

The Album

*Winter/Spring
1994-95*



Times & Tales of Inyo-Mono

THE ALBUM

Times and Tales of Inyo - Mono

Winter/Spring 1994-95
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Cover Photo: Remains of a stone house near the shore of Oneida Lake, Lundy Canyon area. Paw Prints photograph, by Chris J. Wright, who recalls a visit to the May Lundy Mine and stories of another avalanche, page 48.

This collection of Eastern Sierra history for *THE ALBUM* is our first edition of an annual. There are many stories yet to tell and we hope to continue to collect and record them.

People have often said, "Why don't you write a book about the history of the east side?" How could one person's perspective equal the colorful variety of these writers' voices? Some tell of their own memories, personally recalled or handed down through the family. Others have put hours into research and money into reproductions of photographs to aid in picturing history as it happened. Still others share a lifetime hobby of exploration.

Come with these writers who take you to where the Old West and the New mingle in the shadow of the Sierra.

—Jane Fisher, Editor

THE ALBUM, Times and Tales of Inyo-Mono, is a collection of stories, history, and natural history of Inyo County and Mono County, in Eastern California.

Letters, comments, and contributions are welcome; contributions should be accompanied by photos, documents, sketches, or maps.

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The Summer/Fall issue of *THE ALBUM* this year will feature some short subjects, bits of history and interesting discoveries from Neill Olds, Mike Hesse, Deric English, Al Blythe, Johnnie Rossi (a 4th grader who tells his story of how Tom's Place got its name), Robert C. Nibecker, and perhaps more, as well as the usual lengthy chronicles of our past.

The Jordan Tragedy

by Barbara Moore

"AVALANCHES BRING DISASTER, DESTRUCTION AND DEATH! NINE¹ LIVES LOST AND RELIEF PARTIES ARE SEARCHING FOR BODIES OF THE UNFORTUNATE VICTIMS."

That was the headline that screamed out to subscribers in extra bold type in the Saturday, March 11, 1991 edition of the Bridgeport Chronicle-Union.

The winter of 1910-11 was one of record snowfall. It snowed almost continuously from mid-December 1910 to the 16th of January 1911. Temperatures rose during the last few days of the lengthy storms and the snow that fell was wet and heavy. Then temperatures dropped and an ice crust formed on top of the snow all over the Mono Basin and the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada. On February 22, 1911, it started to snow again and continued with no let up for three weeks. It didn't stop snowing until March 10th. Huge accumulations of snow fell on top of the ice, perfect conditions for avalanches to roar down steep hillsides. The snow depth measured 28' at Bodie, 5' at Mono Lake and over 25' at Jordan, the site of the recently finished power plant on Mill Creek at the base of Copper Mountain.

The town of Bodie had a special Christmas present in 1910 when work on the Jordan plant was completed. On Christmas Day the juice was finally turned on after six months of feverish construction, but it wasn't meant to last very long after Mother Nature took command.

The successful operation of the Green Creek plant, built in 1892 to provide electric power to the Standard Mill and selected businesses in Bodie, proved to the world that power could be transmitted over wires for long distances.² The residents of Bodie and other mining companies in Bodie, Aurora and Lucky Boy were anxious to tap into the unlimited hydro power of the Sierra. Plans began in June of 1909 with the purchase of hydro-electric sites along the Eastern Sierra. Jordan was to be the first plant built, and C.E. Poole³ was selected as Chief Engineer of what was described to be the best electric plant in the west.

Financing for the newly formed Hydro-Electric Power Co. was provided by J.S. Cain's Bodie Bank and Hawthorne business men, since these farsighted individuals realized power plants would help to open the treasures that lay in the 50 mile mineral belt.⁴

By April 1910, Jordan was a sea of activity. Contracts had been awarded for generators and hundreds of miles of wire to provide for the planned 2000 horsepower plant. Allis-Chalmers Co. of Milwaukee, Wisconsin⁵ built the electrical machinery consisting of a 1500 KW, 220V, 3 phase, 60 cycle, 400 RPM water wheel type alternator, 65 KW motor generator exciter set, 55 KW direct connected exciter unit and six 200 KW, 55,000, 2200 V oil filled self-cooled transformers. Actual construction work began the last week of May as supplies began to arrive from Minden. Fifty men were employed by grading contractor, John W. DeChambeau, to prepare the sites for the power house and auxiliary buildings. When grading was completed, contractor Paul Ehlers and his men started work building the plant and houses. In the meantime, over 60 men were employed by Charles Stasnopolis who had the contract for excavating the pipeline. This involved digging the ditch to accommodate 12,000' of wooden stave pipe 48" in diameter, and 3100' of steel pipe tapering from 48" to 35" diameter that would carry the water from the intake at Lundy Lake around the side of Copper Mountain to a point directly above the power plant, providing a fall of 1700' to the water wheel.

