

Palomar Pioneers: The Water Bearer

By Jeff Smith | Published Wednesday, May 26, 2010
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In 1904, young Elise Roberts and her family summured on Palomar Mountain. They left their Long Beach home in a roofed wagon, half packed with clothes and bedding, the other half filled with hay for their four horses. Three days later, when they reached the mountain's base, the looming expanse surprised them. They'd expected a solitary peak, blocking out the sky, but before them stood a massive ridge that looked, said long-time resident Robert Asher, like an "upturned rowboat." The family knew the native legend: In the beginning, a flood covered the world. Then "Paaw" — "mother" and "mountain" — rose and saved the children. The astonishing majesty of Palomar, stretching both ways as far as the eye could see, gave the legend credibility.

It would take the wagon a full day to climb the west grade, converted from a horse trail to hard-packed dirt in 1900. The switchbacks curled in precipitous slaloms, an average pitch around ten percent, though steeper ascents rose unexpectedly. Many who made the trek walked, to make less pull for the horses.

Most of the way, the road was just wide enough for a single wagon. One of the dangers: a vehicle coming down, often dragging a tree trunk for brakes.

By the time the family reached the tree line, at 3500 feet, the horses were soaking wet. They came to a sweeping, horseshoe bend in the road, shaded by coastal live oaks. There stood a "grinning black man waving a greeting." At his feet, two galvanized pails of spring water for the horses, and gourds of the ice-cold liquid — praised by many as the most refreshing they ever drank — for travelers. The man wore a sweat-soaked, gingham shirt, overalls pocked with frayed holes, and a wide-brimmed felt hat. His beard was as white as his only tooth. "I'm Uncle Nate," he announced, raising a long, canelike walking stick. "Nate Harrison. I was the first white man on the mountain."

He had to be in his mid-70s. Gnarled wrinkles suggested at least that. But he might have been older. Whenever asked his age, Harrison would reply "Seventy-six next New Years." And people believed him, for decades.

Around 1870, by most estimates, Harrison took a claim just off the west grade, near a flowing spring above Billy Goat Point, which commanded a view of fertile Pauma Valley and, during Santa Ana winds, the Coronados to the far southwest. Harrison greeted thirsty travelers. His reward: spare change or food. (Of the latter, he'd say, "Just wait till I get my tooth in it.") In an era of overt racial divisions — for years after he died, maps referred to the western climb as N-word grade — Harrison was the most welcome sight on the mountain.

"He was a fluent talker," writes Catherine M. Wood, "but not about himself, unless encouraged by a little whiskey."

In one bourbon-laced version, Harrison said he was born a slave. By his teenage years, he had toiled so hard, and been fed so little, he stopped growing and remained small of stature. When he was 16, he and several other slaves were put up for auction. No one bought him. As friends went off to the fields in chains, he crept toward the nearby Mississippi River, keeping low in the high grass. He slid into the roiling brown current and floated downstream. He slept in the fuel bunker of a sidewheel steamer and snuck onto farms at night, stealing food — "best I ever et" — set out for the dogs. He eventually came west.

The sober version: Lysander Utt left his plantation in Westfield, Virginia, and headed for gold country in 1849. With him he took "one healthy Negro man slave," Nathan Harrison. They joined a covered-wagon caravan at Independence,

Missouri. After fording rivers, climbing mountains, and braving deserts, they came to El Pueblo de Los Angeles — a smattering of dirt-caked, one-story adobes — on Christmas Eve. Then they went north to the goldfields near Auburn.

Like the majority of those infected with luster-dust fever, Utt didn't make a dime. He and Harrison moved south to - today's Anaheim/Tustin area, where Utt opened a trading post.

When California sought statehood in 1849, a key question at the first Constitutional Convention was: should it be a free or a slave state? A handful of the 48 delegates at Colton Hall, in Monterey, argued for "slavery extension" — even for splitting California in two, the northern half "free." Though many did so begrudgingly, all delegates adopted the resolution: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, unless for punishment of crimes, shall ever be tolerated."

