John H. Lubken

by Jane Fisher

I remember a man who seemed as big and full of energy and authority as Triton, whose voice at a whisper crossed an auditorium and in normal conversation stilled the birds outside, and whose heart and warmth were equally overwhelming. So was his independent disposition.

Everything about John Lubken was larger than average -- his features, his voice, his determination, and his generosity. There was always a silver dollar for the piggy bank when he came to our house with my dad, Earl Hurlbut, and the other Inyo County Supervisors. There was always time for community service, despite that even in his late sixties he still did much of his own ranch work. When he was Chancellor Commander of the Knights of Pythias Lodge, he gave a turkey dinner for members which turned into an annual event, and eventually included members of the Masonic Order as well. In 1945, for instance, 110 pounds of dressed turkey was prepared for about 120 men, according to the "Intake," a DWP periodical.

"My mother came from near Berlin, Germany to Placerville in 1866. She came to this valley in 1869," Lubken wrote for the pioneer family publication Saga of Inyo County. "My father came to the valley in 1862. He came to New York from Germany and then went on to Australia during the gold boom. He came back to New York then by way of the Isthmus of Panama to this valley. That was long before the Panama Canal was built. He married my mother in 1875 when she was 19."

Best told in his own words, his account of his life continues, "My father homesteaded on George's Creek, then traded the homestead for a share of the Lone Pine Brewery, built by Louis Munsinger before the earthquake of 1872. John Myers, known as Hans Myers, bought Louis out and eventually my father traded his ranch for Myers interest and owned the whole thing. The malt mill in back of the brewery was a horse drawn mill. The horse would keep going as long as the barley hopper was full. Lone Pine Beer tasted a lot like Miller's High Life; it was the same kind of beer. When it got so he couldn't make a profit and he stopped brewing in 1894. After my father died, my mother sold the brewery to Skinner, who tore down the building.

"There were lots of ranches here then. They raised all their food and had everything they needed, winter and summer. When I was a little boy I pulled weeds. I pulled since I was four years old and could tell the difference between weeds and vegetables. Sometimes I would hide because it was too hot to work. I would get in the shade and my Grandmama would come along and say, 'You cussed little fellow, you are lazy. You don't do nothing.' My mother always was good to me and she would save me from a licking when my Grandmama wanted to give me one.

I started milking cows when I was nine years old. I never tasted ice cream until I was about sixteen years old. I had one dish at Levi's in Independence and didn't have any more

until I was grown. I was set to work and that's all I did was work. I could lift a 180 pound sack of potatoes onto a wagon when I was fifteen. My father would go along with four or five kegs of beer and take it up to Cerro Gordo. He made beer and every two days he would take 240 gallons and send it all up to the miners. He made lots of money. There were four saloons in Keeler and one at Swansea.

The farmers raised all kinds of vegetables, corn, potatoes, barley, and wheat. There was the Bell Mill on Oak Creek and another on Bishop Creek run by Kilpatricks. They made the flour and the housewives made the bread. There was an old bakery in Lone Pine that made bread in big pans, like milk pans, and sold it for 25 cents a loaf. When I was only ten, my Grandmama, my brother, and I would sell vegetables. My brother died when he was thirteen.

They also raised a lot of draft horses here. They were heavy horses that could pull, weighing sixteen to eighteen hundred pounds. They hitched 18 to 20 of them to the big stake bed wagons and hauled groceries to Mojave. It took from eight to ten days to make the trip.

People decided to run a boat across Owens Lake to help get the lumber from the mill high up in Cottonwood Canyon. They made lumber there and sent it down in a flume. Sometimes it would get stuck in the flume and stack high up in the air, and they would have to call the mill to shut off the water so they would fix it up again. Down at Owens Lake where the creek comes in, there was a dock running out in the lake to deep water. They would transfer the lumber to the boat and take it to Swansea. Swansea was then a thriving town, something like Lone Pine, with people scattered all along there. There was a pier coming from Swansea running far out into the lake, from there the lumber was taken to Cerro Gordo.

Cerro Gordo was a big mine, rich in silver and lead, with a lot of men, mostly Cornishmen. I have seen gold stacked high on the tables where they were gambling. They would play until one of the men won all the stack or until dark, sometimes all night.

There were six stores in Lone Pine and three in Independence. There were two in Keeler, owned by men who sold and traded dynamite. There were two mercantile stores in Darwin, and one saloon. John Burkhardt was a watchmaker in Lone Pine, and Bill Vaughn was a tailor. Shoemaker Pete made shoes and boots. I remember him making my father seven pairs of boots; he was the only who could fit him. After Pete died, my father got them in Independence but they weren't so good.

I went to school in a little school building where the Town Hall is now," John wrote in 1976. "Elisa Carrasco is the only one living who went to school with me. My wife taught school in a two-story building where the elementary school is now, and she planted the big tree, which still stands in the school yard.

I bought the ranch from my mother cheap. She was going to sell it to George Shoey for $12,000. It was a hell of a place, all willows. I asked her if she would sell it to me for

$12,000 and she said, 'If you have the money, I'll take it.' I told her to never mind the money, but to be in Independence the next morning and we would fix it up.

She said, 'Alright, but remember I have to have the money!' She never knew what money I had; I gave her my check for $3,000 and paid her all the rest in cash. I had $9,000 drawing interest.

I was a rancher most of my life. After I went to business college, I came home and went into the cattle game and made my living out of cattle. I ran about 500 head all the time, mixed whiteface and Durham. I would run six years whiteface and three years Durham. One year I got 33 cents for them on foot; had 97 steers. One time Spainhower and I were coming down the mountain with the cattle. It was hot, real hot, and he said, 'By golly it sure is hot and by jings I'm going to pray the sky will be covered tonight so it will be cool tomorrow.' I don't know whether he prayed or not, but that sky was covered from one end to the other. It was cool and the cattle traveled like hell, a five mile trip, too. And about an hour after we got into the field, the sun came out!

The white men sold whiskey. They would take half a barrel of whiskey and fill it up with water and throw in four plugs of chewing tobacco. People liked it, thought it was pure whiskey, but I knew it was tobacco because my folks made sauerkraut from cabbage they raised and they used to get the barrels to put it in."

How could a man such as this not become a legend? He is said to have driven himself to the pub for his daily breakfast of a man-sized steak washed down with a generous draft of spirits, for years after he probably should have depended on someone else to drive. The ranch dogs -- all named "Dog" -- came along in the back of his pickup and caused him a problem from time to time, in their excessive eagerness to defend the vehicle. One story has it that he engaged another driver in a collision on his way to breakfast, and was extremely indignant because "everybody knows I drive this street every morning at this hour and they should know enough to stay out of the way!"

Many were the stories inspired and exaggerated by John's reputation for fierce independence. The "Intake" called him friendly and hospitable, a true descendant of those hardy Americans who developed the Owens Valley. Typical of long-time residents, John believed that a man's word is as good as his bond and that a friend is a friend, come hell and high water.

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