



OLD-TIMERS
of
Southeastern California

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by **LESTER REED**

1927

THE HUNTER FAMILY OF INYO

Bev Hunter's father (William Lyle Hunter) was born in Virginia, August 24, 1842, and served in the Southern Army during the Civil War with an officer's rating under Colonel Mosby. He was one of seven men chosen by Colonel Mosby to burn bridges and whatever else could be done to hinder the advance of the Northern Armies. Bev tells of his father's group making a raid on soldiers of the Northern Army that were carrying a payroll, and the money they captured was divided among them. William Hunter when entering the army was at the age of 17, and throughout his life after the war, he carried the scar of a saber wound received in hand to hand fighting.

When the end of the war came in 1865, William Hunter, like so many others, had been hearing of gold and other mining discoveries in California, so with \$125.00 he received for a palomino horse he had captured from soldiers of the Northern Army, he started for California. Evidently, he had heard of the silver and lead excitement at Cerro Gordo high on the mountain to the northeast of Owens Lake in Inyo County. Arriving on the train at Mojave, California, he and seven other men hired a man with team and wagon to take them to the Owens Lake area. The horses were so poor and weak that the eight men had to walk much of the time feeling that their belongings made all the load the poor horses should have to pull over the sandy road. Upon arrival in the Owens Lake area, William Hunter then made his way to Cerro Gordo where he found a booming mining settlement of somewhere near to four thousand population.

William Hunter had not been in Cerro Gordo so very long when he bought the Belmont Mine about three miles distant from the Cerro Gordo smelters where he expected to have the silver and lead ores processed. To transport the ores from the mine to the smelters, he bought about 50 mules and finally owned about 200 head. At times when the water system was out of order from freezing or other causes, Hunter would supply water for the camp with his pack animals. With his mules he also packed ore for other miners.

After the ores were processed at the smelters, the lead and silver were shipped by mule-team and wagons to San Pedro. Remi Nadeau was the name of the man who owned and operated the freight teams, and it is said that he operated with 56 wagons, perhaps two wagons to an outfit, and from 16 to 20 mules in each team. The round trip from Cerro Gordo to San Pedro and back required about 21 to 22 days, and along the way Mr. Nadeau had large barns in which to store hay and grain for the mules, and to furnish shelter in bad weather.

At the beginning of the freight-team operations, Remi Nadeau had to haul his freight around Owens Lake by way of the Olancha and Cartago area, but then when the Bessie Brady boat was launched on Owens Lake, freight was transferred to the boat, eliminating the long sandy trek around the lake. The Bessie Brady was launched in June of 1872, and operated between Cartago and Swansea, Cartago being on the southwest end of



William Lyle Hunter, Bev. Hunter's father. He pioneered Cerro Gordo area in Inyo County not long after the Civil War in 1865. Photo, Collection of Bev and Ruth Hunter.

the lake and Swansea at the north end of the lake not too far from where the little desert town of Keeler still maintains a post office. There for many years Mrs. Hilderman was the postmistress, and is still living there as one of the few old-timers left. She is active in writing newspaper items.

As William Hunter added to his pack-mule numbers, it became necessary that he find a range to where he could take mules at times when he did not have work for all of them. To the east of Cerro Gordo, somewhere near to 20 miles, and between Saline Valley and Panamint Valley, he found what became the Hunter Ranch. Much of the range is a rather high mountainous area covered with pinyon trees and some springs as watering places for stock. William Hunter's son Bev, and his grandson Roy, still operate the Hunter Ranch for the grazing of horses, cattle, and burros.

William Lyle Hunter and Carolina Duval were married September 28, 1875, and their old home at Cerro Gordo still stands as shown by the photo in these pages. The corral where he kept his mules has disappeared, although some of the manure that was thrown to the outside of the corral still remains in evidence. The corral fence perhaps disappeared when being used for fire-wood. The old home is surprisingly intact considering the many years that the house has not been occupied. Of course the windows are gone, and some of the flooring shows evidence of decay. Down the hill to the north of the old Hunter home, still stands a shed where William Hunter stored pack equipment and grain for the mules. The old building shows the many years of neglect and wear and tear from weather, and on September 30, 1964, it appeared as shown by photo in these pages.

In addition to transporting the ores from the mines down the mountain by mule team, a tramway was built from the Cerro Gordo area to Keeler. Parts of the old tramway can still be seen today as we drive over the steep dirt road between the old mines and Keeler. Strips of cable are scattered along the way. At one or two places the cables are still high above the canyon floors, some of the ore buckets can still be seen, and some of the line poles are still standing. The remnant of the old tramway testifies to the boom of Cerro Gordo. I have read that the Remi Nadeau freighting wagons did not operate after 1881. This no doubt was due to the fact that silver had dropped in price from \$1.60 per ounce to \$.60 sixty cents. The mines closed down, the smelters burned, so Cerro Gordo was the beginning of another one of the many ghost towns of the Mojave Desert.

With the closing of the mines, William Hunter moved into the Owens Valley and took up ranching where the hay he raised was difficult to sell at \$2.50 and \$3.00 per ton. He then sold the ranch and was Inyo County Clerk for two years. In the William Hunter family there were four sons and one daughter. The first born was the son John, then Willie, Bev, and then Don. The daughter's name is Nellie. Willie Hunter was Inyo County Clerk for many years until his death. William Lyle Hunter died in his 60th year and ended another chapter in the history of those rugged old-timers who blazed the way for us when the going was truly rough, and we of today seldom pause long enough to give them credit for their accomplishments. It is always fine to hear Bev make mention of his parents in the way that leads one to believe that he was a happy boy in a home that did not tend to induce delinquency, either adult or juvenile.