California became the 31st state on September 9, 1850. Around that time, Utt gave Harrison his freedom.

In 1909, when it was first minted, W.C. Fink recalled giving Harrison a bright Lincoln penny and telling him what the president did for the slaves. "I know about Abe Lincoln," Harrison replied. "I had my freedom long before that."

Accounts vary about what he did with his liberty. Among them: he was a woodcutter for many years at San Gabriel Mission; no, he helped carve the road out of Tejon Pass (and drove an ox team as part of the first wagon train). In either case, Harrison grew to hate Los Angeles, which he called "the Pueblo" to the end of his days. Whenever he was there, he slept far from town. "They was killing people every night," he told his neighbor Louis Salmons. "They had a sign: '[N-word] don't let the sun set.'"

Harrison found the same conditions in San Diego. "When I came to the country, no Indian was allowed to speak to the priest without taking off his hat. Mexicans about the same. The Indians were treated like slaves."

He landed a job at Louis Rose's store. The town's first Jewish settler, Rose "never shut his hospitable doors" to anyone (*Herald*). He had a tortoise, called Chili, so large children could ride on its back. One day, Rose had to leave for business; he'd be away maybe two or three weeks. He told Harrison to mind the store, and also Chili, which Harrison dubbed "the turkle." (He liked to rename: he called Escondido "Skundido.")

The tortoise ran away, as it did at every opportunity. Unable to leave the premises, Harrison fretted about how Rose would take the loss. When Rose returned, he organized a posse. They went due south and found Chili at La Presa (across from today's Sweetwater Dam), on his way to the Gulf of California. Rose never complained to Harrison (who called Rose "the finest white man I ever knew"), but this incident may have been a turning point. Harrison and the idea of full-time employment parted company.

Attitudes in town may also have driven Harrison to his high place of solitude. Judson Ames, editor of the *Herald*, urged dividing California, and most townspeople favored the "slavery extension" (in the 1864 presidential election, 180 San Diegans voted for General George McLellan, 51 for Lincoln).

Harrison moved north. He befriended the natives at Pala and Rincon — and may have married a woman from the La Jolla Reservation. During the summer and fall, he worked as a sheepherder up in Doane Valley, sometimes baking bread for the shepherds, often hunting the mountain lions, for 11 dollars a hide, that threatened the flocks. "I killed 27 cats in one month," he boasted, so many that no one wanted the hides.

Then he had another turning point. He and two dogs were herding sheep in Doane Valley. Harrison grew tired, says W.C. Fink, of being alone. "I told those dogs to take good care of the sheep." He rolled up his bedding, packed his grub, and went down to Pauma Rancheria, where the sheep's owner couldn't trespass. Harrison laid low for a spell and participated in the tribal dances.

In 1867, Major C.E. Utt, son of the man who'd brought Harrison to California, purchased the Agua Tibia Ranch. For the rest of his life, Harrison had a sanctuary at the native-built, adobe house on a western spur of Palomar. He could bathe in the nearby sulphur spring and enjoy the largest figs in the county.

Around this time, Harrison abandoned a claim he had at Rincon and began homesteading near the spring, halfway up Palomar. Eventually, he built a 12-foot-square, unventilated cabin of thick, mud-chinked rocks and shake roof. He lived off the land, wild game and herb. A friend wrote, he "knew every trail, every tree, every stream." He also knew how to avoid poison oak and scorpions, and where the rattlers had their dens.

Those who regarded him as "lazy Uncle Nate" misread the man. Along with hunting mountain lions, when he first came to Palomar, he said, there were so many bears "you could hear 'em poppin' their teeth." Harrison and others hunted them, and "grizzlies too. They was darn hard on hogs."

He loved to recall the time he saw one and was unarmed. "I was riding the pinto horse. Bear was coming up the trail and looked at us good. Then he went down the trail. I was glad he went."

