



OLD-TIMERS
of
Southeastern California

LR

by **LESTER REED**

1927

THE DESERT INDIANS WAY OF LIFE

For many years after William Lyle Hunter went with mules from Cerro Gordo to establish the Hunter Ranch, Indians from many parts of the desert would go into the Hunter mountain area to gather pinyon nuts. There are still places today where the remains of the pits where they heated the cones to get the nuts out can be found. Wherever the sand grass grew they gathered the seeds for food. Mesquite beans were an important food item gathered from desert areas. Bev states that certain types or species of the mesquite bean are extra sweet, and no doubt the Indians had a way of knowing them from the others when gathering. One time when Bev was in Saline Valley, an Indian woman, while telling him of how good the meal was that she was grinding, proved that she was right by dipping some of the meal up on a finger and suddenly shoving the meal into his mouth.

There are many plants on the desert that produced foods for the Indian. Some were gathered and cooked as we do spinach. For meat, there were the mountain sheep, or perhaps it would again be proper for me to mention them as the Desert Bighorn. Down through many years it has been generally understood that the early day Indians preferred to kill the rams, knowing that it is the female that mothers and raises the lamb. Other wildlife of the desert which served as food for the early day Indian was the chuckwalla, usually found among or near boulders where there are many crevices that serve as protection. The chuckwalla is a large lizard, dark in color. Those I have seen were about twelve inches in length. When they crawl into a crevice that is just about wide enough to admit them they can inflate so that they are very difficult to remove. When the Indians were hunting them they carried an iron rod with a hook in one end with which to hook over their legs, and often the legs would be broken before they could be brought out to where they could be put into the bag or sack carried for the purpose. Perhaps before whiteman introduced the iron rod a tough stick of some kind served as a proper hook.

Bev tells of watching the Indians at some small seep or spring where doves were plentiful. They would hide themselves in some kind of cover right at the spring or seep with hand just under the surface of the mud where the dove was expected to step when drinking. Just as the dove stepped on the hand it was closed on the feet, and Bev states that it was surprising how many they could catch in that manner. To catch quail, the Indians would find a piece of slab rock they could prop up on a slant with sticks arranged as a trip and some kind of bait placed to lure the quail into position so that the slab of rock would fall upon the quail when the trip was sprung.

It is truly interesting to me to hear Bev tell of the early days in Inyo County. When telling of the Indians moving into the back country to gather their foods, he relates how the elderly women — and some of them very old — would start first, on foot, with their belongings in a funnel-shaped basket strapped to their heads. Bev remarks, there would be a lot of weight in the baskets, but despite the weight, the elderly

women would get enough head start, while the men were gathering pack animals and getting the packs on, that they would be the first ones into camp. Bev expresses amazement concerning the weight the elderly people carried, the time they made on foot, and the distances they traveled. Perhaps they never had been bothered with having a family car in which to drive a block to buy reducing pills.

There are many places in Inyo County where the Indians' petroglyphs are very much in evidence, usually not too far from where there is water, or at least near where water would be during the more rainy seasons. Bev tells of asking the Indians about the meaning of some of the petroglyphs, and the answer would always be: "Boys' play." Perhaps that was as near to being correct as many of the big ideas that we get from other sources. I have often wondered if the Indians wanted the whiteman, who took their country from them, to know the meaning of what they inscribed upon the face of boulders. Maybe they did, but I still wonder! I would like to have had photos of some of the petroglyphs for these pages, but so many of them have been traced over with chalk that they are spoiled for me.

At this writing, when Bev Hunter has passed his 85th birthday and celebrated his 50th wedding anniversary, it is truly interesting to hear him tell of happenings down through years of the past. When he went to get married at Independence — the county seat of Inyo County — his brother Willie was county clerk, and he enjoyed himself by teasing Bev that he was not old enough to be getting married, but when he did finally make out the license he would not take Bev's money. Then when he went before the judge with his bride-to-be (Ruth) they met with more delay and teasing, and the judge appeared to think Bev's money was not good, for he would not accept anything for his services. The newly-weds then boarded the train at Owenyo for Lone Pine where it cost them fifty cents for transportation from the depot into town.

Bev tells of an Indian woman driving from Saline Valley to Independence to get help in time of sickness. The Indian man was a very



Bev Hunter and the wife Ruth.

good friend of the Hunters, and when they arrived in Saline Valley by automobile, they learned that he was a very sick man. When the Indian apparently went into a coma they thought they had lost the battle for his life. About that time the Indian Medicine Man arrived with a rawhide band around his head and cow's horns attached. Then hanging down behind from the Medicine Man's belt was a cow's tail. Bev and his wife, thinking their Indian friend was gone, decided to go over to where the salt works were in operation and have some coffee and a meal that was long overdue. After about four hours time, they returned to the Indian's place, and there he was sitting up in bed eating a bowl of beans. When I get a bit under the weather I try to tell the women how much better beans are as medicine than what their pills are, but I find it is rather difficult to put the idea over. However, Bev says that he and his wife were surely surprised to find the man they thought dead sitting up and eating his bowl of beans.

It was in 1945 or 46 that the Hunter's daughter Betty came to Mark Lacey's Ranch in Olancha where I was working and wanted to borrow the Lacey pickup to go to Hunter Ranch to see how her mother and father were faring since some very heavy snows had fallen. I did not know anything about her friend, but I did know that Betty was of the type of training that would enable her to get to Hunter Ranch, even if she had to finish the journey on foot. The Lacey pickup and mine were the same, so I took one wheel off mine and threw it and the spare in the bed of the Lacey pickup, thinking to prepare well for possible tire trouble. Betty found her parents well and happy, so she returned home satisfied in knowing that they were.

The way of life that Bev Hunter has experienced will not be a part of the future. There will be no more cattle drives from Owens Valley to Mojave, nor any more horse drives from Owens Valley to Los Angeles. There most likely will never be any more horse drives from Lida Valley to Independence in Owens Valley. There will be no more rides on horseback of fifty miles or more to deliver some message, and most surely no more horseback rides from Los Angeles to Independence within 48 hours with only some time out in Mojave for the horse to eat while getting a little rest. In place of any horse drive across the Sierras in a severe snow storm, they most likely will be speeded by truck the long way around, over freeways and other surfaced roads within a very few short hours.

No doubt there will still be some cattle drives between Olancha and Hunter Ranch, and for this day and age these drives can be a little rough because of distances between water. Bev tells of the Indian Johnny Hunter helping him bring some cattle in from the Hunter Ranch one time and they were so thirsty the Indian decided to drink some of the water at Nine Mile on the south side of the old Owens lakebed. The Indian was a very sick man for several days.

Now that trucks and horse trailers have taken over, the old Indian trails will not be used any more, and when the old-timers — both white men and Indians — are gone, the trails will be entirely forgotten and very difficult to follow because of not being used. I cannot help but believe that the Indians who lived before we interfered were a much happier people than the whiteman of today. Certainly they had worry about wars, but if we wish to dwell on that line of thinking, let us turn on the television or radio and listen to the news concerning war.

