

Old Time Religion

By the Friends of Cerro Gordo

Old time residents of Independence talk of circuit riders, “mostly Methodists,” who came on horseback, making their way to far-flung charges. When no minister was present, families such as the Blaneys of Independence, held Sunday school in the hotel they owned with the eldest sister presiding over informal services. In 1871 when the Methodist Episcopal Church sent Rev. E. H. Orne to Independence, the Blaneys and others like them, had a real preacher at least once in a great while. Orne’s parish consisted of areas from the mountain top of Cerro Gordo to Benton, as well as a few of the outlying mining camps.

The circuit minister worked with self-sacrifice and devotion in the name of God. Little was received for their efforts, except the satisfaction they were doing the Lord’s work as they were called to. Local farmers saw to it that the traveling minister and his steed were both well fed, while the money in the community was mostly reserved for saloon keepers. When the minister was ready to set up a more permanent shop, he would roll up his sleeves and work as hard as anyone whenever and wherever he could for lumber, canvas, nails, and whatever other building supplies he needed.

With few ministers and churches covering such a large area, it was not uncommon for Christians of all faiths to gather in one place for worship. The Catholic population of Big Pine sent their children to Sunday school with the Protestants. The priest spent most of his time traveling from San Bernardino, through Death Valley to the Owens Valley and only had one or two days a year to allow to each community on his list. Mr. Louis Joseph, a well educated Jewish merchant, also of Big Pine, knew the Old Testament of the Bible inside and out, so taught Old Testament history and customs classes to the Methodist adults. Regardless of denomination, believers managed to set aside their differences at least one day a week, to praise the Lord together.



The more isolated mining camps such as Cerro Gordo, relied totally on the circuit riders for their religious needs, but the booming town of Bodie, much further to the north, eventually collected enough funds for Catholic and Methodist churches and a Chinese Joss Temple to be built. By the late 1920’s, Bodie’s population dwindled down from a thriving 10,000 to a meager 30 or so. E. J. Clinton came to town in 1928 and re-worked the tailings at the Standard mine’s dump. The Clinton-West Company brought in another 300-400 residents whose church needs were provided by Clinton and his wife. In addition to turning the old railroad office on the bluff into an indoor plumbed mansion for his wife and three children, Clinton completely renovated

the Methodist church and took it upon himself to stand behind the pulpit each Sunday to do the sermon.

In the twentieth century, as mining played out, the thriving towns once dubbed the tempests of lust and passion of the Eastern Sierras and Inyo Mountains, turned to ghosts with little need for the Holy Spirit. The ranching and farming communities in the Owens Valley thrived in comparison. Today, with tourism as the main industry, the modern traveler can pick and choose from an abundance of churches and faiths to celebrate and give thanks to the heavenly maker of their choice.

Mike Patterson made a promise that there would finally be a church in Cerro Gordo and it was one of his last projects before he passed away. The chapel (above photo) is not complete on the inside to this date (01/2021) but the outside shines for all to enjoy.