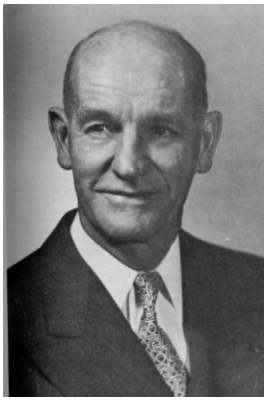
Photographer of the Desert

by Russ Leadabrand



BURTON FRASHER may not have been the first man there, but in many cases he was the first man there with a view camera.

Frasher and his camera went everywhere in the California desert wasteland and that was long before pavement and four- wheel drive vehicles.

The sandy washes of Death Valley knew Frasher in 1920 when the best way to get there was up the washboard roads out of Barstow, over flinty Jubilee Pass and through the sugary sand into Furnace Creek Ranch and its little date palm grove. On his many trips into the desert country Frasher's cars broke down, became stuck in the sand, were slowed by weather and stopped by wind. But he kept going back into the desert with camera and film "on any excuse."

In the beginning it was as much just an itch, call it a hobby, as it was anything else. There was not much market in those early days for large and arty scenes of Death Valley and the surrounding desert country. Later, when Frasher began funneling his energies into the creation of picture postcards, views of the strange California desert country went all over the world. Frasher became a kind of postcard king of the Southwest. His tripod-footed cameras might be found sitting on any rise between Washington and New Mexico. And since part of the fun for Frasher was in the going, he drove his cars into the desert until he could drive no farther and then he walked, camera and tripod over his shoulder, to get the view from the farthest hill.

Frasher postcards are seldom seen these days, but their passing does not mean that the work of this inquisitive explorer has gone for naught. His earliest views -- some 1500 glass plates -- have already been turned over to the Pomona Valley Historical Society in Southern California for safekeeping and for use by historians in the future. The enormous bulk of his later work, some 60,000 celluloid negatives, guarded in fireproof vaults in Frasher's photo studio in Pomona, will soon be transferred to the Historical Society's archives.

Some of those early Frasher glass plate negatives might surprise some collectors of Southwest scenes: group pictures of fruit packing house workers. This was the beginning of Frasher as a traveling photographer....

Burton Frasher was born in the Denver, Colorado area on July 25, 1888. His father died (or disappeared) early forcing Burton, the eldest child, to go to work. Even then there was interest in photography by the Colorado boy; photography, exploring the mountains of Colorado, fishing. But for a living Frasher took to making boxes, first for a department store in Denver, a meat packing firm, a milk company, finally at fruit packing houses. Making fruit boxes for packing houses then became his first trade.

In time, around 1910, Frasher and Harry Wilson, his partner, came to California where the big interest in raising fresh fruit had started. Frasher became a box maker boomer, traveling to areas of the West where fresh fruit was being harvested and packed.

Even then Frasher carried a camera -- it was a large formal 5 x 7 inch view camera, possibly made by Crown. The camera and tripod and portable darkroom all went into the sidecar of Frasher's motorcycle. In 1912, when he married Josephine Angel from Yakima and took his bride with him on his box making chores, Josephine went in the sidecar, too.

With the big, old camera Frasher took some scenics, but the collection of earliest plates show mostly an assortment of groups at packing houses from Southern California to Northern Washington.

Then, in 1914, just before Burton Frasher, Jr. was born, the Frashers settled down in Lordsburg, California, and opened a portrait studio with a sideline of photo supplies and stationery. Lordsburg would, in time, become LaVerne.

Frasher found himself doing more and more commercial photography and portraiture. By 1921 Frasher moved to Pomona, bought out Ayers Stationery and enjoyed a growing business.

While he had hung up the hatchet and the apron of the box maker the itch to travel stayed with him. In a Model T Ford Frasher sought out the sandy lonesome of the Mojave Desert country, pushing all the time closer and closer to Death Valley.

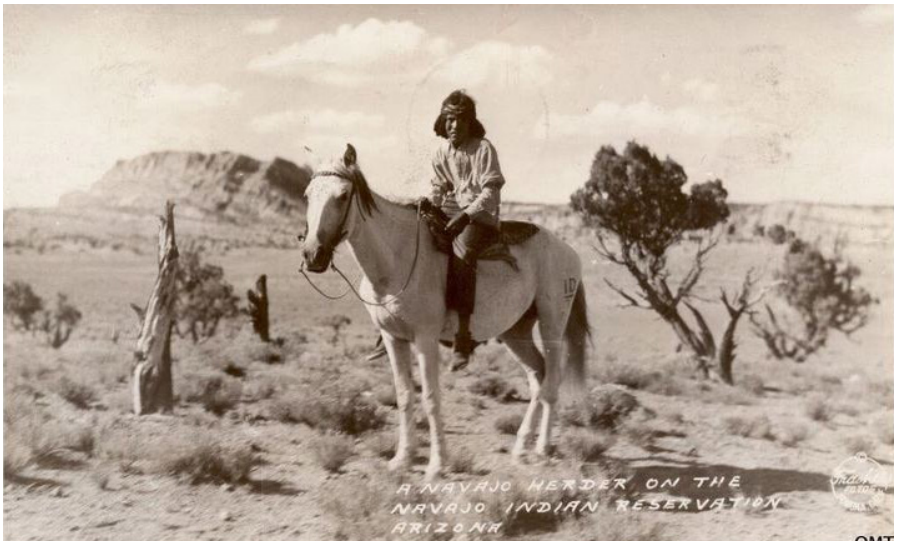
His first trip into Death Valley, made with a group of friends, was in the winter of 1920, according to Burton Frasher, Jr. who has no journal or diaries of his father to guide him, only a collection of sometimes dated negatives and an uncommon memory.