During the month of May all available teams were used to haul construction materials from the railheads at Thorne (near Hawthorne) and Minden. By the end of June a telephone line to Bodie was operational and the foundation was completed for the power house. In mid-summer things were going so well that plans were revised and it was decided to run the power to Hawthorne and the mines of Rawhide and Wonder, all in Nevada, besides Bodie, Aurora and Lucky Boy, so machinery for a duplicate plant was ordered.

In early August the power house was ready for its roof, giving some the optimistic thought that power could be generated by mid-September. However these hopes were dashed by delays in the arrival of the heavy equipment and the need to construct special steel racks to transport it from the railheads to

Jordan. On August 20th, two transformers weighing four tons each, and two dynamos 12' high and 11' wide, weighting 12 tons each arrived in Thorne. Portions of a generator weighing 34,000 pounds followed a few weeks later. The first week of November saw the generator in place and the foundation for the exciters nearly finished. When the power house, built of reinforced concrete, along with the two cottages for employees were nearing completion, R.H. Mason, accompanied by his wife, arrived from Oakland to take up his duties as Chief Electrician. They moved into the number one cottage.

With wires strung and all equipment in place Bodieites had their finest Christmas present when light and power arrived on Christmas Day, 1910. The unrelenting storms however, unleashed the terrible tragedy that followed less than two and one half months later.

In late February and early March heavy snow delayed mail as stages couldn't get through the snow clogged roads. For the first time in many years mail to and from Bodie was carried on sleighs and by men wearing snowshoes. By March 11th no mail had arrived in Bodie for 10 days. Earl Hays' team had been stuck in snow for a week at Murphy Springs and several men from Bodie worked for days to break the road to free the horses. Reports from all directions stated that the roads were impassable as the worst storm of an exceptionally stormy season hit the area with savage ferocity.

A few minutes before midnight on Tuesday, March 7, 1911 Bodie went dark! At the main power company office in Bodie it was thought the storm had brought down the transmission line somewhere between Bodie and Mill Creek and at 12:01 March 8th, two men started out on skis to locate the trouble. With snow blown by 50 miles per hour winds causing blizzard conditions, the men returned to Bodie for help after going only a short distance. Four men who were expert skiers joined them. Carrying lineman repair tools and supplies, plus a portable phone (in their haste they forgot to pack food and water), five of the six reached the Scanavino Ranch, tired, hungry and cold, nine miles from Bodie, six hours later at 6:45 a.m., March 8th. One of the men had broken a ski and suffered a sprained ankle in a fall. With the help of the Scanavino children he was brought to safety at the ranch on a hand pulled sleigh.

The men had carried Fels Maptha soap to apply to the ski bases to prevent the skis from sticking once the wax wore off and this had to be applied often during the nine mile trek. By 11:30 a.m., after resting and being generously fed by the Scanavinos, who also rewaxed their skis, the men continued on. Steven Scanavino⁶, a strong lad of 16, volunteered to join them, replacing the man who had sprained his ankle. Bucking deep snow and gale force winds, but finding no breaks in the transmission lines, they finally arrived at Mill Creek at 5:30 p.m., nine miles from the Scanavino Ranch.

All along the way they had heard and felt rumbles of snow slides so massive that the ground shook like an earthquake. When they got to Jordan, expecting to see the power house and cottages, they were shocked to see there was nothing but snow, and realized a tremendous slide had wiped out the entire settlement. Everything had been buried under 20' of hard packed avalanche debris.

1. Although Jordan was the scene of greatest destruction and at least eight deaths, Samuel M. Smith, owner of the Pittsburgh-Liberty mine was killed at Masonic. 50 years old, he was survived by his wife and two children residing in Santa Rosa, CA.

2. THE ALBUM, Volume 1, Number 3. "Bodie Electrifies the World"

3. The Bridgeport Chronicle-Union in two separate articles printed Poole's initials as C.E. and C.O. It is unknown which was correct. The Poole plant in Lee Vining Canyon was named in his honor.

4. The Jordan plant was built by the company the Cain group founded and called The Hydro-Electric Power Company. It was sold to the Pacific Power Co. in January 1911. Pacific Power Company subsequently sold it and several other electric facilities in the Eastern Sierra to Southern California Edison in the 1960s.

