

Gordon Stuart on Palomar Mountain

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2023, version 3

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. Excerpts from Stuart’s book are quoted below.

TRUJILLO TRAIL

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.... At the north end of the valley we left the groves and went over the ridge into Valley Center. ... That night we camped along the road... Next morning we came to the foot of Palomar, on the south side. A road went from there to the top of the mountain. The 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.

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

SAMUEL STRIPLIN'S SAWMILL

Samuel Striplin's sawmill was located in what is now known as Pedley Valley. An early valley homesteader was Thomas J. "Tom" Powers and it was known as Powers Valley.

Samuel Striplin, a friend of Enos T. Mendenhall, arrived and purchased it from Powers. Samuel Striplin and William L. Wilhite brought lumber down from their Palomar Mountain sawmill to provide building materials for the growing towns of Valley Center, Escondido and San Diego. They also sold lumber for many Palomar Mountain cabins.

Striplin lost the sawmill during bankruptcy proceedings, and Frank and Stell Pedley bought out Striplin. The meadow at the east of Pedley Valley was known as "The Old Bull Pasture" because it pastured the sawmill oxen.



Striplin's Valley 3rd Saw Mill - Palomar.

... 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.... 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.

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.

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. 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. ... 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.... Wagon loads of campers drove up, as Charlie and I did. ...

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.... Twice a week I rode a horse over to Bailey's to get a few groceries and pick up the mail. ...

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.... 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?...

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 the 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....

GEORGE DOANE



Robert Asher photo

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.

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, 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."

CLARK CLEAVER

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.

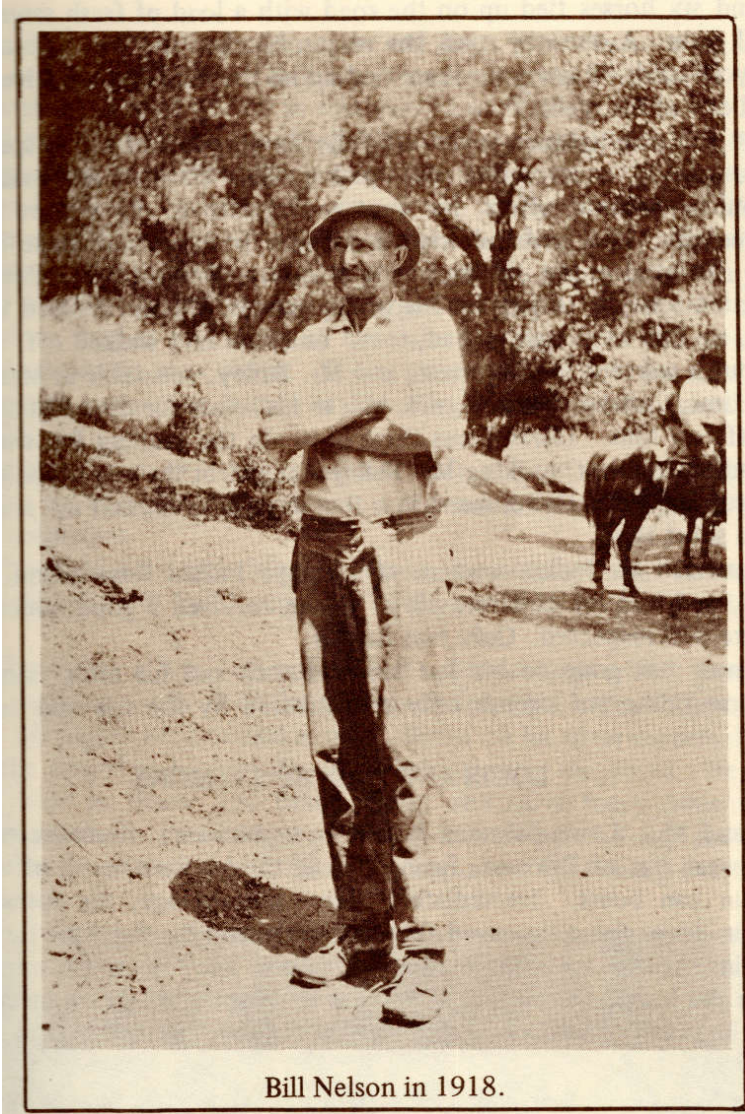


Robert Asher photo

HIDDEN CABIN

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....

BILL NELSON



Bill Nelson in 1918.

Gordon Stuart writes:

Forty years before 1904 a covered wagon train was coming out of Salton Sink. Bad water and Indian attacks 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. 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.

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 H. Davis writes that Bill Nelson was about six feet, four inches tall, “gaunt and drawn out, but immensely strong.” [Davis’ Palomar Mountain history entitled “Palomar and the Stars,” published in Palomar Mountain Views, Volume 1, September 1982, along with Nelson’s photo above]

Davis has a different origin story for Bill Nelson, saying his father was a cavalry officer in Arisona, 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 Carriso 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, 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 leaves 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.”