The 30th of September, 1964, when I went with Bev Hunter to Cerro Gordo he told of many interesting things concerning the days when this mining settlement was a place very much alive. Several millions of dollars worth of metals were taken from inside the mountain causing a network of tunnels about 28 miles in length. He told of one of the teamsters putting metal surfaces on his brakeblocks, and when he started down the mountain the metal surfaces rubbing together caused sparks to fly in a way that started the mules to run. This incident did not occur to one of Nadeau's teams, but was after the mines had closed down and the slag from the smelters was found to be of value because of metals still remaining — I believe mainly zinc. The weight of the loaded wagon was great, and when once under motion down the steep mountain the force was formidable, and as the mules went down the weight continued to drag them along. Finally one of the wheelers became jammed in the front wheels bringing the wagon to a halt. All of the 14 mules had been killed but one — truly a tragic situation.

Bev told of another runaway that occurred in the Cerro Gordo area in later years. He pointed across a canyon to a steep dirt road, and told of an old-timer having a runaway there. This old-timer was known to everyone as Dr. Jackass Sam, and he drove two horses to a light wagon with which he took on small jobs. This time when he had the runaway he had taken some people into the Cerro Gordo area who wanted to look over some of the area. When starting down the grade something happened that started the team into a run. At the bottom of the hill there was a very sharp turn where the runaway horses failed to stay in the

road. They came to a halt when they fell into a shallow mining shaft and one of the horses was killed. Sam thought his passengers should pay for the horse, but they did not feel that way about it, so he quit the business. I do not know just what happened to the passengers, whether they were lost out of the wagon during the runaway, or if they were in on the finish.

From the time Bev Hunter became big enough to sit on a horse, until now at the age of 85, horses and cattle have been his life. He makes mention of how thoughtful his father was in letting him go on cattle and horse drives when very young. He made his first cattle drive from Independence to Mojave when about 15 years of age. Bev tells of how he can now look back over his life and remember the interest his father took in asking him questions concerning the cattle and horse drives he made as a boy. Now as a man of many years he truly appreciates what it meant to him to have his father ask questions and take special interest to note what events had appealed to him. As Bev tells of his first cattle drive, he relates of how the cattle were stopped during the night near the Red Hill not far to the north of Little Lake. Getting off his horse and stretching out on the ground to rest he fell asleep. Some time later he was awakened in the thought that someone was pouring a bucket of water on him. In the dim light of the night he could see no one around, the cattle and cowboys were gone and his horse was standing directly over him, with front feet on one side and hind feet on the other. He tells that for a time he was thoroughly bewildered, soaking wet, and uncertain just which way he should go to overtake the cattle. When he thought that he had gained back his sense of direction, he started on to overtake the cattle and felt a real sense of relief when he began to hear some of the cattle bawling. His major hope was that in the night the men could not see how wet he was. Bev says he learned a lot on this drive.

The owner of the cattle was a man by the name of Hulbert, who would go into the Owens Valley and buy up cattle until he had what he wanted for a drive. Mr. Hulbert would buy hay from Bev's father to feed to the cattle while holding them until he had enough for a drive. On one of these cattle drives there were some oxen in the herd that were bought from a sawmill man by the name of Rawson, and some of these



The old William Lyle Hunter Home at Cero Gordo. Photo by Lester Reed in 1965.

old steers with plenty of age on them weighed around 1800 or 2000 pounds. They were bought for ten dollars per head. Bev speaks of Mr. Hulbert as being a real good cow-man, and remembers that his cowboys were not allowed to yell and shove behind a herd. No extra horses were taken on these cattle drives, and Bev tells of how these old horses would actually snore when having an opportunity to get some rest.

Watering places for the cattle herds after leaving Olancho were Rose Springs near the south end of the present Haiwee Lake, Little Lake, Grapevine, Coyote Hole (Raymonds Place), Red Rock Canyon, and then no more water until arriving in Mojave from where the cattle would be shipped by train. The distance from Olancho to Mojave is about 92 miles, and between Olancho and Independence is about 39 miles, making the cattle drives about 131 miles.

At a very early age Bev helped make horse drives from Owens Valley to Los Angeles, from where the horses would be shipped to different parts of our nation. The drive with horses to Los Angeles required seven days, and the return trip on horseback to Independence was another seven days at \$1.50 per day. However, Bev tells of riding on horseback from Los Angeles to their ranch at Georges Creek south of Independence within 48 hours, stopping only in Mojave to feed and rest his horse for a while. Perhaps we of today would for a time want our meals served while standing at the mantlepiece if we were to make a ride like that.

As a boy Bev could always be found where there were either horses or cattle involved. He and the son of W. K. Miller, who owned the stage line between Keeler and Mojave, became great friends. So, often Bev would be staying at Indian Well (now called Homestead), from where he and young Miller would drive the stage on the route toward Keeler, or toward Mojave to the south.

