



OLD-TIMERS
of
Southeastern California

LR

by **LESTER REED**

1927

FRANK CHRYSLER

At Lone Pine, Inyo County, California, lives one of California's native sons by the name of Frank Chrysler. He was born at Kernville, California, but has spent most of his life in Inyo County working as stage driver, packer, and cowboy. I have stopped in at cow camps where Frank was the cook, and for sure I sat down to an enjoyable meal. Being an old-time cowboy himself, he surely knows how to prepare a pleasing meal for those who work with cattle, either when on the trail or when at camp. Now living pretty much in retirement, Frank owns rental property as testimonial to the fact that he has lived with thoughts of his tomorrows, and now his todays are fruitful to his advantage.

I have known Frank for about twenty years, and I have reason to think of him as one of those men who will go into the back country and stay without wanting to come out for Saturday nights. As I remember, he stayed in the Monache area of Tulare County, in the High Sierras in the summer time for cattlemen, and also at Little Whitney. When he would be at Little Whitney, Johnnie Lacey, as a young boy, would go to stay with him and have a great time fishing for trout. I often said at that time I never felt sure whether Johnnie and Frank were two young boys having a good time together, or whether they were two men getting along in years. Evidently Frank enjoyed having the young boy with him, and I do know the boy was happy when out with Frank. To me there is no doubt that such companionship helps to make better men of our little boys.

On the 27th day of June, 1966, I contacted Frank where he lives in Lone Pine, California, and on the tape recorder I received from him his way of telling about experiences in earlier days of Inyo County. I learned that Frank Chrysler was born on September 20, 1890, making him just 39 days older than myself. Should we choose to use the expression, we can say that a lot of water has run under the bridges since that date, and of his way in life there are many experiences that could be related in these pages, but because of space I will deal with what to me are the highlights of what I have on the recorder.

As a very young man Frank Chrysler drove a two horse stage between the mining town of Darwin in Inyo County, California, to Ballarat in Southern California, not far from the California and Nevada line. Along the stage route was the Junction Ranch where the Ballarat road and the one from China Lake area joined, and it was there that the stage drivers changed horses. Also at the Junction Ranch in earlier days, it was Mrs. Green who milked cows there inside corrals made of stone and evidently she shipped the milk by stage. In the early days the Junction Ranch served as a stopover place for the teamsters hauling freight.

When Frank Chrysler drove the two horse stage by way of the Junction Ranch, it was at Ballarat he met the stages traveling both north and south. From Darwin to Ballarat was a day's trip, and the following



Frank Chrysler. One of Inyo County's early day packers, cowboys, and stage drivers. Photo by Lester Reed.

day he would return to Darwin. He tells of the weather reaching 122 at Ballarat, where the thermometer was in an old adobe saloon building and the floor was kept wet.

When Frank Chrysler was at the age of 14 he drove the four horse stage coach one round trip between Indian Wells and Mojave. For some reason the regular driver was unable to make the trip, and Frank, at the age of 14 years, was the best qualified to take the driver's place. Around those desert way stations there were not many persons available to serve as extras.

Another time when Frank was very young, and at Coyote Holes between Little Lake and Mojave, surveyors were camped there working out the route for the aquaduct to Los Angeles. The man who drove the team to take the surveyors to and from work had been hurt, so young Frank Chrysler was again the one to drive the team for them over a distance of 8 or 10 miles each way.

About 1908 Frank was doing cowboy work in the Cosos when the cattlemen there were such old-timers as Domingo Dominique, Silas Reynolds, and later Summers and Butler. When he was camped at the Junction Ranch, beef would be butchered to send to the Skidoo Mine, and, of course, for their own use at the cattle camp. Frank mentions what fine flavored meat it was, and how well I know what he means, for it was on that cattle range that I ate my first of the Lacey beef.

One of the old-timers Frank Chrysler tells about as being in the Junction Ranch area was a man by the name of Al Williams. One time when this man, Frank, and Domingo were camped at Cole Spring, Al Williams had a bad case of exema, so went down to the Coso Hot Springs in search of a cure. After being there for awhile his trouble cleared up, and being over-anxious to get back to the cattle camp at Cole Spring, he started out on foot. Instead of starting out on the old road running between the two points across some of the mesa-like areas that was not a

direct route, the man thought to take a short-cut by traveling up one of the draws that led him through a rough canyon.

