

MANZANAR

by Henry S. (Tom) Smith

People came and went at Manzanar; like the old timers, the Sheperds, from 1870 to the break-up of their large cattle ranches. Apparently, in the overall period 1900 to 1920, they came in from Tonapah and Goldfield, down from Washington's apple country, and up from Whittier, where they were neighbors. Before 1900 it had been referred to as Francis and, I believe, Thebe.

Romeo Ashur Wilder, who was from the Central City - Grand Island, Nebraska area, came down from Washington about 1900 and suggested the Spanish name "Manzanar" (apple grove) for the locality. R. A. Wilder was an excellent husbandman (farmer), and provided a good income for his wife, Elsie, and later, a daughter. Manzanar was started with about 500 acres of apples, peaches and pears. At one time there were probably 2500 to 4,000 acres under cultivation, much in alfalfa. There were drains all over the place, which had required miles of trench with inverted tile buried, to drain off the water. The latter was usually turned into pasture areas.

I had occasion to attend the Big Pine grammar school in 1914, for but ten school days (where we were informed the Redwoods were the oldest living things). Jim Butler, from Goldfield-Tonapah, had been a discoverer (a prospector there) and had sold his claims, and now ran the Butler Hotel at Big Pine. In the sanitary facilities there were signs: "Don't forget to pull the chain, Los Angeles needs the water."

Following these ten school days, I transferred to Manzanar School for another few days in the spring of 1914. It was a new school then. I don't think there were more than 35 pupils at the Manzanar School, except in 1914 and 1915. In 1914, the surveyed roads were laid out and graded. Before that, they traveled in all directions. We drank from any of the various creeks, without worry about pollution. I didn't know the word. It was so quiet at Manzanar, at times, that one could watch for the "Slim Princess" leaving Owenyo and note the plume of vapor when the whistle was sounded. It seemed a couple of minutes before the sound arrived (it was probably 40 seconds). I doubt if there are any recordings of the sounds of the Slim Princess, the Keeler to Mina "fast express." I still remember the sounds of this true "rattler."

In 1914-1916, the Hatfields were running the general store and post office at Manzanar. Later, they sold out to the Robert Bandhauers. There was a sign (billboard) near Hatfield's Store and P.O., with the legend: "Manzanar, where the big red apples grow." Families I remember at Manzanar were: a Mr. Myers (who came over from the Goldfield area and bought an orchard across the road, east of the R. A. Wilder place), the Newbys (north, towards Independence - the two girls rode horseback to school), the Grahams (near the Wilders), the Hatfields and Daphne Hatfield, the Laceys (south of the Wilders), the Strohmeiers (the girls were in 1st grade in 1914 - they now live in Independence), the Jess Hessians (they attended the Independence Methodist Church occasionally), the Cornelius girls (Armenta and Viola), the Lafons (I knew Sam and his sister), Charlie Bevis (also came over from Tonapah), a man they called "Bee" Smith who was in the honey business, and Mr. Butterfield who hauled the mail from Manzanar Station, using two mules. I think he was a bachelor.

About that time, it was cheaper to ship 35-pound or 50-pound boxes of apples to the Goldfield-Tonapah area, by parcel post than by freight or express, because the airline distance was the basis for parcel post charges.

In 1916, I attended the Manzanar School again from mid-January to the end of the school year. That summer I hoed out many a weed for the R. A. Wilders. They raised corn midst the apples. Only one room of the school was used in 1916, and Miss Nordyke was the teacher. Ruth Gladys Wilder was born in 1916. When Ruth's approaching birth was eminent, R. A. arranged for a private car to transport his wife over the Southern Pacific, from Owenyo to Los Angeles. The trip was without incident and Ruth arrived "on schedule", as did the private car.

Manzanar and George's Creek were never classed as towns. They were localities. There was a school at George's creek. I never attended, but on a visit, we found the kids during the noon hour, fishing. They wrapped their trout in burlap and left them in the creek until time to go home.

It is surprising how many of the Valley residents now are unaware of the ranches and farms on the East side of the valley, from Lone Pine Station towards Big Pine. An examination of an old U.S.G.S. map will confirm this. Indeed, no buildings are shown, in 1905, over around Manzanar, but a few are shown near the Reward Mine. A tour of the area over that way will show a large abandoned ditch which had been used for irrigation water. I remember the collapsing ranch barns over near the Reward School, which was on the south side of the road between Manzanar Station and the Reward Mine (also called Eclipse Mine). I remember the dried-out alfalfa fields over there that seemed to survive, unirrigated. In 1915-1916 the winter was very wet, so that might have helped. The Reward School used a very large Geography Book, showing Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory. Apparently, in those days, places were abandoned and were not often va-dalized.

The Wilders had a good team. "Mollie" and "Joe", and occasionally he borrowed a horse, "Major", from a ranch east of Owenyo. When my family, (except my father who was in Colton), used the Wilder buggy to go from our "shack" (it was!) near the center of Manzanar to Owenyo, in late August of 1916, Major did the honors, pulling the buggy. My mother tied him to a nearby telegraph pole, as my brother and sister and I unloaded. A few moments later, the Owens Valley "Passenger" Locomotive came chuffing along to couple up, and Major headed for his home, with the buggy quickly turning to kindling as the dust flew. Jim Wilder was Romeo's brother, and Jim was a Southern Pacific employee in those days, at Owenyo. He would use the company "velocipede" from Owenyo to Manzanar Station and I occasionally drove the buggy to the station (about dark) and got him. At the time, he was getting acquainted with his sister-in-law's (Elsie's) neice, Mabel, whom he later married. Mabel was a teacher at Independence for many years.

In 1919, 1920, and 1921, I worked for the Wilders as a farm hand, in vacation time (or after graduation from Colton High School in 1921). It was about this time that "Stub" Lydston arrived in Manzanar from Whittier. He lived, with his family, across the road from the Wilders. There was even an Earl, from England, (they called him Lord Paget). Johnny Rotharmel managed the Earl's 100 or so acres. One summer about 1919, Jim Wilder, Johnny Rotharmel, Romeo Wilder and I were getting in some hay for the stock, and Paget, who was on a visit from England, volunteered to help. As I remember, he speared a gopher snake and was quite upset. Johnny Rotharmel later married one of the Manzanar teachers, a Miss Merkel.

In 1921, the Wilder's home, a frame structure, burned to the ground. It was replaced with a cement block structure. I helped make many of these, in a small, handworked mold.

In the various visits I made to the Manzanar area, I encountered new faces and missed old ones. I don't know when the Manzanar picnics got started, probably in the teens. After "The City" dried up the area, the Manzanar picnics were held in southern California, at or near Downey, and other points. I attended one in 1938, which may have been one of the last.