

Marion Beckler's Palomar Mountain Memoir

Peter Brueggeman, editor. 2024



Edited by Peter Brueggeman from Marion Beckler's handwritten notes for a talk she gave to local San Diego teachers. Undated, but probably 1961 due to her reference to holding school ten years ago in the Observatory construction mess hall. Marion Beckler taught in the Palomar Mountain school from 1951 to 1955. She and her husband owned a cabin in the Crestline area of Palomar Mountain. Marion Beckler wrote the second book on Palomar Mountain history, entitled "Palomar Mountain: Past and Present," which was published in Palm Desert, California, by Desert Magazine in 1958.

If you student teachers knew what a joy it is to teach the little school of Palomar you'd put in your applications right now, and the Pauma school board wouldn't suffer its annual anguish finding a teacher.

Now the teacher has a house trailer provided near the school and there is a good schoolhouse and she doesn't have to transport the children – missing half the fun!

Any young person who enjoys winter sports would love shoveling snow, putting on chains, driving over icy roads – getting plenty of help – for no one is alone with his difficulties here on Palomar; I had to transport the children.

Ten years ago we held school in a small room walled off at the end of the old mess hall of the Observatory construction era. We had no equipment. Our school yard sloped in every direction. Much of our play time was filled recovering balls down the mountain side. But we got our picture in the National Geographic. There were ten children, half of them beginners. We were a happy, aspiring bunch. There was the great Observatory, the clear blue sky – or snow to play in. And there was that delightful romantic feel of our mountain. I remember Joey Stehlik, one sunny spring morning, gazing up at the sky and saying, "This is a wonderful place. I wish I might never have to live anywhere else."

This is isolated. As a teacher making teacher's meetings on time, you feel it. But the isolation makes your work a challenge. You realize the unparalleled richness of this environment, the beauty, the wildlife and what the Observatory means to the whole world. And you make the most of all this in planning your work. Your social studies, your science, it's right here. We had annual excursions below, to the zoo, historic landmarks, and at home nature hikes. Byron Hill devotes a morning each spring to taking the school through the Big Dome – and on special occasions, as when the great mirror has been removed from the telescope for washing and re-aluminizing, we have been invited to observe.

There are not the outside distractions of the city children and our isolation made it a pleasure to create entertainment for the local residents. We loved putting on plays, and marionette shows. In fact, here on Palomar the school can be the very center of the community.

I know the one room multi-graded school is frowned upon now. But the opportunity for you who love teaching is very great. And I believe the children get a more complete experience. I know they enjoyed it. The day before this New Year, I had five callers, young folks who had attended school here during most of my six years. Three

of them are in Hi, one a senior up at Clear Lake. They had come to see how the mountain looks now, to call on their old friends, including their old teacher.

My first idea in taking the school, was to make the children enjoy school, and get a [illegible] of it. These former pupils looking me up – others have also -- made me happy in the belief that I may have succeeded in my original intent.

Those rides with the children, transporting them from State Park to school, I wouldn't have missed for the world. Sometimes my car was a space ship with Danny Goswick at the controls, relaying messages to folks on other planets – the back seat riders. Sometimes we played "I'm going on a trip and my trunk is filled with so and so – a game that kept them occupied till we arrived. Often I was asked questions like "Mrs. Beckler, do the men in the sky wear skirts? Mrs. Beckler, what does it mean, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be dumb?" Wildlife always in mind – how many deer they saw this a.m., look for grey squirrels.

...**My first acquaintance with this mountain was in August 1900**, when my family came up the mountain – up Smith Mountain, for a month of camping. [PB: Palomar Mountain was formerly called Smith Mountain]

The trip then required three days from San Diego. On the second night we camped at the foot of the mountain and next morning started up the Trujillo trail, which parallels somewhat the present South Grade – you can see parts of it yet. It was so steep only my father rode, driving and stopping every few yards to rest the horses while my uncle blocked the wheel.



Trujillo Trail, replaced by S6 South Grade. Percy Smith Cox photograph, August 1896.

At about 4 o'clock we reached Bailey's Resort. They gave us permission to camp down at Iron Spring. We drove on down through azaleas, past the schoolhouse – one of the mountain's three school houses, and came to a road dropping across the stream. We liked the trees across the road and made camp there. Next morning when my mother was the only one left in camp, and she was cooking something over the tin camp stove when she became aware of a horseman looming over her and a rather frightening voice demanding to know what she was

doing there. She couldn't see the man, the sun was in her eyes when she looked up. She said, "I can't see you." He said, "I'll come round where you can see me." Then he asked again what the camp was doing there. She told him Bailey's had given permission, and he said "Baileys don't give permission to anybody to camp on Mendenhall land." It seems that crossing the road put us across the Bailey-Mendenhall boundary. But he let us stay.