One time when a drove of cattle was going through, a big bull gave out about seven miles distant from Indian Well. So, after hauling hay and water to the bull for several days, W. K. Miller decided he could get the bull to Indian Well where he could take better care of him. Bev went with Mr. Miller in a light buckboard and two of the stage horses with the idea the bull could be tied to the rear of the buckboard, and with one of them driving the team, the other could walk along behind the bull. As usual, the bull was lying down to keep off his sore feet, so all they had to do was drive right up to the bull, place a rope on his neck and tie it to the rear of the buckboard. However, the moment the rope tightened, the bull made a lunge, breaking the doubletrees, setting the horses back on their haunches, the tongue came out of the neckyoke, and the bull was headed off down the slope at full speed. Wheels and other parts began flying off the buckboard, and after running a mile or more the bull gave out, still tied to what little was left of the vehicle. The bull refused to try to get on his feet again and had to be killed. Bev tells how Mr. Miller laughed until he cried, then each of them mounted a horse bareback and rode the seven miles to Indian Well. Bev would sell horses to the stage-line owner on credit, and then he and other members of the Hunter family would ride out the price of the horses.

Bev tells of an Englishman by the name of Harry Floyd who came to America because of lung trouble, and found the Mojave Desert very much to his liking. The man owned several head of pack burros, and upon them he carried his belongings while prowling over the desert, including

the Death Valley area. He would buy Indian baskets as he wandered around over the desert and then sell them. One night when Floyd was staying in Lone Pine, he asked to camp inside a corral where the owner kept his milk cow. During the night he left the corral gate open and the cow got out, and when asked about it, he explained that it was rather "stoofy" in the corral and that he had left the gate open in an effort to get more fresh air.

Harry Floyd would go to the Hunter Ranch on Georges Creek to make camp, and when he stopped at what he thought a suitable place he would unpack each of his several burros right where they stopped instead of leading them to a certain place. Then when he went to cook his meal he had to go to each of the scattered packs to find what he needed. Perhaps the coffee pot would be in one pack, the frying pan in another, and by the time he had finished in preparing a meal he had searched in every pack to find what he needed. Then when he went to move on to some other place the packs were thrown together in the same manner. Apparently, his major objective in life was not to hurry, and if he decided to camp beside a road or trail he would barely get off the travel-way and remain in bed until around noon the following day. However, he gained back his health and became a rather rugged desert prowler.

Evidently he was of a fairly well-to-do family, for he received money from them and would take trips back to England. When World War I started he went back to his homeland and was not seen in Inyo Canyon anymore. Seldom do we ever see any more of the old burro men of the desert, and Harry Floyd was one who depended on the burros to lead him back to camp or back to where he had his bearings again when he got lost. Perhaps he fared even better than those who may now prowl the desert in some old jalopy that can get stuck in the sand, quit running, or run out of gas or water.

Early in life Bev Hunter started on the way to becoming an outstanding wild horse hunter of his time. Over in the Lida area of Nevada the wild horses were numerous, and it was there that he caught, rounded up, and drove many of them into the Owens Valley. Bev Hunter has been referred to as a man who can think like a wild horse, and I have heard him say that when a man thinks he is smarter than a wild horse, he has not even started to learn about them yet. He tells of how the old stallion will often linger long behind his harem of mares in a manner that will lead the inexperienced to believe he would not be difficult to catch, but should we have the opportunity to give it a try we will find that this cunning animal has plenty of speed to outdo the average good saddle horse. We may think of wild horses running in large bands, but men like Bev Hunter and his son, Roy, are more likely to tell you that a stallion's harem is somewhere near a dozen. They say that when leisurely following a stallion and his band of mares, if one or more of his band start as if to go their own way, the old stallion will head them off and really work them over with his teeth until they are back in line again. Or, if some of the mares get to lingering behind too far, their master will again go back and give them a working over with his teeth.

Bev tells that when they were gathering wild horses in the Lida area of Nevada, a man from Arizona came and made camp near to theirs. The old fellow had two mares. So, early the following morning, when Bev was the only one up, the man from Arizona came over to where he was

and claimed that one of his men had stolen one of the mares. The old boy was carrying a rifle, and Bev, seeing that he was pretty hostile, tried to handle him as easily as possible, while trying to explain that most likely one of the wild stallions had stolen his mare. Not knowing the ways of wild horses this was difficult for the man to believe, but while having breakfast with Bev and the other men, the old fellow cooled off and Bev then went with him to see what they could learn about the absence of the mare. Both the mares had been hobbled, so it was not difficult to follow the sign of the one that was gone. After following the sign of the hobbled and shod mare, with additional sign of wild stallion working her over as he headed for his band, they could see the two of them in the distance, and the stallion was still trying to hurry her along to get her with his band. When they caught up with the two horses the stallion ran off a short distance, and of course, the mare was willing to stop as soon as he left. When the man saw how the mare was so badly skinned up by the stallion, he turned and killed him with his rifle. Bev and the owner of the mare had to follow the sign of the two horses about six miles, and when they arrived back at camp, the man from Arizona knew more about wild horses than what he had when going to Bev's camp thinking some of them had stolen the animal.

Bev Hunter and a man by the name of Ed Cornell, along with other men helping them, gathered about five hundred head of the wild horses out of the Lida Valley area of Nevada. They did not get them all at one time, for as I have written before, the horses run in small bands, and usually it is not practical to try to drive too many in one herd. However, in gathering enough for several drives the number taken from the area summed up to around 500. I have often heard Bev mention Harold Gill when telling of his wild horse operations. Harold was a small man who was quite a bronc rider, and like his father, Dee Gill, he was very good with a rope.

