse the daughter had entered the City Hospital in Boston. Bill showed us her picture. She was a beautiful girl. She said she never wanted to go back to her own people.



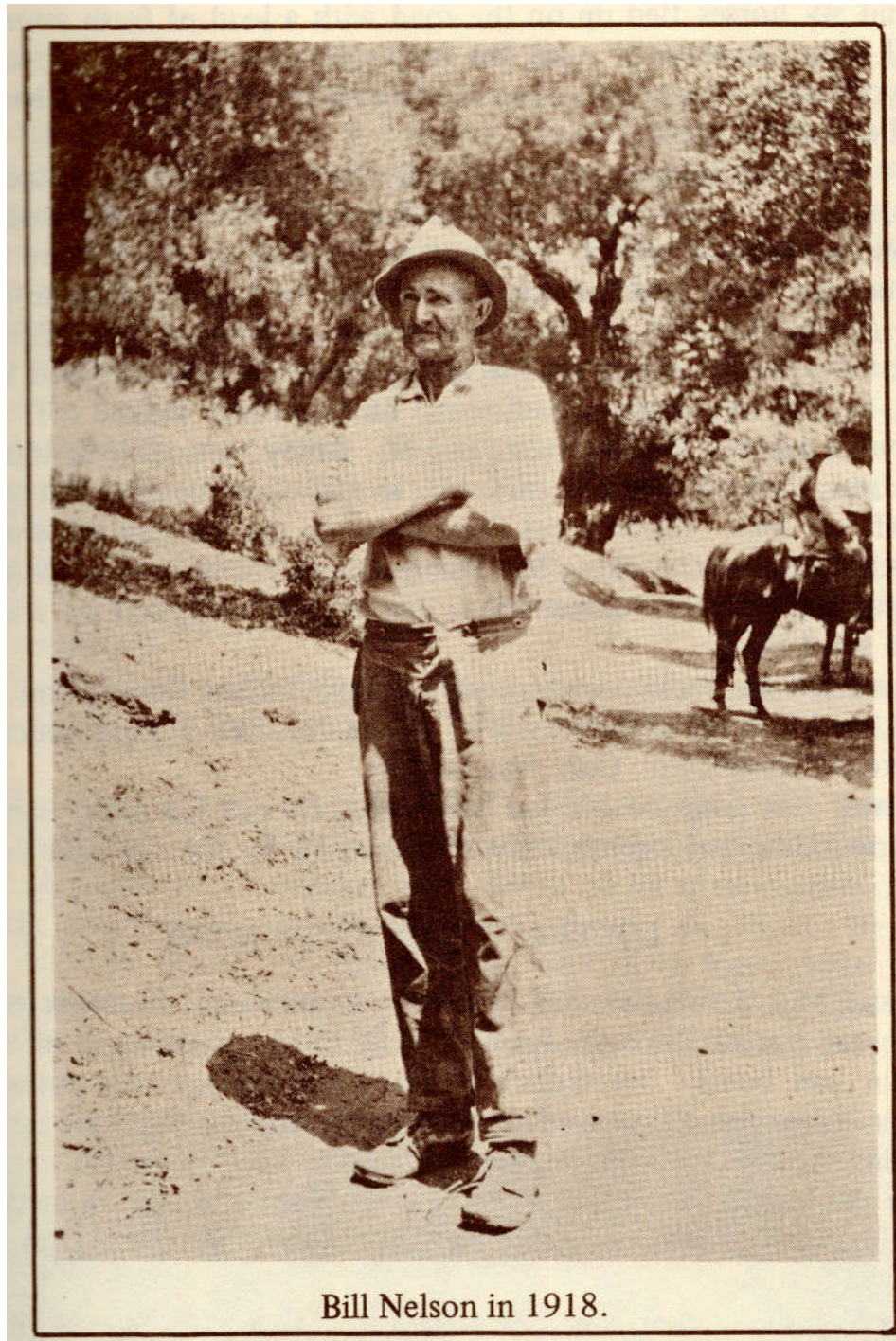
Edward Davis photo

Edward H. Davis wrote about Bill Nelson in his "Palomar and the Stars" memoir, writing that Bill Nelson was about six feet, four inches tall, "gaunt and drawn out, but immensely strong."

[[archive.org/details/davis-palomar-stars\\_20230205](https://archive.org/details/davis-palomar-stars_20230205)]

Davis has a different origin story for Bill Nelson, saying his father was a cavalry officer in Arizona, and when Bill was two years old, Bill's mother died at Fort Yuma. His father left him in charge of Captain Dye who kept the Carrizo Station on the Butterfield Stage Route, and later moved to Spring Hill, raising grain which he freighted and sold to the Butterfield station in the desert. Bill Nelson was cruelly treated and beaten and when eight years old, was taken away by Billy Warnock of Ballena who then raised him.

Davis writes that "there was always a strange kink in his brain; he became bemused,



Bill Nelson in 1918.

due, people thought, to too much abuse and punishment when a child, and undoubtedly being struck over the head. It took the form of a sort of nostalgia, an uncontrollable desire to go home, to leave his job at any time or any place and head for home. He might leave his job cutting hay, baling, threshing, or driving team, for a day or a week, then return and resume his job as usual. When he left he would leave his fork in a hay stack and without a word, walk off."

Davis writes that Bill Nelson "married an Indian woman at La Joya Indian Reservation, Manuela Guassac, and had six children, all of whom received a good education and who were well respected."