5. In 1910, my father, Samuel J. Gates, was employed by Allis-Chalmers as an apprentice engineer, earning a starting wage of 19¢/hr. His memoirs refer to working in the foundry that made parts for electric motors, the turbine erecting department and later the electrical test floor. It is quite possible that he worked on some of the Jordan machinery. The Allis-Chalmers training was a strong background because he eventually was involved in the design, operation and control of motors and generators. Recognizing his contribution by building industrial power plants in the mid-west and designing portions of the generators for Hoover Dam, he was named in "Who's Who in Engineering" and also was elected president and a director of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. On a visit to the Eastern Sierra when he was in his 80s, upon driving past the Rush Creek power plant in the June Lake Loop, he commented that it was one of the first hydro-electric plants in the world. I don't know if he was aware of Jordan, or that Jordan had suffered massive damage, but I only wish I had discovered the Jordan story while he was still alive. He was aware that hydro-electric power was pioneered in this area.

6. Steven Scanavino wrote an account of his recall of the rescue mission for the "Mineral County and Hawthorne Independent News" issue of June 10, 1960.

Adding to the horrifying scene a high pressure water line had broken. As it shot a stream of water over 200' in the air, the water froze into a grotesque 100' high ice-berg with icicles hanging down from the sides. The men hurriedly dug eight feet down through the snow to reach the 20' tall telephone poles to call Bodie⁷, to alert them to the catastrophe, and also to inquire how many people had been at the plant. As far as the office in Bodie knew, there had been eight men and one woman, Mrs. Mason. The last call from the plant had been made at 11:45 p.m., March 7th when someone reported it was snowing so hard that four men who were concerned about the possibility of snowslides had moved to the plant, thinking that the reinforced concrete structure would be a safe haven, and heat from the three big transformers would provide warmth. The four, who were miners residing in nearby cabins, joined the two men who were operating the machinery. One man sought shelter in the old copper smelter nearby. H.M. Weir, an electrician and lineman, had spent the evening with the Masons. When he left their cottage he said he had to do some work on a transformer. That was the last he was seen alive.

The search party's call to Bodie was completed about 8 p.m. Snow and boulders continued to slide down Copper Mountain and with darkness adding to the dangerous scene, they decided to ski to the Fred Mattly Ranch a mile north to wait for daylight. There they not only found one of the power plant employees, but also noted that the avalanches had spared Mattly's by a mere 50'. With the temperature a bone-chilling 28° below zero, one of the men left the Mattly Ranch at midnight, skiing through heavy snow to reach the John Conway Ranch two miles to the east to alert them to the disaster. Conway immediately notified the Mono Lake people by phone.

At Bodie, the mines had closed down due to the storms so the miners had adjourned to the saloons to drink and gamble away the idle time. When the messengers went from saloon to saloon bringing the sad news there was instant quiet at first, and then a rush as miners dropped cards and left unfinished drinks and winnings on the tables to stampede for the doors. Within one hour 100 men had left Bodie on skis!

The first four miles down Cottonwood Canyon are very steep and only the most expert skiers could negotiate the pitch of the slope, made even more difficult by blizzard conditions and darkness. At one mile intervals along the road the mail and freight carriers had erected shelters which they stocked every autumn with food, water, bedding and wood. The weakest skiers, and

7. The Bridgeport Chronicle-Union, in its edition of March 8, 1911, said communication to the office in Bodie was made from C.W. Vogt's place (location unknown) by way of Mono Mills because other phones were out of order.

some who had broken their skis and sprained ankles, about 30 out of the 100, were saved by these shelters and most were later helped back to Bodie. The rest of the men arrived at Scanavinos about 6 a.m. on March 9th, with five of them needing help from some Indian boys over the last exhausting part. Scanavinos again provided food. After four hours' rest, on re-waxed skis and with lunches tucked under jackets, 75 were able to continue on, arriving at Mill Creek in early evening. Again, the combined danger of darkness and continuous slides preventing anything being done, they went to Mattly's to wait for daylight.

The morning of March 10th, 100 men from the surrounding area, in response to John Conway's call for help, joined the 75 men from Bodie to dig for survivors, or more likely, to recover bodies. The six men who had sought safety in the power house were found along with some of the machinery that had been swept over 500' by the power of the slide; two of the bodies were encased in ice from the broken water pipe. As the men dug frantically, snow and boulders continued to crash down, causing numerous interruptions as the men ran over the hard packed snow to get out of the way of danger, only to return and find the holes so tediously dug had been covered over and tools buried.