When Bev and Ed Cornell first started to gather the wild horses in the Lida Valley area, they made camp at the Oasis Ranch where hay was cheap and plenty so their saddle horses could be kept in good working order. Gathering these horses was not a situation where the cowboys would take after a band of horses to try to outrun them and catch them with ropes. Instead when they sighted a band, they would ride round them at quite some distance so that when the horses started they would be headed for the flat in the vicinity of their camp at the Oasis Ranch. At first they tried having a band of their saddle horses out in the flat for decoys but the instant the wild horses would get close enough to detect the odor of man they would break and run away. When the men realized what was causing them to suddenly get frightened, they gave up the idea of using the saddle horses, and held the first band gathered. This procedure worked in getting enough together for a drive.

Today, when mentioning the wild horses, Bev reminds that the wild horses have been greatly reduced in numbers, due to the many that have been gathered and driven out as did Bev and Ed Cornell. During World War I, there were those who would shoot the wild horse just for the hide that was selling at a fair price. Perhaps these killers called themselves "MUSTANGERS," but they were not the type of men who appreciate wild horses as a part of the outdoor way of life, and as the animal that has served the cowboy so well in his every-day work, or served so well

on the farm for many years. Even yet today many thousands of people get their major recreation at the racetracks. Most any little child will turn to look back when passing a horse trailer on the highways.

In the Coso Range of Inyo County, California, there is still the remnant of wild horses that have been there for many years. They originated from horses brought in there during some very dry years back as some believe in the 1870's. These horses were never all gathered, so in time the ones born and raised there were as wild as horses can be, and being unsuccessfully chased many times does not tend to make them gentler. One time in the middle Forties when I was riding around to the west of our camp at Cole Spring, I came upon five head of the wild horses at Willow Canyon when they had come in to the water. Waiting out of sight until they drank all they wanted and started back down the canyon, I followed along, still keeping out of sight, and by hurrying along when out of sight I kept getting closer. I was riding a small horse that Bev Hunter had raised and he was the type that could start quickly with plenty of speed, so when the horses had about seventy-five yards of open canyon bottom ahead, I suddenly charged them.

A little sorrel stallion was traveling behind, and I so surprised him that he hesitated to look back, and I got close enough to make a pass at him with my large loop just as he started up the mountain to one side of the canyon. I had made the loop large because most of my life I had roped grown cattle by the horns, and when roping at horses I would just get my loop over the ears. The back of my big loop hit the horse at the withers and the front end of the loop dropped down over his nose to his front feet. Only by sheer luck I got the loop drawn up on his left hind foot. By pulling him hard enough to make him tired, he lay still while I made a loop in the other end of my long rope and tossed it over his head before letting him get to his feet.

After about twenty or thirty minutes time the horse would drive along ahead of me, and in that way I got him near enough to the camp that I made. Don Tysinger (the cook) and my brother "Gib" heard me call and they brought me a halter which I got onto the young stallion from the back of my saddle horse. I tied him to a Joshua tree for a few days until we were ready to start for the Lacey Ranch with what cattle we had gathered. Putting two lead ropes on the wild horse we tied him behind an old horse we called Chub. With a pack-saddle on Chub we ran a lead rope through the britching on each side of the old horse and then fastened the rope to the pack-saddle. Chub was then started with the other loose horses and he delivered the stallion at the Lacey Ranch.

At the ranch the stallion was thrown down, Bev Hunter castrated him and he was branded with Mark Lacey's Double Circle. Unfortunately, the young horse, while running loose in a large corral with other horses, became sick with a severe case of distemper, got one hip knocked out of place, and a stifle dislocated, so we had to shoot him. One night after I caught this horse, Roy Hunter heard two young fellows talking about how they were going to start catching wild-horses, and Roy informed them he had heard me say that I was more surprised than the horse was when I managed to get the big loop drawn up on the hind foot.

I have drifted somewhat away from writing about the Hunter family. However, it was Roy Hunter who suggested the way to tie the horse to Chub, and I was riding a horse that had been raised at Hunter Ranch

in rough country, and had been broken by the Hunters, and trained so that I had no trouble in maneuvering him.

Bev Hunter tells about his wife and two young sons going with him into the Coso Range area to trap wild horses at the watering places. The older of the two sons was Mark at about the age of seven, and Roy at the age of five. About 1913 Bev and Ruth Willis were married at Independence of Inyo County. Their first born was a boy, Beveridge Clark, who died at the age of four, the second was a daughter, Betty, then Mark, and Roy is the youngest. Bev tells of how Roy at the age of five was determined to follow him to the horse traps where he would be in hiding to wait for horses to come into the corral (or trap) that encircled the watering place. The trap gate was a piece of heavy canvas rolled on a piece of pipe in the manner of the old style window curtain that extended across the top of the gate opening, tied there with some kind of string not too difficult to break, and from this string a rope or wire was extended to the place of hiding. The instant the line was jerked to break the string, the weight of the pipe dropped it to the ground, and the canvas leaving no opening at the gate, served to keep the horses from running into it. There would be a second corral into which the trapped horses were placed and the curtain could then be rolled on the pipe again and placed in position to be dropped behind the next little band that might come for water. The second corral adjoined the main trap. In this manner many wild horses have been trapped, and then by necking some of them together they can be driven to where the man may want to take them.

After Bev's son Roy became a little older, he would go into the Cosos and when sighting a band of wild horses, the boy would go around them in a plan to cause them to run by where his father was in hiding. From there an effort would be made to rope some certain horse picked out for some purpose they had in mind. This plan often worked out. It depended mainly upon Bev getting close enough to throw a loop at the horse he wanted. Another method that father and son worked by was to go out and start a band of horses, and when they more or less figured out the area in which the horses had chosen to make their escape, Roy would go back to camp. After a time agreed upon he would take some food and coffee, and perhaps a change of horse or mule for his father to continue in following the band, never riding fast unless having an opportunity to make them change their course to an advantage. In such maneuvers they would try to keep out of sight until the right moment.

