

# STORY OF ALONZO BROWN – PIONEER OF OLANCHA

by Clarice Uhlmeyer

This was taken from an interview by Clarice Uhlmeyer in 1938. Mr. Brown died in 1941.

Alonzo Brown was born in Maine in 1852. In 1877 he came to the Owens Valley, coming as far as Carson City by train and from there to Olancha by four-horse stage. The stage trip took several days. Horses were changed at fourteen-mile intervals.

At the time Brown came, the Indians in the valley were peaceable and the soldiers had been moved from Fort Independence.

Brown found farm work at Olancha and worked part time on the ranch for William Walker, whose widowed daughter, Charlotte, he later married. He also worked for Horace Bellas and Henry Badger at the Haiwee Meadows Ranch. This ranch is now largely covered by Haiwee Reservoir.

A steamer, no doubt the Mollie Stevens, plied back and forth across the Owens Lake for the Cerro Gordo and returning with bullion to Cartago. Here the bullion was picked up by large freight wagons and taken to Mojave. The charcoal was burned in two adobe kilns a few miles north of Cartago at the mouth of Cottonwood Creek. Lumber was flumed down Cottonwood Canyon from a mill operated by Colonel Stevens. The lumber flume has long since been destroyed, largely being used for buildings around Olancha. The remains of the mill still stand far up Cottonwood Creek. The two kilns near the lake, are scarcely harmed by time.

Brown says that the big freight teams took their loads about twelve to fourteen miles a day. The teams would be changed and the same team would return the next day with an empty wagon, or loaded with supplies - thus, each team was always used over the same stretch of road. It was at least a six-day trip for the loads to reach Mojave.



The Molly Stevens

Besides working on ranches, Brown spent two and one-half years driving what was called a "fast freight" for mining companies between Darwin, Lookout, Keeler and Cartago. These were lighter freight wagons with only six horses.

William Walker, who later became Brown's father-in-law, came to Olancha from Sierra County, California, in 1874, with his family. There were five daughters and two sons in the Walker family. Two of the daughters were married when Walker came to Olancha. Walker purchased the ranch at Olancha that is known as Brown Ranch. The adjoining ranch, the present Lacey place, was owned by Gus Walker, no relation of William Walker. The original ranch house, made of adobe manufactured at Olancha, still stands and plainly shows a crack caused by the earthquake of '72. Brown did not say who owned the house at the time of the earthquake.

Walker kept a store on his place, the only one at Olancha. He got supplies by freight wagons via Mojave from San Francisco, Sacramento and Los Angeles.

Brown says that immigrants stopped there for supplies and often had dances and parties in the Walker house.

After coming to Owens Valley, one of Walker's daughters married Thomas Passmore. He was sheriff of Inyo County from 1875 to February 1878, when he was killed while making an arrest.

When Brown first came to Olancha there were no trees there. There was a row of fence posts around the house that had been cut from Cottonwoods on Cottonwood Creek. A few of these posts began to sprout. The one old monarch cottonwood, directly across the highway from the house, had its start as a fence post and has never been watered. Brown started many more in this way. It is most interesting to note that the beautiful row of Cottonwoods that extend north from the house on the highway grew from seeds blown from other trees and lodged in a ditch beside the fence.

There were no fish in the mountain streams when he came. The two Walker boys brought fish from Monache and planted them in Gus Walker Creek, south of Olancha. Later Brown took fish from this stream and stocked Olancha, Cartago and Bailey Creeks. Colonel Stevens stocked Cottonwood Creek with fish he brought across the mountains.

Game was plentiful. In the mountains deer and quail were plentiful in the valley. Brown tells that ducks were so numerous that on the Walker Ranch at Olancha when they would rise from the lake in the mornings - "It sounded like thunder." He tells that at one time, with two shots, he got forty-five ducks. There were also many geese.

There was not a town at Cartago, merely a station for teamsters. The towns of Lone Pine and Independence were small. Lone Pine had one store operated by E. H. Edwards and Dick Richards, and one hotel kept by Mrs. Steward. The little mining towns of Darwin, Lookout and Cerro Gordo were lively while the mines were active, but these all more or less quieted down not long after Brown's arrival.



Colonel Sherman Stevens charcoal kilns  
on the shores of Owens Lake

In addition to one daughter by Mrs. Brown's former marriage, Brown and his wife had three children, two sons and a daughter.

In its early activities in Owens Valley, the City of Los Angeles tried to lease water from the Brown Ranch, but the Browns refused. No purchases were made around Olancha though much land was taken up by homesteaders at the time the aqueduct was put through, in hope that water could be obtained from the City for farming.

#### *Addendum- 1976*

Mrs. Brown died in 1926 and is buried at Independence. Mr. Brown still lived on the old place with his son George, his daughter-in-law and grandson until 1941. George Brown owned the place.

Mr. Brown was very old and plainly showed the results of a long and hard-working life. His hands were gnarled and drawn, his eyes not so clear, and his hearing was almost entirely gone back on him, but his mind was alert, his sense of humor keen. When I asked him to tell me stories of his early life in Owens Valley he said, "You ask me questions, and I'll give you the answers."