In 1900, a road-construction crew camped near Harrison's cabin. As they sat around the campfire, a worker, pretending to read a newspaper, invented a lurid tale about a fleeing murderer headed their way. Harrison jumped up and ran to the cabin. Amid giggles that they'd fooled the old man, Harrison returned, sat down, and laid a shotgun across his lap. "Had a stranger appeared at that time," writes Catherine Wood, "Nate surely would have taken a shot at him."

Because Harrison knew every inch of the mountain, a rumor claimed he knew where to find gold — even had a pile stashed away. A visitor going to Julian, allegedly "hunting a railroad," needed a place to stay for the night. Harrison put him up and gave him two blankets. The man, who "snored like 60," arose the next morning and asked Harrison if he believed in dreams.

"No," said Harrison. The man recalled one about a "fortune coming from the ground." Then he produced "letters and papers" announcing rich veins in the mountains. Harrison just shook his head. The man rode off, none the wiser.

"I was glad to get shed of him," said Harrison. "I didn't want that sort of a fellow around. Didn't want my throat cut."

A rumor of wealth may have killed Joseph Smith, Harrison's rival for first non-native on Palomar. The six-foot-four, former sea captain came to the mountain in 1852. He built a four-room adobe, raised horses and hogs, and supposedly had a large sum hidden in his milk house. In 1868, a young, barefooted deserter from a British ship befriended Smith. One day, while Smith was repairing a beehive, the youth shot through a window and killed him. A search party tracked the boy down. They brought him back to Smith's house. "Know him?" they asked, pulling a canvas tarp from the body.

The boy confessed. Twenty-five men took him to a nearby live oak and draped a noose around his neck. Instead of putting him on a horse and scaring it from under him, they chose a much more painful "stand-up hanging." Someone looped the rope around a branch and all 25 pulled it. When the boy was six feet off the ground, they cinched it down and watched him squirm to death. Harrison was one of them.

Until 1901, Palomar was called Smith Mountain. For decades, Harrison was the water bearer of the west grade. He lived off the land, tips from travelers, and gifts from neighbors: flour, butchered meat, sugar, and tobacco for his short-stemmed pipe. A favorite was Louis Salmons's annual Christmas present, a bottle of Scotch, which Harrison promised to sip till sundown. Whenever he saw Salmons, Harrison always asked, "When's Christmas?"

In time, it became difficult to estimate what Harrison had accumulated more of: befriended travelers or tall tales. Salmons, who called himself just a “second-rate liar,” loathed the hogwash. “You go on down to So-and-So’s ranch, ask some of the liars down there about Uncle Nate. They raise the best liars on Palomar.”

In 1920, the stories converge.

No one had seen Harrison for some time. Someone visited him (accounts vary) and found Harrison so wracked with rheumatism he could barely move. “His clothing was in tatters and he had little to eat. Rats and mice were making sad havoc with his bedding” (*Union*). Ed Quinlan and others drove Harrison to the San Diego County Home for the Aged. “As he was seated in the automobile,” wrote the *Union*, “he waved a last salute to the trees and rocks of the rugged - mountainside.”

“They put him in an institution,” said Salmons. “They meant well. It was the only thing to do. But we all believe he must have thought he was being carried back to slavery.”

“Some of us would visit him,” Salmons added, “and he would beg to be taken back to Palomar.”

Harrison died October 10, 1920. He was buried in an unmarked grave at Mt. Hope Cemetery.

In 1924, over 100 friends witnessed the dedication of a bronze plaque placed in a granite monument where Harrison greeted thirsty travelers.

In 1972, Ed Diaz, member of the National African-American Historical Society, discovered that Harrison’s grave at Mt. Hope was unmarked. Diaz appealed for donations and on July 23, 1972, Reverend George Walker Smith dedicated a marble gravestone to the “slave turned pioneer.” For his text, Smith chose Psalm 121: “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help.”

