

Palomar Pioneers: The Water Bearer

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In 1904, young Elise Roberts and her family summered 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 shepherd 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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