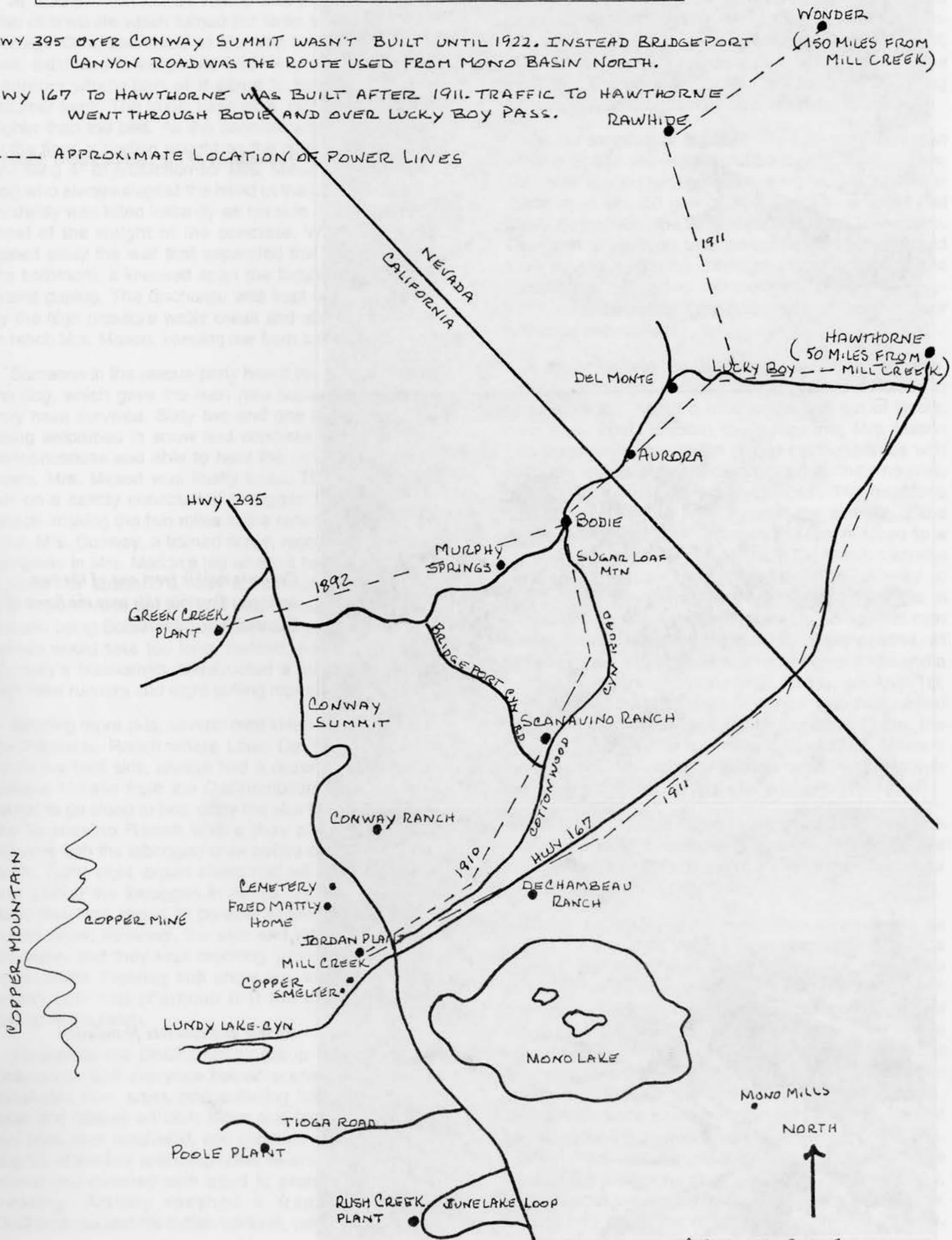
Alluvial fan at the base of Copper Mountain indicating the path of the avalanche.

HIGHWAYS 395 AND 167 ARE SHOWN FOR ORIENTATION ONLY

HWY 395 OVER CONWAY SUMMIT WASN'T BUILT UNTIL 1922. INSTEAD BRIDGEPORT CANYON ROAD WAS THE ROUTE USED FROM MONO BASIN NORTH.

HWY 167 TO HAWTHORNE WAS BUILT AFTER 1911. TRAFFIC TO HAWTHORNE WENT THROUGH BODIE AND OVER LUCKY BOY PASS.