QUOTATIONS:

1. Marion F. Beckler: Palomar “is in no sense a mountain peak. It is a mountain range, a rolling plateau.”
2. W.C. Fink: “He wrote his name with an X, voted the Republican Party; his memory retained everything; he repeated the tales in the exact words he used before.”
3. Abel M. Davis (quoting Mary Connaghan Newell): “Endearing himself to thousands of visitors over a period of more than 70 years, [Harrison] was literally ‘the man by the side of the road — watching the world go by.’”

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Palomar Pioneers: Of Travail and Tragedy

By Jeff Smith | Published Wednesday, June 2, 2010

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Rattler Man

Joseph Beresford, son of a British Lord, fell in love with the gardener's daughter. His father, whose lineage went back to James I, gave him an ultimatum: marry beneath your rank and lose your inheritance. Joseph chose love. His father not only disowned him, he gave Joseph a small sum of money and banished him from England - forever.

As they sailed to America in the late 1860s, Joseph assured his bride he'd strike gold in California. They would return in such high style that all the Beresfords — including a nephew who became Lord Mayor of London — would embrace them.

By the time they reached Yuma, the Beresfords had two daughters. As they watched rope-pulled ferries cross the muddy Colorado, Joseph heard tales of lost treasure.

Thomas L. "Peg Leg" Smith, a mountain man who died in 1866, allegedly discovered "fabulous wealth" near three small buttes, three days west of the river. Most prospectors assumed that meant around Borrego Springs. But a self-proclaimed insider said no: the buttes, and nuggets the size of oranges, lay near a great mountain northwest of the desert.

The family had become so accustomed to hardship, they eagerly traversed the arid wasteland in 110-degree heat. To avoid human contact, they skirted the Southern Emigrant Trail Camp at Warner's Ranch, and continued beyond Hot Springs Mountain, the highest peak in San Diego County. They ascended into Lost Valley. A few days later, they headed west, toward Palomar.

One cold evening, somewhere on the eastern slope, Joseph found an abandoned adobe structure near a flowing spring. Except for a fireplace and a tall pile of straw, the single room was empty. While he started a fire, his wife and daughters made straw beds on the dirt floor — and soon fell asleep.

Joseph went out to care for the horses and rustle up firewood. He heard shouts, then sky-piercing shrieks. He raced back inside. Rattlesnakes, which had crawled into the straw for warmth, shook staccato clacks and struck and struck the women like punching fists.

Joseph grabbed a large stick and slashed with swift and terrible fury. But every time he killed one, another twitching tongue emerged from the straw. He pounded their hard, triangular heads, or speared and flung them at the walls.

Joseph was enough of a pioneer to know that, to make sure you don't step near a sharp fang by accident, you kill a rattlesnake twice. He dragged each one outside and chopped off its head. When he was done, 16 California black rattlers lay just beyond the door.

The screams abated. Bit countless times, his wife and daughters were either dead or dying. The next day, he buried them.

Joseph became known as "the hermit of Smith's mountain" (Palomar's early name). In the words of long-time resident Robert Asher, he was one of the region's "forlornlites." He'd sometimes wave to passers-by, even let himself be photographed, but kept away from people.

Two legends grew. In the 1870s he raised sheep, he said, "because there was nothing else to do." When shepherding declined — cattlemen wanted the bunchgrass-rich valleys for their herds — Joseph had no visible means of support. Yet he remained on the mountain for decades. To this day, many believe he used Palomar as a base, made frequent forays throughout the region, and actually found the lost treasure.

"On the past he does not dwell," wrote Guy O. Glazier in the early 1920s. "Still I verily believe that Joseph Beresford, reportedly heir to an English name and fortune, is living on gold taken from the mythical Peg Leg mine."

The second legend is actual fact. Palomar Mountain has surprisingly few rattlesnakes. That's because for over 50 years, Joseph Beresford hunted down and slaughtered every rattler he could find.

Sisters of Solitude

Maybe they weren't lonely. Maybe that's just a flatlander's citified view of two women who fled from human contact. But long-time residents of the mountain ponder the Frazier sisters' profound seclusion. Edward Davis, who knew the "modest, retiring ladies," said, "I often wonder what these women got out of life."