So, at the beginning of this century, my family had blundered into speaking acquaintance with the two families who, more than all the others, made this mountain famous. The Baileys who were running the most popular mountain resort in all the Southland, and the Mendenhalls whose cattle empire included 11,000 acres of Smith Mountain's beautiful valleys, and were known throughout the Southwest as "Mendenhall Cattle Kings." And there at Baileys was Nellie Post Office, whose story belongs to the mountains folk lore.

My family also called on Old Man Doane, the mountain's most colorful character, famous for his great beard and his love of school marms. [PB: George Doane]

When we returned home the grade at the West End was near enough completion so that we went that way. [PB: Nate Harrison Grade, which was completed in 1900]. The lower portion and the upper portion lacked about a mile of meeting and we made it where there was no road, dragging a tree. And stopping at the trough for water, we saw the well known Nigger Nate, who claimed he was the first white man on the mountain. Of the many stories Nate told of how he came to be there, the one most often told at his spring while passers by watered their horses, represented him as a runaway slave, hiding there in his little cabin, not knowing for years the war had made him a free man.

Nathan Harrison is the only pioneer to have a monument erected in his honor, which you can see if you go down the West Grade. But the Mountain place names are in a sense monuments to the pioneers who made their homes here: "Smith Mountain", the name it was known by for fifty years; Nellie P.O. there at Bailey's in 1900, honoring the first postmaster; Doane Valley, honoring probably the mountain's most colorful character of early days.

How this Mountain came to be "Smith Mountain"

Joseph Smith was the first white man to settle on the mountain, unless you include horse and cattle thieves, and they never quite settle. Smith came up in 1859, and was the first of a number of pioneers who came up from Warner's, the Butterfield Stage station.

Briefly, Smith, a retired sea captain, came to California with Colonel Cave Coutts in 1848, became a civic leader in San Diego, helped plan the route of the first overland mail, the JackAss Mail, supervised the road and looked out for road agents. In 1859 when the Butterfield stages began running, he saw an opportunity in supplying hay, meat, etc from this mountain. So he came up and built his adobe house in a valley at the east end and built a road from Warner's station up to his ranch. He came through what was known later as Love Valley, now the home of Hap Mendenhall and Jack and family.

Smith's murder in 1867 was one of the news sensations of that day. He had gone to Pauba, Temecula with wool and made the mistake of picking up a hitchhiker, glad to have someone to talk to who spoke his language. He made the man ranch foreman. All we know of the man is, he was a deserter from a British ship in San Diego Bay. Why he shot Smith has been the subject of arm chair sleuthing ever since. Old timers say they were probably having a drunken argument. The man, escaping on one of Smith's horses was stopped by George Dyche, who was running cattle on Warners. Dyche brought him back, found Smith's body, got a confession from the man, and with John Place, took him down to Warners. There as the story goes, while they were imbibing restorative spirits, men at Warners took the prisoner and hanged him. Many tales grew out of the murder and hanging. The incident grew into a legend. The Mountain became known as Smith.

Nellie Post Office

Nellie was the name on the post office at Baileys when I was here in 1900.

Nellie McQueen and her aging father came up to homestead in the early 1880s.

Joseph Smith's house was then occupied by George Dyche. The Valley was Dyche Valley and quite a pioneer community had grown up around it: the Cooks, the Mendenhalls over in Mendenhall Valley and many others. And these people were getting their supplies and mail from the old Butterfield station and store at Warners, whoever had to go, got the mail for all.

Nellie McQueen promptly applied in Washington for a Post Office with herself as Post Master. She asked to have the P.O. named "Fern Glen." She got her contract April 2, 1883. But her post office was named Nellie and Nellie it stayed for fifty years.

Mrs. Louis Salmons told me "Nellie" was always a joke. We would say "It's time to go call on Nellie" etc. And how everyone worked to shake that name: Nellie.

Nellie McQueen, Miss Nellie, is described as wiry, real good looking, tough as rawhide. Once a week she saddled her horse and rode to Ramona, returning next day with mail. Her father one day went out to milk and kicked the bucket, using Mountain vernacular. Alone, the strain was too much for Miss Nellie and she left at the end of her four year contract. The P.O. went to her sister's, then to Baileys where it remained, with a few brief intervals for the next sixty odd years. The name Nellie and Smith Mountain were dropped in 1920 and the mountain and its post office became officially Palomar Mountain.

The post office remained at Baileys until Dec 31, 1957 when Mrs. Bailey retired, but her retirement and the moving of the old post office marked the passing of the old era, when mail days were times of social gala.

Beckler cabin
Birch Hill



L to R: Uncle Carl Floyd & his wife Anna; Marion Beckler; Grandma Floyd; Mr.
Beckler, boy is Kenny Floyd





Marian Beckler on right; Adalind Bailey, former Palomar Mountain postmaster, on left. Summer 1962

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