Frasher recalls that the route in those days was something like this: out of San Bernardino over the Cajon Pass to Barstow, and beyond. This far in those days on those roads was itself a day's drive. From there the route was north through the Silver Lake area to Jubilee Pass, through that passage into the lower end of Death Valley proper and up through that gritty wasteland to Furnace Creek. It was on this trip, Frasher recalls, that his father's party started running low on gasoline. They drove the touring car from Furnace Creek to Ryan and from there a call was placed to Death Valley Junction. Frasher waited at Ryan until the little train brought the tins of gasoline over from the Junction. Frasher and his group returned to Furnace Creek, drove north up through the Valley, crossing over the mountains finally to ruined Rhyolite. And such a Rhyolite it was. Burton Frasher, Jr. recalls it from a later trip.

"All the wooden buildings were still standing. We spent the night in one of the town's best preserved buildings, an old church. We had to sweep the whisky bottles off the church pulpit to put down our bed rolls. In the old newspaper office the files of the paper were still in place. There were hundreds of Rhyolite and Bullfrog stock certificates scattered across the floor of the bank. I was a great collector, or wanted to be in those days. I wanted to take it all with me. But my Dad was opposed to it. 'Leave some for the next man' was his motto. I took a few things. The next time we were there it was all gone. From the first visit the wooden buildings started to vanish at Rhyolite and the collector's items had vanished."

If Burton Frasher was bearish on collecting curios, he did like to put everything worth seeing on film. There are pictures in the Frasher collection of Rhyolite of that day.

Subsequently Frasher's excursions -- almost always with his wife and child -- took them and the cars of the day into the lonesome desert region. There are some wonderful pictures in the Frasher collection of old Pierce Arrows and Hupmobiles. As a rule Frasher drove new cars or nearly new cars into the desert on his trips. He knew the dangers of a breakdown in remote places, and Frasher sought out the remote places. Titus Canyon -- and this was before C. C. Julian built his road from Rhyolite into the swindle town of Leadfield -- was a place that Frasher sought out. He drove to the north end of the Valley and got to know that strange Death Valley character, Death Valley Scotty, and the recluse, Albert Johnson. It is said that while Johnson and Scotty lived Frasher was the only commercial photographer



allowed to take pictures inside the castle. There was an earlier castle, but it was partially built and then torn down. Frasher took no pictures of it and none may exist.

At the north end of the Valley, north still from Scotty's Castle, at Sand Spring, Frasher took pictures of a scattering of dead cattle and their bones -- they had nothing to do with emigrants or their disasters. It was an unsuccessful experiment to run cattle in the mineral saturated wasteland.

Even in those days the sound of the words "ghost town" intrigued young Frasher and he remembers Scotty and his father talking about a place that cannot be pinpointed today -- the vanishing mining camp of Ubehebe, which was located somewhere on the eastern side of Tin Mountain. Frasher photographed the Keane Wonder Mine and Chloride City.

Many made their first trips into Death Valley as a result of seeing Frasher's pictures. Burton Frasher, Jr. recalls:

> "H. W Eichbaum, who was driving a bus on Catalina Island for Wrigley at the time, saw some of Dad's pictures of Death Valley and talked with one of Dad's desert friends. I think it was the pictures of the sand dunes that impressed him. He went up to Death Valley, founded Stovepipe Wells resort, and by 1926 or 1927 had built the Eichbaum Toll Road -- the Mt. Whitney Toll Road -- from Darwin Wash up over Towne's Pass down into Death Valley. In the beginning Stovepipe Wells was just a collection of small huts and some tents."

The Frasher picture file records the site.

All historians credit Eichbaum with opening Death Valley to the motoring public. Frasher introduced Death Valley to Eichbaum.

How did Frasher navigate in this lonesome desert land in those days? Burton Frasher, Jr. recalls that on his earliest trips his father used a National Geographic map of some sort. Research reveals only a 1906 or 1907 map in the National Geographic magazine. There were U. S. G. S. Maps in the day which showed the major tracks through the desert, and the Automobile Club of Southern California had a map printed just before 1920 which Frasher might have used that would have been helpful.