Jim Frazier came to Palomar with his invalid wife and young daughter. He bought the old Morrison property and planned to raise hogs and cattle. The small, southwest-facing cabin stood on a promontory — today's Frazier Point — below the snow-line, with an expansive view of San Diego County.

Jim's wife died shortly after they moved in. He wrote his sisters, Mariah and Lizzie. Come west, he urged them. Help care for the child.

The sisters had a small farm near the Illinois/Missouri border. Mariah was tall and thin, a "handsome young woman," writes Marion F. Beckler, "with personality and sparkle." Petite Lizzie was much more withdrawn and "never very robust." Both were dressmakers, "neat as a pin," who enjoyed refined living. They sold everything and made the trek in 1895. Not wanting to be left alone, their mother joined them.

Jim drove his two-mule spring wagon to meet them in San Diego. He had awkward news: he'd married a woman with two children. He moved his new family to the east end of Mendenhall Valley (southeast of Palomar Observatory), where he'd built a cabin and barn. The cabin was cramped for five people and way too small for eight. His mother and sisters could return to Illinois or live somewhere nearby.

Mariah and Lizzie decided to stay. They rented the old Wolfe place in Mendenhall. A curse, some said, hung over the abandoned cabin: Wolfe, an ex-stage driver, fell in love with a married, red-headed woman. Her husband, also an ex-driver, shot and killed Wolfe, then left the region.

Shortly after moving in, the Fraziers' mother died.

The sisters decided to homestead a canyon-like property at the edge of Barker Valley. To make a trail up to - Jim's house, a good 2000 feet higher in elevation, they chopped down swaths of manzanita, thick acacia bushes, and poison oak. They rolled boulders to the side, first making sure no scorpions or rattlesnakes lurked in the shadows. Then, with pick and shovel, they graded the steep path.

For their cabin, Jim brought boards from Escondido. Davis: The "sisters, totally unused to manual labor, packed these boards on their backs, one at a time, over a crooked, rocky trail." The work was arduous, but, Davis adds, "they asked no help or favors and received no assistance during all their life on Palomar."

The cabin slowly took shape, but needed a roof. Halfway up the slope, Mariah found a grove of cedars. She and Lizzie made the climb every day until they had split enough three-foot shake shingles to cover their home.

Those who saw the property wondered why the sisters chose it. Ravines and hillocks afforded little arable land. The cabin was over a mile from Jim, their nearest neighbor, and at night coyotes howled nearby.

The sisters lived there for ten years. Mariah sold eggs and butter to neighbors and hotels. The Mendenhall children swore that Lizzie made the best biscuits around. In the beginning, writes Catherine Wood, the sisters "sometimes joined their neighbors in picnics." Mariah had the first Kodak camera on Palomar and loved taking pictures. Many of them, now long gone, were of a man who proposed marriage. But when Lizzie, whose health began to fail, objected, Mariah said no.

Arthritis wracked Lizzie's legs. Her stiffening hands made her specialty, lacework, impossible. In time, she could barely sew.

In 1898, to generate income Mariah began working for the post office. In those days Palomar had two: Jessee and Nellie, named for their first postmasters, Harriet L. Jessee and Nellie McQueen. Three times a week, regardless of the weather, Mariah rode the steep, serpentine Trujillo Trail down the south slope and back to - Jessee.

Mariah wore a bonnet and divided skirts. She refused to ride side-saddle, as was the fashion for women. Before she reached Jessee, she'd dismount and walk because, writes Davis, she was "too modest to be seen riding - astride."

During this period, Jim's wife left him. So the sisters moved in: summers at the Mendenhall cabin; winters, ten miles southwest, at Frazier Point. Lizzie's arthritis became so severe, she needed a rocking chair to move about. In time, her legs became paralyzed.

One spring morning, as Jim prepared to drive Lizzie to the summer cabin, he passed out in the wagon. Lizzie checked his pulse. Jim was dead.