Bev tells of a band of 12 wild horses he followed for six days in the Cosos. He started them near Louisiana Peak. During the six days of following this band, they traveled as far west in the Cosos as Cactus Flat, and then back to the starting point by way of Wild Horse Spring. By the end of the sixth day, the frozen ground had taken effect on the horses' feet to where they did not like to run any more, so Bev decided it was time to start on the way with them for Independence in the Owens Valley. Bev tells of rounding up a band of 25 young stallions in the Lida area of Nevada one time and driving them out to Independence. These horses were then taken to Porterville in the San Joaquin Valley by Howard Gill. In those days the wild horses could be sold to persons wanting horses for delivery services around the towns. Some people would buy one or more to own a wild horse to break for riding or as a work animal.

One time when I was camped out at the Hunter Ranch between Saline and Panamint Valleys, Curley Fletcher, who wrote the "Strawberry Roan" song, asked if I had ever been out on a trip with "Old Bev". When I told him that I had been for not more than one day at a time, Curley then answered, "Well! I have, and the old devil will pull his hat down over his eyes, fold his hands on the saddle-horn, and then forget a man is supposed to eat."

Bev tells of leaving Owens Valley in the month of September one year, when he was a young man, and on the 27th of the month a very heavy snow storm came up making the trip very difficult for men and stock. Their route of travel was through Little Whitney Meadow, down to the Kern River at Lewis Camp, up over Coyote Pass, and then down into the Rifle Creek area. They had no time piece with them, so could not guess at the time of day. At a log cabin Bev thought they should stop for the night, but the owner of the horses (W. O. Russell) from Yolo County thought they should keep going. He was afraid the snow would get so deep they could not get over the Farewell Gap, but about the time they got near to timber-line — not so very long after leaving the cabin — dark came upon them and they had to stop because of not being able to see the route of the trail.

They had no trouble in getting the horses stopped, for they wanted to huddle up with tails to the storm. The wind was so bad that they tried to build a fire where there would be timber to break the wind, but after quite an effort to get a fire started, the wind would blow snow from the trees onto their fires and put them out. One time when getting a fire to burn for a short time, their pack mule wanted to stand right in the fire in her effort to get warm. After a few efforts with the fire they had to give it up and depend on keeping on the move to keep from freezing. Bev's younger brother "Don" and another young boy were along and when getting to near the freezing point they were determined to lie down and go to sleep, so Bev had quite a struggle with them throughout the night, his brother "Don" thinking he was trying to be a bully with them, but the other boy, "Boob" Gill, being younger and not related, was easier to handle. When daylight came the pack mule had frozen to death a short distance away, and the band of horses they were driving had milled around so much that they were inside a corral of snow about three feet high.

Leaving this camping place as soon as light enough to see the way, they struggled over Farewell Gap and down to Mineral King where they came to the road which was much easier to follow and leading down into the lower elevations of the foot-hills of the San Joaquin Valley. The horses were driven to Goshen, there loaded onto railroad cars and shipped to Yolo County. At this writing, when Bev tells the story of this horse drive, he believes that if he had not taken the saddle and blankets off the pack mule she might not have frozen to death. The skin peeled from the young boys hands and ears, and no doubt they were pretty well along toward manhood before they realized that the "big bully" who made them stay awake in the snow storm that night had saved their lives.

When Bev talks of this storm coming on the 27th of September, he reminds that perhaps it will happen again some time and make it rough for the cattlemen to get their stock out. At the time of that storm, cattlemen on the western part of the Sierras had to hire men to shovel



Tinemaha Dam in Owens Valley, built with mules rented from Bev Hunter pulling the old Fresno scrapers. Photo by Lester Reed in 1965.

out in places in order to get the cattle through. The coldest day I ever spent in the Sierras was on the 5th of June when the hail and sleet were really bad. However, before the day was gone I found where a large tom lion had gotten into one of my traps, and by the time I followed him up, got him killed and loaded onto the mule, I had forgotten it was a cold day.

Soon after the city of Los Angeles began buying out ranches in Owens Valley with the idea of taking the Owens River water to that city, Bev Hunter heard that they wanted to hire some mules for the building of the Tinemaha Dam a few miles to the south of Bigpine. The dam is mainly a dirt structure extending across the valley, that I would say is well over half a mile in width. Bev contacted the proper authority and the contract was drawn up and signed to effect that he was to furnish 45 head of mules. At the time he had two mules broke to work, and the only harness he had was for those two. At ten dollars per set he bought enough harness from ranchers who had sold to the city that he could outfit the 45 mules. He then went to Hunter Ranch, between Saline and Panamint Valleys, to start gathering mules.

The weather was so wet and stormy that there was some delay in getting enough mules together, but through two gatherings he had the 45 at a ranch in Owens Valley where the breaking of mules to work was soon underway. In a large round corral he prepared a large metal wheel for a drag, and hitching bronco mules to this with one of the ones that was already experienced as a work animal, he was ready to deliver the 45 head on the job at the appointed time. The mules were started inside the corral, then taken out in the open and driven around until taught to be guided. When starting on the job, the mules were hitched four abreast to a Fresno Scraper. A man on horseback on each side would have a lead rope on the outside mule. As soon as each team of four mules

became used to the noise of the scraper they would be turned over to the teamster. In this manner the 45 mules were soon gentled to their work, and before long the teamsters would jump upon the back of one of the mules when going to and from the construction camp.

