

OLD JOE WARD

. . . Desert Man, Prospector and Poet

by Dick Gilbert

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I first came to know Old Joe Ward and his burros back in the early Twenties, when the desert fever got into my blood and sent me wandering out into the Mojave. I thought then that he was the most peculiar man I had ever run into. Never tasted alcohol, never smoked, did not use profane language, never married. In fact, he swore he never once in his life had a lady friend. But he loved those little rusty burros better than he did himself.

Joe came from the Isle of Man direct to the Mojave Desert in 1876, when he was 16 years old. He was suffering from tuberculosis and was sent by his brother, to either die or survive. Joe survived. He had little education, but he did know one thing – gold. I sometimes believed he could smell the precious metal. He made lots of money selling claims, but was always broke. In appreciation of his brother's sending him to the desert, he sent every dollar he could raise to him.

The people of the Mojave knew little of Joe's background, but they did know he was a lucky prospector who worked on the quiet. Many times he was followed by mining men trying to get a line on where he was heading. Once I was with him out at Ludlow. We stayed in camp three days because of spying eyes. We finally slipped out to the Klondike wash at two o'clock in the morning, but the spying eyes had outsmarted us. They had studied the tread of my tires and followed us. They caught us inspecting a big gravel bed – which proved to be just that.

Old Joe, when he was broke, would eat dry grass with his burros before he would beg one penny. However, he wrote desert poems, and every time I received one of those poems in the mail, I would know Joe was in bad money circumstances, and either went to his rescue or mailed him a ten spot. And I never lost a dime I loaned the old fellow.

In 1934 I was notified Joe was dying on a ranch near Inyokern. I hurried to him with my doctor. We found him on the ground on a mattress of tree limbs covered with canvas, and loaded him in my car and brought him to Los Angeles. But he flatly refused to be taken to a hospital, so I took him to my own home. There he confessed to me and my wife he had not slept in a bed for 40 years.

Cared for, Old Joe soon began to recover. And each morning he demanded to go on a trip. So I'd drive him about two miles to a clump of bushes along Ballona Creek. There he'd crawl from the car, take my little short-handled shovel and stumble off through the bushes. No store-bought toilets for Old Joel

Joe went back to his wandering. In 1942 I was away on location with a motion picture company for several months. During that time Joe got sick on the desert.

Someone sent him to a hospital, and he passed on. I only learned about it a year after he was gone. He had often told me of a spot on the desert where he had buried three burros, and he said he had laid away enough money to be taken there to rest with his pals. I have never been able to learn whether his wishes were carried out. So few people know anything about the old fellow who kept his lips closed so tight.

But I do remember the first time I saw him make his desert bed. We were to look at some claims. I loaded him into my old Pierce-Arrow, equipped with two comfortable built-in beds, and we started. We arrived in the middle of the afternoon and the first thing Old Joe grabbed a shovel and started digging what looked like a grave, about one foot deep and six feet long. When he had finished he hurried to the bushes and soon was back with his arms full of green branches. He threw them into the "grave" and hurried back for another armful. Then he unfolded a large, dirty piece of heavy canvas, spread it over the foliage, and dropped on it.

I wised up to what he was doing and said: "Joe, I have two fine beds for us here in the car."

But Old Joe shook his head saying: "Here's where Joe sleeps tonight."

We looked over the claims he wanted to show me, then returned to camp and ate our supper. It was barely dark when Joe turned in for the night. But he had hardly hit the canvas when out he came – with a spurt.

"I've got a friend in my bed," he said. He grabbed a shovel and jerked off the canvas. In a couple of minutes he had fished out a rattler about three feet long, and that mad devil was weaving his head like a cork bobbing in water.

"Kill the so and so, Joe!" I yelled. But Old Joe just kept nudging the snake out through the bushes. Finally it turned and began to glide away.

I was still yelling "Kill it Joe!" at the top of my voice when he returned.

"He never harmed me," Joe told me then, "so I never harmed him." And then he went back to bed as though nothing had happened while I stayed awake all night, watching from my bunk for the reptile to return and attack Joe. But I never saw any more of it.

And that's the kind of heart Old Joe carried. If he accidentally stepped on a bug, he'd worry about it for hours. The bad the world isn't full of desert rats like Old Joe Ward.



Old Joe Ward, famed Nevada and Mojave prospector, photographed about 1923 by Adelaide Arnold. Bourke Lee in "Death Valley" said: "Joe was a poet. The meals one of the Rhyolite mines fed its men were pretty bad. Joe wrote a poem about the rich mine and the poor chow. The poem became so popular and amused so many people that the mine began to set a better table. Joe Ward's poetry was powerful."

In June, 1952, CALICO PRINT ran a story by Adelaide Arnold, "*My Burros Gave Me Life.*" Adelaide didn't remember the name of the old prospector whose burros saved him from death by leading to a water hole, but she did have a picture of him. But old timer and desert-wise subscribers told us he was Old Joe Ward. Here's a little more about a real desert prospector by a man who camped with him.