Of course the men at Cole Spring did not know anything about Williams having left the Coso Springs. So, about two weeks later, when a man from the Coso Hot Springs arrived at Cole Spring looking for his burro, he was surprised and worried to learn that Williams had not arrived there. Frank Chrysler and the others went in search for the missing man, and when getting down near the canyon Williams had chosen as a short cut, they could see some ravens soaring over a rough rocky place in the canyon, and down in the boulders they found the body. Going back out and reporting to the officers what they had found, the officers, because of the reported condition of the man's remains, advised that they go back and do the best they could in the way of burial. They found a diary with the remains of the man's body showing he had fallen and broken an ankle and been able to keep his diary for nine days.

Frank tells of what a fine pistol shot Williams was. One time when Williams was at a ranch or cattle camp, the owner asked him if he would shoot a chicken for him. When a certain rooster was pointed out by the man, Williams jerked his pistol and shooting from the hip, shot the rooster's head off. Of course it was easy to think that this might have been an accidental shot, but not long after when the owner of the place wanted another chicken, and a certain one was pointed out, another rooster had lost his head in exactly the same manner.

While telling of old-timers of the desert area, Frank mentions a man by the name of Coffee who drove a mule team hauling freight between Johannesburg and the Skidoo Mine. Frank mentions Mr. Coffee's mules as being some of the finest big mules he has ever seen. The stage drivers who traveled over this same route changed teams several times. Frank tells of one of the old-time stage drivers who could take one of the old long braided four-horse whips and knock a horse-fly from the back of one of the animals in his team without hurting the horse or mule.

As a young man Frank worked on the salt tramway between Saline Valley and the Owens Lake area. The tramway was about thirteen and one half miles in length. Aside from working on a division of the tramway, he worked two winters at the salt mill on the Owens Lake end of the tramway. He had quit working as a cowboy about 1917, and then from working at the salt works he went to work as a packer out of Lone Pine about 1921. In those days they packed from the town of Lone Pine, and the distance to Cottonwood Lakes was about 21 miles, making a long pack trip over rough mountain trails.

In mentioning old-time packers, he tells of a man by the name of Logan, who packed out of Big Pine. Archie Dean and Lee Pierce were packers out of Independence. From Lone Pine were the Olivases. Fred Burkehardt and a man by the name of Cooke were packing from Sage Flat at the foot of the mountains to the west of Olancha. Barney Sears had a pack station at Sage Flat and one on Cottonwood Creek. Bonner and Agner were old-time packers out of Lone Pine. Then farther to the south than Sage Flat was a packer by the name of Cowan, and another by the name of Phelan. Sam Lewis bought the Cowan Station.

Frank Chrysler tells of working with another man when the two of them had 3,600 pounds of cable to pack over a rough mountain trail. They loaded this cable onto 13 head of mules extending from one mule to the other with coils on each mule summing up to around 276 pounds to the mule. Frank states that had one mule fallen off the trail the other twelve would have been most likely to have gone over too. From the Lone Pine Depot of the Southern Pacific Railroad, Frank Chrysler and Elvis Bonner packed the machinery and other materials for the building of a mining mill across the Inyo Mountains to a place known as Beverage not too far from Saline Valley. The distance across that miner's trail over the rugged mountains was 16 miles, and the heaviest piece of machinery packed on one mule was 320 pounds: quite a chore for two men to lift onto the back of a mule, then get it tied on and balanced to ride over such rough terrain for a distance of 16 miles.

Prior to the time Frank and Elvis were packing the materials for building the mill, there had been other old-timers quite some time before them packing out gold worth many thousands of dollars. How often do we pause to realize the effort and money spent in mining before our time, and when transportation was only by pack-animals and the freight teams. There are not many of those old boys left any more, and most surely it was such old-timers who blazed the way for us.

In the early part of Frank Chrysler's life he rode a horse from Darwin to Keeler to get the doctor for a man who had pneumonia. In those days when a doctor was called he went by whatever means were available. Quite different from ordering a patient taken to some hospital where the doctor can attend to a number of patients.

Frank tells of a time after some of the old-timers in Owens Valley began driving automobiles. Four of those old boys had been somewhere to the south of Lone Pine driving over the very rough dirt road, and on the return trip, near where Cottonwood Creek crossed the road, the driver of the big car, in which they were riding, hit a deep chuckhole, when driving too fast for the condition of the road. Everyone bounced high above their seats, and when getting up the road five or six miles, one of the men riding on the back seat called to the driver and said: "Hey! I don't know what is the matter, but my partner is not here anymore." Turning around and going back to where they hit the chuckhole there was the only sober man of the four beside the road with some ribs broken.

Such old-timers as Frank Chrysler are dropping out of the picture one by one, and with them we will lose much of the history of their day. Those old boys knew how to make the best of what was available to them, and those whom I have known and admired are not of the type to complain when the situation was not just to their liking.