The construction camp was on the east side of the Owens River near to the narrow gauge track of the Carson and Colorado Railroad leading south to the little desert mining town of Keeler near the north shore of Owens Lake. Bev stayed around the construction for about ten days, and then decided the mules were doing well enough that he could leave. During the time he was around the camp, one of his saddle horses wandered out onto a railroad bridge over a gully that was about 18 or 20 feet deep and one of his hind legs went through between two of the ties. Thinking to saw one of the ties in two to get the horse's leg out, he sent a boy to camp to get a saw, but the boy soon returned saying he could not find a saw. By this time the horse had twisted around and struggled so hard that the leg was through up to the stifle, and his head was hanging over one side of the track. Bev put a rope around his neck and tied it to the rail so that he could not change his position but little more. Then with a hame from a harness he managed to pry the leg from between the ties, and the horse struggled to his feet and walked on off the bridge. After working in desperation for fear the train would come along, Bev learned there would be no train passing by that evening.

When vacation time came, some of the construction men thinking the mules were broke to ride because of riding them to and from work decided to use some of the mules for a riding and pack trip. The mules appeared so gentle on the job that they decided to put packs on some of them and ride others on a trip into the high country. Of course this was completely out of line with their everyday routine, so riders and packs were scattered in all directions and it was thoroughly demonstrated they were not yet broken as saddle and pack animals. We often hear and say a lot about faith, so I wonder if Bev did not possess an unusual degree of faith in himself to sign a contract to furnish 45 mules for the building of the Tinemaha Dam, when he had only two mules broke to work, had only the harness for them, and the other 43 were running wild at Hunter Ranch?

About the year 1901 Bev Hunter joined the 101 Show at Bliss, Oklahoma, and went with them from there to Birmingham, Alabama, where the state fair was going on. The management of this show advertised to the effect that Bev would ride anything they would bring in as a saddle bronc. He says that he was fool enough to try to back up the advertising, and states that some of the old grain-fed horses were really rough on the hard ground that was always chosen for putting on the show. The management posters also advertised that Bev was an expert steer roper — perhaps they used the word champion, but old Bev, at 85 years young, wants it thoroughly understood that he never did claim any championship. Never-the-less, I know him well enough, and know enough about him, that if ever the champion roped against him, and wanted to retain championship, he had no time to play around.

In telling about the rough horses they brought in for him to ride, Bev says that he could hang onto the horn if he wanted, but I would be willing to lay my bets that the saddle-horn was not over-worked. Instead of riding those old horses the 8 seconds as is the rule in rodeos of today,

he was required to ride them until they quit bucking. I have tried to get him to tell of some horse he rode that he considered outstanding as a buckler, but all he will ever say is that he rode what they brought in to him, and that he rode them until they quit bucking. I feel quite sure he is afraid I will think he is bragging.

In the early part of Bev's life as a roper, he was in competition with such men as Ave Gardner, Clay McGonigal, Elson Carrol and other good ones. When talking with Bev about his roping, it is difficult to get him to say much about it, but I did manage to get him to admit that he had held his own when in competition with some of the best of them. Down through my life of 74 years I have roped calves by the hind feet with a good many different fellows, and never yet have I been in the corral at branding time with two better fellows to work with than Bev Hunter and his son Roy. Never at any time did either of them maneuver in a way to interfere with either of the other two. I had borrowed a good horse and a good rope from George Brown of Olancha, and then to be roping with two men like the Hunters, the day summed up to a very memorable one for me.

When Bev is telling of traveling with the 101 Show, he mentions the "cowboys" who were along who wore highheeled boots, big hats, and a line of talk that did not at all belong to the life of a working cowboy, or one that could really ride or rope. Of evenings after the show was over, Bev would get into clothes that would not identify him as being of the 101 Show personnel.

Bev mentions that Tom Mix was traveling with the 101, which reminded me of a time when my two brothers, "Gib" and "Zeke," and I were furnishing steers for a rodeo in Hemet, California, and Tom was there, entered in the steer tying. Evidently, it was a day off for him, for he ran the black muley steer all over the arena and never did catch it. I felt sorry for the man because of the way those old hill-billies razed him.

When Bev was traveling with the show people, they toured mostly in the Western and Southern United States. At a time when the show management was planning to go to England, Bev's father was not feeling too well, so he would not sign up to go. Evidently because of his moving picture publicity, "Tom" Mix was quite a drawing card for the show. When talking of good bucking horse riders traveling with the show, Bev mentions a man by the name of Johnny Brower, and he tells of the original Annie Oakley whom he first met when she was traveling with the Buckskin Bill Show at Pucker City, Oklahoma. She later joined the Buffalo Bill Show when Bev was with them, and Bev mentions her as being one who could really shoot.

Since I have known Bev a reunion was held for those who traveled with the 101, but, if I remember correctly, he did not attend, and it is most likely that today he is one of a very few who are still living. Bev is a type of old-timer that is very difficult to find any more. There is no longer the opportunity for that kind of experience necessary to harden a man to the exposures and hardships of his day. If a horse was mean to buck, he harbored no thought, only to ride him if he could, and experience had taught him that he was well mounted if he kept such horses between his knees.