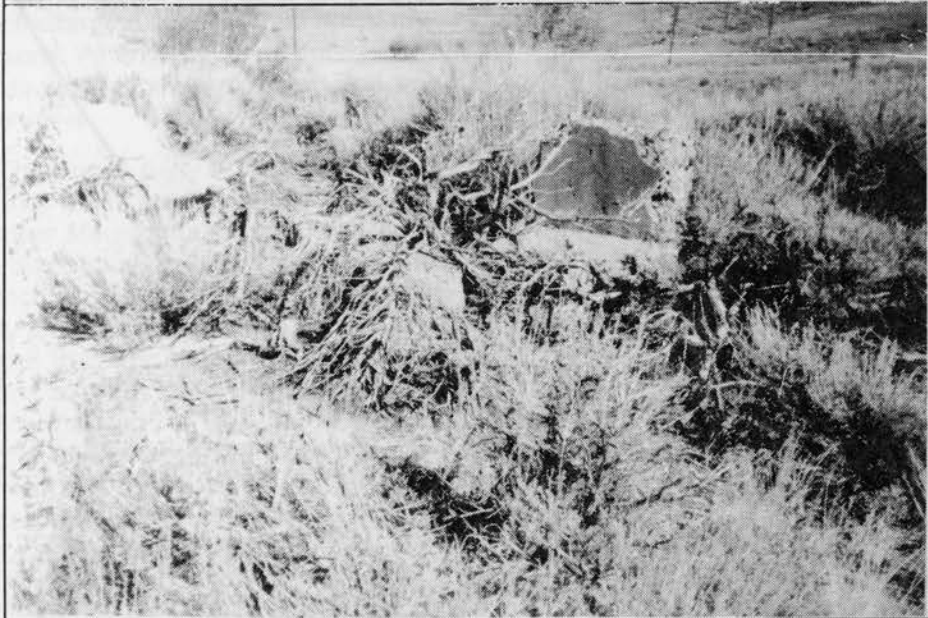
--- APPROXIMATE LOCATION OF POWER LINES



MAP NOT TO SCALE



Foundation of the Jordan Power House



Concrete rubble from one of the two cottages. Possibly this was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Mason.



Rubble and concrete foundation

At 2:30 p.m. on March 10th one of the men struck a slab of concrete which turned out to be the west wall of Cottage One, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Mason. The wall, estimated to weigh two tons, was pushed into the bedroom where part of it came to rest on a strong steamer trunk. The trunk, used as a night table, was 4" higher than the bed. As the concrete smashed the bed to the floor, a portion caught on the corner of the trunk, providing 4" of protection for Mrs. Mason and their pet dog who always slept at the head of the bed. Mr. Mason evidently was killed instantly as his side of the bed took most of the weight of the concrete. When the slide ripped away the wall that separated the bedroom from the bathroom, it knocked apart the fixtures, leaving the drains gaping. The discharge was kept open and clear by the high pressure water break and allowed fresh air to reach Mrs. Mason, keeping her from suffocating.

Someone in the rescue party heard the whimpering of the dog, which gave the men new hope that someone may have survived. Sixty two and one half hours after being entombed in snow and concrete, never losing consciousness and able to hear the voices of the rescuers, Mrs. Mason was finally freed. The men rushed her on a hastily constructed toboggan to the Conway Ranch, making the two miles in the record time of a half hour. Mrs. Conway, a trained nurse, recognized signs of gangrene in Mrs. Mason's leg where it had been pinned against her husband's body for almost three days. It was imperative to get her to a hospital quickly, the nearest one being Bodie. To open the road with shovels and horses would take too long. Instead, working all night, Conway's blacksmith constructed a sturdy toboggan with steel runners and eight pulling ropes.

Needing more skis, several men skied six miles to the DeChambeau Ranch where Louie DeChambeau, who made the best skis, always had a dozen pair on hand. Several Indians from the DeChambeau Ranch volunteered to go along to help carry the skis the four miles to the Scanavino Ranch where they planned to rendezvous with the toboggan crew before continuing on to Bodie. Forty eight expert skiers had left Conway's at 4 a.m. pulling the toboggan in relays. By leaving before dawn they had hoped to be able to take advantage of frozen snow; however, the skis and toboggan proved too heavy and they kept breaking through the crust to softer snow. Fighting soft snow and strong winds, it wasn't until mid-afternoon that the toboggan crew arrived at the ranch.

