

Life Sketch, Bruce Morgan

By Charles Morgan

Born in Madera County on June 9 in 1906, Bruce soon moved to and grew up in the Los Angeles Area and worked at various jobs in the area including at one point repairing slot machines. In the late twenties he took all the money he had, bought lumber loaded it on a truck and headed for the “last gold rush boom town in the west.” He built a two-story structure that consisted of a saloon on the first floor and a “house of ill repute” on the second floor. He no sooner had it fully stocked when the town “busted” and he lost his investment. Shortly after he went to work for the “Salt Works” at Tramway. It wasn’t very long after that he met, courted and wed Grace Jackson.



Tramway – near Swansea

Saline Valley via ore cars suspended on a tram to the Southern Pacific narrow gauge railway in the Owens Valley. Charles was born there in 1931 and Barbara two years later. The depression hit, and the business [The Saline Valley Salt Tram] was forced to shut down and never reopened. Bruce moved his young family into Lone Pine where he went to work for Ellis Motors, the area Ford Agency. Bruce was a born salesman! One of his proudest accomplishments was that he sold a car a day, every day, for thirty days. Remember this was during the depression. He later worked a couple of years as a carpenter for Bill Skinner.

In 1936 Bruce and Grace gathered up all their saving and borrowed whatever they could to purchase Tunnel Air Camp from Ted Cook. The camp was located at Tunnel Meadows at 9,000 feet elevation in Inyo National Forest with a landing strip only 1,600 ft. long. It took a really skilled pilot to safely land and take off. The guests were flown in bi-planes with huge radial engines. Grace prepared meals in the two large tents that served for a kitchen and dining room. Guests slept in sleeping bags on cots in individual tents located around the compound. Pack trips to the Kern and Rocky Basin Lakes were conducted from the camp on a regular basis. After four years of scrimping the fifth year was profitable and it looked like the camp was successful at last.



Grace Morgan at Tunnel Air Camp

December 7, 1941 and the coming of World War II changed all that. The camp was closed for the duration and Bruce and Grace went to work as fire guard and telephone operator at the Tunnel Ranger Station. The whole family spent the next two summers at the ranger station with newly born Richard joining his sisters and brother in the mountains. The following two years Bruce, Charles and Dick Troeger spent the summer managing cattle at Little Whitney for the Anchor Ranch and Russ Spainhower. Grace and the girls grew an enormous “Victory Gardens” at the ranch in Lone Pine. It was at this ranch that a tall gentleman just out of the Army made a partnership offer to Bruce that was beyond belief and after a very short discussion with his family, he chose to accept. A one page agreement was drawn up and signed forming Mt. Whitney Pack Trains. Of course that man was the family’s good friend, Ike Livermore. Business was good in the early fifties. The outfit not only packed the Sierra Club High Trip but also provided stock and services to the Wampler Trip, The Trail Riders of the Wilderness two Sierra Club Base Camps and a Sierra Club Saddle Trip. Saddle trips were conducted to the Top of Mt. Whitney out of Whitney Portal. The outfit packed mule loads of supplies to Golden Trout Camp located below Cottonwood Lakes, and also sent many parties into the camp. The outfit also packed large parties from corporations such as Pacific Coast

Borax Company on two week all expense trips. From 1948 to 1954 the family also managed the stable at Furnace Creek Ranch in Death Valley. Most of the stock were wintered in the Valley. Moonlight, breakfast and dinner rides were popular many accompanied by dancing on the dry lakes. With the help of their family Bruce and Grace taught folk dancing four nights a week at the Ranch and Inn. In addition Bruce had the "Grey Line" Tour concession for the valley, and with the help of Barbara, Enid and Charles tours were conducted up and down the valley. Bruce eventually was appointed Recreation Director for the Ranch and the Inn.



Bruce's twenty mule team was first hitched up for the 1949 Death Valley Centennial Celebration, and the next year appeared in the 1950 California Centennial Pageant conducted at the Hollywood Bowl. The team was a popular attraction at Furnace Creek, and won the sweepstakes trophy three times in the Helderado Days Parade in Las Vegas. It appeared in many movies and was featured in the titles for the popular "Death Valley Days" television series. Bruce is credited by historians as being the last Pacific Coast Borax 20 Mule Team Borax mule skinner. The team was hitch up for the last time in Mojave, California in 1960. In 1956 Grace succumbed to her long battle with diabetes and a vacuum was created in the business that was never quite filled. She did so much that no one could ever really walk in her footsteps.

In 1958 Bruce accepted an offer from Joe Bonham to manage the Dow Villa Hotel in Lone Pine. He divided his interest in Mt. Whitney Pack Trains as follows: 30% went to Charles and Mary, 30% went to Barbara and Tommy, and Bruce retained 40% of the business with the idea that someday that would be divided between Enid, Roberta and Richard. Charles and Tommy jointly managed the business with much assistance from their wives. The new partnership lasted until 1961 when Tommy and Barbara moved to Shafter in order for Tommy to begin a career training horses. Charles and Mary continued to manage the business for the next three years at which time Tommy and Barbara were welcomed back into the outfit. Charles' participation in the management of the outfit ended in 1964. Barbara and Tommy continued on with the outfit until Barbara's untimely death in June of 1970. Tommy and Ike negotiated the sale of the outfit to Bob Tanner and Herb London in 1972.