About 1908 Bev Hunter bought what was known as the Steneger Ranch in the Death Valley area. He bought the land from a man by the name of Yandel. Yandel had bought the land from Steneger, and Steneger had acquired the land at a time when there was a plan to bring a railroad into the area to develop a copper mine near Ubehebe. The plans included a roundhouse on the Steneger land, where there was plenty of water, including a hot spring. Somehow, the plan did not materialize, and sometime after Bev became owner of the Steneger Ranch he sold it to a man by the name of Johnson, then the famed Scotty's Castle was built.

Bev and his son Roy tell me of a time when they went to move some cattle from the Steneger Ranch to Hunter Ranch. After being on their way for a time, the cattle stalled as they sometimes do, and they had to give up the idea of being able to drive them, but were able to keep them from going back. During two days and nights Roy and his father took turns going back to water the saddle animals and get something to eat. Finally, one of the old cows sniffed the air, and as if she thought she could smell water, started in the right direction, with the others following until arriving in the Hunter Ranch area. They both say that if they were to tell how far it was to the water, they would not be believed. It is easy for us not to believe what we have not experienced, but many an old-time cowboy has seen cattle appear to smell water for distances that are amazing even to him. When Tom Turner was in charge of moving a large herd of cattle from the Vail Company's Great Empire Ranch in Arizona to the Warner Ranch in Southern California in the 1880's, neither he nor the lead steer had ever been over the route before, but Tom was a wise enough cowman to know that the old steer was a much better judge than he, so when the old fellow thought he smelled water, he was left free to set the pace and lead the way.

When Bev was a young man he sold and shipped horses and mules to different parts of our nation. At one such time, when he shipped a carload of horses and mules to Blythe, California, he learned after arrival that he was somewhat ahead of the time of year when there would be



Bev Hunter when still hunting wild horses.

a demand for the type of stock he had, so he put them out on pasture and returned to Owens Valley. The year was somewhere around 1914, and when he returned to Blythe to attend to his stock, he went by train to Blythe Junction to the north of Palo Verde Valley, and on the Santa Fe Railroad running east by way of Needles. By stage he went from the Junction to the town of Blythe and arrived there about noon. A little later he heard some shots fired in the direction of the bank. People began running from all directions toward the bank to learn the cashier had been killed or wounded. Two young men had held up the bank and escaped on horseback with quite a sum of money. Among the many excited people who were running in all directions, one man, who was carrying a small pistol, dropped it in the dust of the street. He was quite some time in finding it again. Someone, knowing Bev had a saddle-horse with his stock, suggested that he get the horse and join a posse. But Bev, as a stranger in the area, had different ideas. He thought of how easy it would be for some "man-hunter" to mistake him for a robber and display a bit of over-enthusiasm.

A short time later two saddle horses were found grazing on a ditch bank just outside El Centro to the east. In the meantime a small crippled fellow, whom I remember by the name of John Haynes, was walking down the hall of the old Franklin Hotel in El Centro, and when passing by a room door that was open, he saw some money bags sitting on the room floor. John slipped out of the hotel, notified the law, and the two young fellows had to be awakened to the fact they were under arrest as being suspected of bank robbery at Blythe. At the time I was attending a hearing in El Centro in which some men were being tried for stealing cattle, and when passing by the jail I could see the bank robbers in their cell. One of them had a bandage over one eye because of an injury received when hurrying through a mesquite thicket. As I remember, the officers who had trailed the young fellows out of Palo Verde Valley lost their sign in the sand dunes to the east of El Centro. I do not remember how the young fellows fared when coming to trial.

One of the old-timers Bev tells about in the early days of Inyo County and the Cerro Gordo area was a Portuguese man by the name of Manuel Silva who owned some cows from which he furnished milk to the residents of Cerro Gordo during the booming days. When the price of silver dropped causing the smelters to close down and the boom days of Cerro Gordo were over, Manuel took his cows down into the Owens Valley and started in the cattle business. From his milk-cows he built the herd up to several hundred head and held a grazing privilege for them in the Mulky area of the High Sierras. When the cattle were to be brought out of the high country in the fall of the year, they were started out by way of Diaz Meadow to what is still known as The Portuguese Slide. There, Manuel Silva — with the aid of his three dogs — would shove the cattle down the slide to come out in Cottonwood Canyon near what is known as Wormhole. When he took the cattle into the mountains they were driven up the Cottonwood Canyon trail, for the Portuguese Slide was too steep for them to climb up.

Bev tells of often seeing Manuel Silva working his cattle when there would be no one helping but the three dogs. If he was parting out some, two dogs would be holding up the main herd, while the third dog would be holding up the ones he had parted out. Most likely all the cowboys

in the country could not have shoved the cattle over the Slide as did this man with his three dogs; and most likely cowboys could not have held the cattle up as well while they were being worked. They were used to the ways of the dogs, and Manuel's general way of handling them. This man never petted his dogs. They always stayed back some distance from him, and when time came to feed them, a hunk of beef would be thrown to where each one was waiting his turn. Bev tells of one time trying to get one of the dogs to come up to him. Manuel caught him in the act and made it clear that the dog must not be petted. Bev remembers one of the dogs by the name of Bosco.

The Portuguese's English was very poor, so at times Bev would act as interpreter for him. Bev also describes the old fellow as being very witty and humorous. The old fellow had no cabin at Mulky, nor did he have any horse pasture. He depended on the dogs to keep the cattle off the grass right near camp so that his horse would stay around close on the better grass, and he stayed in a tent. Manuel's horse was very shabby and slow, and what Manuel and the slow horse could not do was left up to the dogs. Bev says that he never has seen better trained dogs.