Meanwhile the DeChambeau group had arrived at Scanavinos and everyone helped prepare food for 75 exhausted men, some now suffering from snow blindness and blisters on both faces and feet. A steer and two hogs were butchered, and potatoes and vegetables dug out of the four feet deep holes where they had been stored and covered with sand to protect them from freezing. Activity reached a frenzy as Louie DeChambeau and his Indian workers, using a mixture of

resin, beeswax, and pinyon pitch, re-waxed and repaired 100 pair of skis. More than 20 Indians contributed their winter store of pinenuts. Working all night, they shelled several hundred pounds and ground the meat to a fine powder that was added to the dwindling flour supply, so bread could be prepared and baked.

On the morning of March 12th, a second toboggan left the Scanavino Ranch pulled by six men on skis. This was loaded with lunches, a coffee pot, a home-made stove and 30 gallons of water. The weather had finally cleared, but the temperature was still below zero. The Chief of the local tribe anticipated the skiers would have trouble pulling the toboggans uphill so his people accompanied the group and took over in the steep sections, on snowshoes they had made of green willow branches and rawhide.

In the meantime, the Bodie people hadn't been idle. They worked night and day with shovels and horses to open the road. About a mile and a half out of Bodie, near Sugar Loaf Mountain, the groups met. Mrs. Mason was transferred to a sleigh pulled by four horses with specially made snowshoes attached to their hooves, and was rushed to the Bodie Hospital. The gangrene had progressed to a point beyond the abilities of the Bodie facility and staff, which had been reduced to a minimum as Bodie mining declined. On March 19th she was again loaded on a sleigh for the journey to Hawthorne, the first leg of the trip to a hospital in Oakland. Roads were still impassable so several men walked beside the sleigh, shoveling where needed, all the way to Del Monte, over eight miles from Bodie and a few miles beyond the state line. Finally, on April 1st, accompanied by Mrs. Mason's father, who had rushed from Yuma, Arizona, and Chief Engineer Poole, the group boarded a train for Oakland where Mrs. Mason's leg had to be amputated. After she recovered the power company employed her at their main office.

The company also responded to the tragedy with letters of appreciation to those who helped throughout the disaster and reimbursed the many ranching families for their contributions of provisions.

Burial was delayed for more than three weeks as coffins for the eight victims were prepared, the roads opened, and the graves dug through rock and frozen soil. Somber services were held in the Mattly home with appropriate background music provided by the jingle of sleigh bells on the horses as they waited outside in the cold. The site chosen for the cemetery was a hilly knoll 300' east of the Mattly home, where the view to the south overlooked the scene of the catastrophe. Headstones were made from the light grey marble that had supported the switchboard that held the power control switches and electrical meters at the plant. The force of the avalanche shattered the 2-1/2" thick panel, so the pieces were cut into oblique shapes with victims' names and dates carved into the stone. The holes,

drilled for screws that had attached the marble to the wall of the plant, remained.

After the weather cleared the damage could be assessed. The buildings had been erected in what was considered a safe area, 1,000' from the steepest part of Copper Mountain, but obliteration of 100-year old trees that grew near the power plant and cottages, and the destruction of the old copper smelter built in 1879, gave proof that the storms of 1910-11 were an unusual phenomena. The slides that destroyed everything in their paths measured one mile long and one-half mile wide, releasing an estimated 4,000,000 tons of snow that buried everything 18' to 22' deep. The avalanches swept the buildings over 500' off their foundations. The electric transformers inside the power house, weighing 20 tons and standing 15' high, were skidded 300' but were still in a vertical position when dug out.