"After that," writes Wood, "the two sisters, who were well thought of by all their neighbors, carried on alone."

Mariah did all the work: building fences and corrals, plowing, sewing, reaping. She carried every drop of water they used and tended their 60 head of cattle. She still delivered the mail, this time from Nellie to Jessee. Since - she'd often return late at night, before she left, Mariah spread canvas across the windows and locked Lizzie in the cabin. If a man came near, Lizzie must not budge. To assure her sister's safety, Mariah jammed slivers of wood into the keyhole. Two dogs — some say "half-starved" — kept watch outside.

Mrs. Hodgie Salmons saw the sisters from afar for five years before they ever spoke to her. She became one of their few friends. One day, Hodgie wanted to pay Lizzie a call at the point. When she neared the cabin, she saw no sign of life. She shouted hellos and knocked several times. Rude hands fumbled with the lock. Lizzie opened the door a crack, smiled, and invited Hodgie into a "dark and gloomy" room.

“I thought no one was home,” said Hodgie.

“When Mariah goes off,” said Lizzie, “she locks everything up, including me. She’s afraid some man will come and kill me.”

Whenever a man came to the cabin, writes Davis, Mariah opened the door holding a knife in her calloused hand. “She was never known to shoot anybody or even threaten, but she was always ready.”

One evening, as the sisters prepared dinner at Frazier Point, the stovepipe overheated. The ceiling of their four-room cabin caught fire. They had no water. The spring was a good 100 yards away. Mariah thought fast. Milk! She filled a pan, stood on a box, and doused the flames.

Somehow Lizzie made it outside. Davis: “No one, even Miss Lizzie herself, could explain how she accomplished the feat.”

Twice in the spring of 1918, when Mariah harrowed fields at the East Mendenhall property, she tripped and - couldn’t move. As she clung to the reins, mules dragged her back to the cabin.

On a Sunday in November, 1918, Mariah spent most of the morning chasing down stray calves. After stowing the last one back in the corral, she entered the cabin, ringing wet and glassy-eyed, and slumped on the bed.

Noticing that Mariah had become strangely quiet, Lizzie went to her side. To Lizzie’s horror, her beloved sister — and life support system for the past 15 years — was dead.

A shocked Lizzie straightened Mariah’s hair, crossed her hands on her chest, and prepared her to receive - mourners.

For a touch of culture amid the wild, the sisters had a little bell, with a white handkerchief attached. Lizzie always rang it at dinnertime. To attract attention, Lizzie opened the door, propped herself against her chair, and began ringing the bell. The sounds echoed through the cabin, but the nearest neighbors, the Mendenhalls, were a good two miles away. Lizzie shook and shook the bell. Every ring shot pain through her crooked fingers.

No one heard. Mariah’s body began to decompose. Lizzie needed to go outside. Inch by inch, dragging a pail of water behind, she lugged herself up to their apple orchard on a small rise. Lizzie rang the little bell for two cold days and nights.

On Wednesday, Retha Mae Mendenhall hadn’t seen Mariah ride past their house for quite some time. She and Marion Davis decided to check up on the sisters. As their wagon approached the orchard, they noticed something white waving among the trees. Then they heard a slow, soft tinkling.

They found Lizzie, staring straight ahead, ringing and ringing the bell.

Lizzie stayed for a while with the Salmons, Louis, and her friend Hodgie, then returned to Illinois. She died, soon after, while eating breakfast.

Neighbors buried Mariah under a large black oak, about 40 feet from the house. In 1929, Edward Davis visited the site. He saw “a stake at the head and a white rock at the foot,” but “no name, date, or other sign to tell even that a grave was there.”

QUOTATIONS:

1. Peter Brueggeman: Tradition calls her Maria, but “land office records record her name as Mariah - Frazier.”
2. Edward Davis: The Frazier sisters “were very refined, honorable, honest and cultivated people and not used to physical labor such as starting a ranch high up in the mountains.”
3. Davis: Mariah “always performed her work the hardest way, when it could have been performed easier by the horses.”

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