Evidently, Bev Hunter inherited an interest in mining from his father, for since I have known him he has been interested in talc mining operations. He tells a story of a time many years ago when an Indian known as Shoshone Johnny, and a man, by the name of Tom Wilson, would spend their summers at Hunter Ranch and the winters at Furnace Creek. Shoshone Johnny knew of a ledge in the vicinity of Rhyolite, Nevada, that he thought to be very rich, so at a time when Shoshone Johnny was camped at Lee Pump, Bev went there with a food supply on two pack animals. A very heavy snow storm came up right at the time, so by the time the storm cleared away the food supply was pretty well cleaned up, and Bev, feeling that he should be getting back to his family, gave what was left of the food to Shoshone Johnny, planning to make another start to locate the ledge in the names of Shoshone Johnny, Tom Wilson, and Bev Hunter. Before Bev got back to renew the mission to locate the mine, Shoshone Johnny was somewhere in town, where he met a man who asked him if he knew of a good mining prospect. When Johnny stated that he did, the man, going by the description Johnny gave him, made out a location notice and told Johnny to go and place it at his ledge. Shoshone Johnny, not being able to either read or write, did not know that his name was not on the location papers, but instead it was made out to the man who prepared the papers.

The mining excitement in the vicinity of Rhyolite was growing fast, and it was not long until the mine the Indian, Shoshone Johnny, thought he owned, was reported to have been sold for one million dollars, and it was then that it became known the man who made out the location papers for Johnny had "forgotten" to include his name. However, the "big-hearted" rugged individual who made out the papers for the Indian, did give him an old spring wagon and twenty dollars. In the meantime the rugged individualist sent Johnny to his home to help his wife clean up the place, and then brought a charge that the Indian had tried to molest his wife. With another person helping to bring the charges, Johnny was frightened so that he left for Hunter Ranch to go into hiding.

About that time another man came into the picture who had been putting up money for the man who prepared the location notice for

Johnny and brought suit for a portion of what the mine had been sold for. Johnny was needed to serve as a witness in the suit, so he was located at Hunter Ranch and taken to Goldfield where the trial was being held. Threats were made to Johnny that he would be killed if he testified, so he ran away on foot for Hunter Ranch without taking time to carry any food. At the Steneger Ranch, where Scotty's Castle now stands, Johnny found some frozen watermelons that had not been taken in from the field which did serve as a little better than nothing for food. Someone was sent after Johnny, but he remained in hiding and was not found, and the court then offered a reward of \$2,500. Tom Wilson and Bev Hunter then hunted up Johnny and persuaded him to go with them to Independence. From Independence a telegram was sent to the judge at Goldfield that Johnny was on his way, and the judge wired back that the trial had been settled and the Indian was not wanted.

The new mining excitement caused Rhyolite to boom for a time. Another railroad was built to the place in addition the one already there. A new school house, a bank, places of entertainment, and numerous other buildings were added to the town, but after about two years of boom the mining business began to slow down and Rhyolite took its place along a more moderate way in being a desert town. Today when Bev Hunter thinks back over the years he wonders what the difference might have been for Shoshone Johnny, Tom Wilson and himself had the snow storm not come up at the time they had planned to go and locate Johnny's ledge. Even if the boom did not continue for long, or even if they had not sold the mine for a million dollars, it is likely they would have had a fair stake to divide three ways.

When Bev is telling of early days in the vicinity of Hunter Ranch, he mentions how numerous the Desert Bighorned Sheep were. He tells of a time when he, his son Roy, and the Indian Johnny Hunter were in the Tin Mountain area watching a large band of all rams — both young and old — as they were on their way to water. Bev states that he feels safe in estimating the band to be around one hundred in number, and adds that he realizes this is difficult for inexperienced persons to believe, especially at the present time when for perhaps many reasons, the sheep have been greatly reduced in numbers.

While the three were watching these sheep they evidently suspected that man was somewhere in the vicinity, for they stopped, all facing the direction of the water. After quite some time had passed and one young ram was standing a short distance in advance of the others, one of the old rams came from behind, and hitting the young ram in the rear knocked him an unbelievable distance in the direction of the water. With the young ram then standing where the old one had knocked him, another old ram — or perhaps the same one — would knock the young fellow as far as he could, and again this was the guide in distance for their next advance. After a time they became frightened enough to whirl and take off.

Down through the many years that Bev has lived in the desert areas he feels that he has reason to believe that the eagles do get some of the Bighorn lambs. He also has reason to believe that often one or more eagles may be seen flying away from a sheep carcass that it had not killed, but had died from some other cause. The one thing we do know beyond questioning is: that the band of rams estimated to be at one



Bev Hunter at his log cabin in Hunter Mountain area. Photo by Lester Reed.

hundred in number had accumulated where the eagles, the coyote, the bobcat, the fox, and the American Indian had been for no one knows how many centuries before white-man interfered.

During the time — no one knows how many centuries — that the American Indian and the so-called predators lived together in the desert areas, before white-man's interference, I believe we would be more than safe in saying no such criminal atrocities were ever imposed such as that which recently occurred at Santa Barbara Island off the coast of Southern California. We read of more than one hundred sea lions and other species of wildlife being slaughtered apparently for no reason only to wantonly kill. In addition we read of National Park Service installations being destroyed on the island. I wonder if any other nation in the world is plagued with such acts from what we call humanity? Such acts are among those of which I always think when I hear mention of "loving" all humanity.