It was not in the desert, where the Frashers ran into few people, but at Carson Camp at Silver Lake in the Sierra Nevada where the idea of going into the postcard business was born. The proprietor there asked Frasher to provide him with "some of his pictorial views" in postcard form which he could sell at the resort. Frasher agreed and found himself in the postcard business, an enterprise that would continue to a degree even after his death.

On subsequent trips to the Death Valley area Frasher tried to follow the old twenty mule team borax wagon route out of the Valley via Wingate Pass. His car of the trip could not make the rough crossing and he had to turn back.

Once coming back from Death Valley across the mid Mojave Desert with Copper City as their destination the Frashers ran into a fast-approaching night. There was a well at Copper City, an abandoned camp in the desert south of Death Valley. It was near dark when they reached the town, tired and thirsty. They found the well at abandoned Copper City without trouble, but the well had a dead horse in it. It was a dry camp that night.

Burton Frasher, Jr. recalls getting stuck in the sand near Stovepipe Wells at one time. He recalls breaking springs on their car at Salt Creek and having to wait for a week for repairs or replacements.

The Frashers were in Bodie before the last big fire and have photographs to prove it. Tioga, Mammoth, Aurora, on the edge of the desert country, were visited by the Frashers. On many of the trips Mrs. Frasher took motion pictures of their adventures. Frasher liked the mountains and fishing and they made numerous pack trips into the High Sierra region after fish and after pictures.

Among the desert personalities that Frasher counted as friends were Eichbaum, Scotty, Johnson, W A. Chalfant (the publisher of the Owens Valley newspaper and a respected author and historian), and Harry Gower (the man who opened the Furnace Creek Inn).

Chalfant took Frasher with him through Death Valley when he was putting together his book, "Death Valley, the Facts" and some of Frasher's photographs illustrate the book.

Frasher's photographs illustrated other books of the area. The WPA guide, "Death Valley, A Guide" published in 1939, carries a number of fine Frasher photographs. So do books by C. B. Glasscock,

William Caruthers and others. But, strangely, none of the Death Valley authors of the day mention the doughty photographer in their chronicles.

Once, in a Buick, the Frasher family was snowed in for three days at Keyes Point in Death Valley, but such events seldom disturbed Frasher. He frequently camped atop Dante's View for days waiting until the weather was just right for some of his sweeping pictures of the Valley and the Panamints to the west.

Frasher's most unusual piece of equipment was a 7 X 17 inch banquet camera made by Crown. The extremely wide angle device was preferred by the desert photographer because it did not present the problems of distortion found in some of the cranked panoramic cameras of the day. The 7 X 17 inch negatives did provide problems of filing, but Frasher took hundreds of pictures with the oversized camera. The pictures are pinpoint clear.

Frasher preferred a 5 x 7 inch Crown view camera for much of his work. He disliked telescopic lenses, experimented with some of the faster films when they first appeared but each time went back to the slower films which he knew and trusted.

A tripod addict, Frasher haunted junk shops and pawn shops always on the lookout for old Crown Primo cameras which he cherished. He employed different filters, liked them primarily because they gave the sky grades of value which were missing in most desert photographs of the day.

Frasher learned quickly that the best pictures in the desert were taken early in the morning and late in the afternoon. Photographers still agree wholeheartedly with this philosophy.

By 1929-1930 Frasher wandered farther and farther afield seeking new subjects for his burgeoning postcard business. He employed photographers and salesmen. He drifted into Arizona and New Mexico and discovered the Indians there and found them fascinating. He made friends with them in his own manner and was given access to their secret rooms and their private dances.

In 1941 Josephine died. Frasher remarried later that same year. His widow, Margaret, is still living.

Frasher died of a heart attack in 1955. He was 67 at the time. The operation of the photo studio was assumed by Burton Frasher, Jr., himself a prize-winning photographer. Young Frasher sold the postcard business -- by then consisting mostly of colored photographs -- in 1959 but he still gets requests for postcard prints of some of the older black and white pictures. These he supplies -- the orders are small but there is a strong link of auld lang syne between Frasher's and the resorts and small firms that order.

Frasher's collection of old glass plates and celluloid negatives is one of the largest still intact in the state.

Of all the country that was focused in the groundglass of Frasher's cameras, it is obvious that Death Valley was his favorite. It was here that Frasher returned again and again, year after year. It is hard to measure what he contributed to the desert country, but the fact that in return it gave the pioneer photographer much pleasure and an assortment of moods and faces, cannot be doubted.

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In the portfolio of Frasher photographs that follows, an assortment of Frasher camera views is reproduced. It was difficult to make a selection, to keep it as small as it had to be for such a publication as this. It would have been easier to have run a section of hundreds of Frasher photographs, for there are hundreds to choose from. In most instances selection was based on items in the photograph that indicated a date, although precise dates are not always available. From the condition of the old mining camps, from the model of the new cars that Frasher drove, from these things we can approximately date these delightful photographs from Burton Frasher who drove the sandy washes into Death Valley first in 1920 and continued his visits for 30 years. -- R. L.