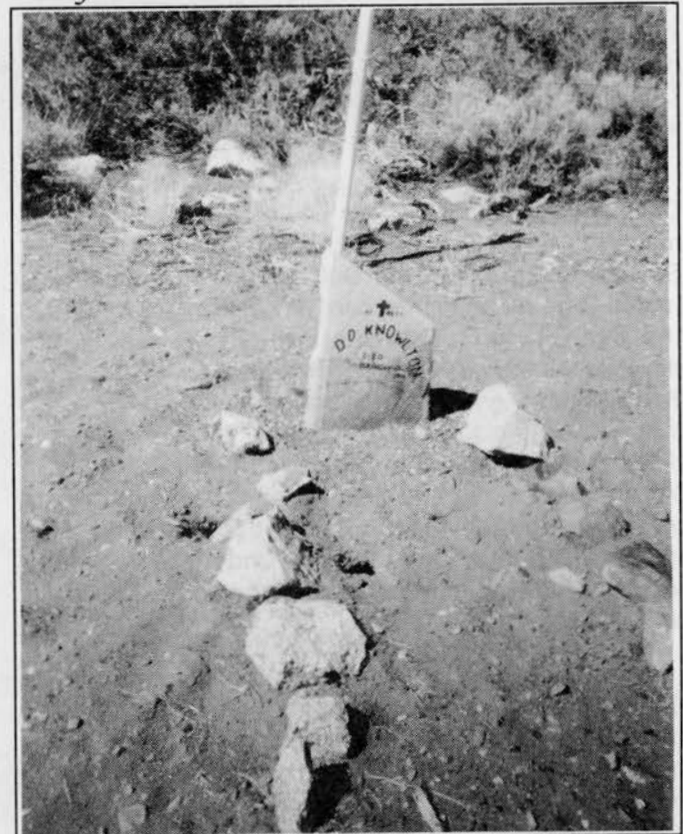
The avalanches brought destruction throughout the county. The slides wrecked the post office at Mono Lake and shoved the building into the lake. Considerable damage was reported in Lundy where Del Orme Knowlton, an electrician for the Crystal Lake Power Co. was killed when an avalanche demolished the power house, along with several other buildings in the canyon.

As efforts continued to open the roads, power company personnel began work on a temporary building while a new plant was planned, to be constructed in an area

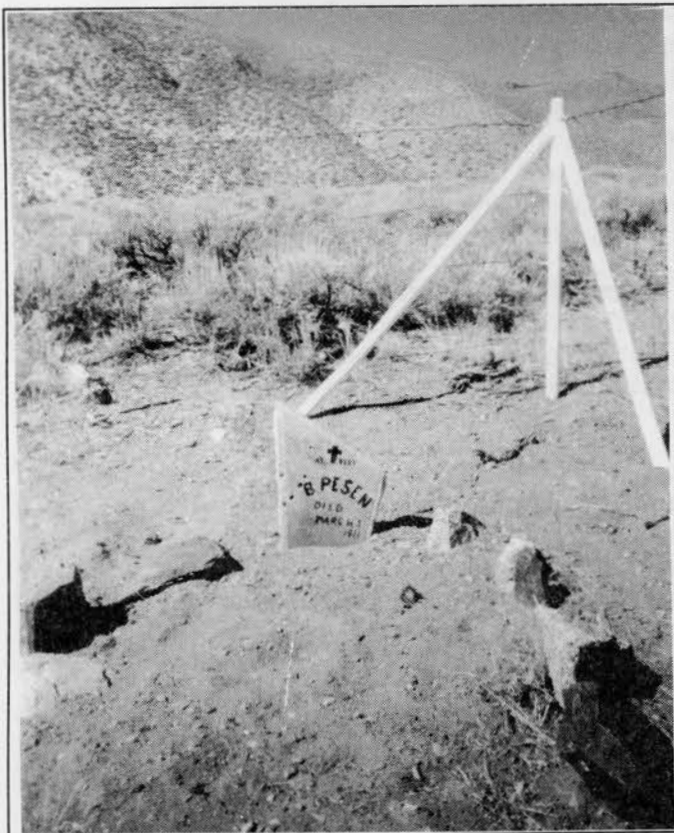


L. Laveaux - not listed in the newspaper account of fatalities.

There are two men listed in the paper as fatalities for whom no graves are in the cemetery: E.M. Peacock, electrician, married and John Sullivan, miner, single, age 42 Lundy.



D.O. Knowlton. Del Orme Knowlton, Jr. Electrician, 29 years old, single killed in Lundy according to the newspaper.



B. Pessen. Miner, single. Newspaper reported his name as Ben Pessner



Fenced cemetery near Jordan with 7 marble headstones. Note empty space between 1st and 2nd grave with no marker. Originally there had been 8 graves.



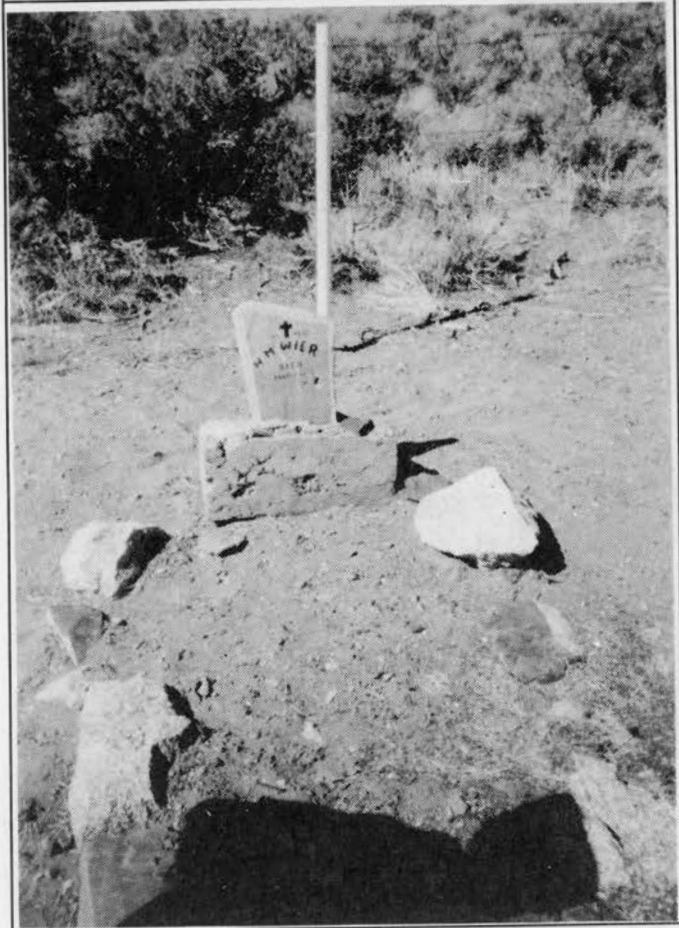
Wrought iron fence surrounding grave of P. Stromblad/Patrick Stormblad



P. Stromblad. Miner. Original marker states "died March 7, 1911" as is the date on all the other markers. White marker spells the name as Patrick Stormblad and the date as March 8, 1911 age 42 years on the new marker. Note screw hole on original marble headstone.



Above: R.H. Mason. Electrician. Only grave with "killed in snowslide" engraved on marker.



Upper left: R. Harden. Miner, single. Newspaper reported a Harold Hardy. Presume a misspelling.

Lower left: Grave of H.M. Weir. Electrician and lineman. Single. Note the screw hole in the headstone.

considered to be out of danger. Fortunately, a generator and the water wheel had remained on their foundations and were undamaged. Duplicate machinery, ordered the previous fall but held in Hawthorne due to the storms, was shipped as soon as the roads could accommodate heavy freight wagons. By May first power was generated from the temporary facility, and after the new plant was finished all the machinery was moved. This machinery, including the surviving generator and water wheel, is still humming away, producing power from what is now called the Mill Creek Plant, presently owned by Southern California Edison Co.

The site of Jordan is around the bend from the Mill Creek Plant. Sections of rusty pipe and concrete foundations are scattered about, almost obscured by more than 80 years' growth of sage and willow. A mile north is the fenced cemetery, meticulously maintained by personnel from Southern California Edison. Nearby are a few relics, all that is left of the Fred Mattly home that played such a prominent role in the rescue efforts.

The Bridgeport Chronicle-Union, in its March 11th edition, printed "like a thief in the night, the mountain-side came to the valley, took the lives of those in its path, leaving broken hearts and desolate homes in its wake." MAY THEY REST IN PEACE"

8. The Bridgeport Chronicle-Union, March 11, 1911, printed "nine lives lost." There may have been more. Eight deaths evidently occurred at the power plant (although some were not power plant employees), one at Masonic and at least one at Lundy. However, there is a headstone for L. Laveaux who is not listed in the paper and no graves for E.M. Peacock, an electrician, or John Sullivan, a miner at Lundy, who were listed in the paper as fatalities. Also there is the mystery of the grave with no headstone. Because of the change of ownership through the years and the lapse of time, few people in the Edison Company are aware that there ever was a Jordan. The company's archives in Los Angeles don't go back to 1911 so they have no way to clear up discrepancies in spelling between the newspaper obituaries and the headstones, nor do they know anything about the grave with no marker or the grave with two headstones. *

REFERENCES:

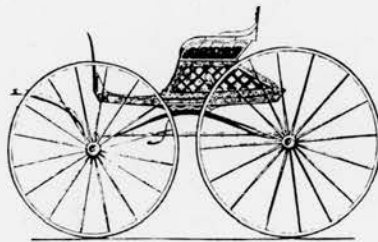
Victoria Scanavino Young: copy of her Uncle Steven's article

Arlene Reveal and staff at the Bridgeport library: assistance with microfilm

Bridgeport Chronicle-Union: 30 articles from June 5, 1909 through May 15, 1911



Stone wall at the back of Fred Mattly's home



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