

## MAX SKINNER

As told to Clarice Uhlmeier, by Max, in 1940

The Joseph Skinner family came west by train from Missouri in 1880. After looking around the country, they first settled in Bridgeport. The following year four families with a twelve horse, an eight horse, a six horse and a two horse team and wagons crossed the Sonora Pass into the San Joaquin Valley. They were looking for a new location. None of them liked the San Joaquin so they started to return to Bridgeport. The Sonora Pass was closed because of snow, so they went south and crossed the Walker Pass, thus coming into the Owens Valley. Of the four families, the Skinners were the only ones who liked this location, so they stayed. The other three families returned to Bridgeport. Max Skinner was thirteen years old at the time the family took residence in Lone Pine. That was in 1882.



Joseph Skinner rented the McCall place on Tuttle Creek for two years, then went into teaming. He and John Shober had a contract to deliver charcoal to Darwin and Modoc for the furnaces. They collected wood in the nearby hills, burned it into charcoal and hauled it to the mines. Regular kilns were not used. The wood was piled, thatched over with browse, then small bows, then covered with dirt and burned.

Modoc was a thriving mining town on the western side of the Panamint Valley. The mines there were owned by the father of William Randolph Hearst. After its one big boom it became a ghost town, and nothing has remained of it for over half a century.

Burning charcoal for the mines was a very important industry at that time. In Wild Rose Canyon alone, there were twelve or more kilns. These were large and constructed of rock, so still remain.

The ones on Owens Lake were made of adobe, and time and vandals have deteriorated them. At one time there were four furnaces running at Darwin. They were: the New Coso, the Cuervo, the Papoose, and the Defiance. All other mining towns had many furnaces also, so that a great quantity of charcoal was needed for heat to smelt the ore. Max drove teams for his father for many years, the size of the teams varying from ten to sixteen horses. During these years he had many harrowing experiences. Once in mid-August he ran out of water. He was hauling pipe from Panamint, up Shepard Canyon, into Darwin, for a nine mile pipe line. He was due in late afternoon, but it was not until the next morning that he reached his destination. Another time, in deep snow, he almost went off the grade. Twice, on one trip, his wagons turned crossways of the canyon, the road was so icy. The road out of Keeler used to go straight south, up the bottom of a canyon. At this time "Sidey" (short for Sidewinder) McLean was with Max. They looked up ahead of them and saw a wall of water coming down the canyon. They barely got themselves and their horses onto the side of the hill. Had they been a little further up, they could not have escaped the flood as the walls of the canyon were straight up and down. Max said that these things were "all in a day's work", and soon forgotten.

Beverige was a rich gold-mining town east of Lone Pine, about three miles down the west slope of the White Mountains. Max says he remembers as many as 100 mills, loaded on pack mules on the streets of Lone Pine, headed for that town. Although rich, the mines soon gave out and Beverige was short-lived. He also related that Cerro Gordo was the richest lead-silver mine in the world. At one time, Nadeau, who was the head of the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company, had as many as 200 teams running

between Cerro Gordo and Wilmington, each team having between twelve and eighteen mules. He ran this freighting outfit for about ten years.

Max Skinner was one of the last of the "Mule Skinners" who had driven the twenty-mule-team Borax freight wagons. In 1892, he drove one of these teams from Searles to Mojave. He said it was the easiest job he ever had, teaming. The round trip was made in eight days. Unlike the freight wagons of Nadeau's history, the Borax drivers and teams made the complete trip - not changing wagons and working over a short strip of road all the time, as the others did. He had one helper called the "swamper." The swamper rode horseback and went ahead of the wagons to clean stables and start supper at the stations. At only one station was there a keeper. This was called the "Summit Garden Station," because the keeper had a garden and orchard. John Searles, the original locator of Trona, was Skinner's boss. Max said that Mr. Searles was one of the most interesting people he had ever met. He was self-educated, but could talk intelligently on any subject. He had traveled all over the west, and had a splendid library. At one time he had been a bear hunter. As a result of this, he wore a plate in his jaw, having once been mauled by a bear.

Max Skinner recalled many interesting pioneers. Among others was John Shober who came into the valley across the mountains on foot, carrying on his back a whipsaw. He was an expert with this implement and was paid five dollars a board as soon as the board hit the ground for every one he could saw out of Pinon Pine. Another pioneer was Horace Bellas who lived at Haiwee. Because he blamed the Indians for killing his brother, he killed several when he found them alone. Once, he had his gun pointed at a man, with his finger on the trigger, when the man turned and it was one of his best friends, a noted person in Owens Valley history, Allie McGee. When Bellas saw who he had nearly shot, he exclaimed, "My God, Allie, I pert near got yuh." This was the end of his killing. Later, he talked a stranger out of killing a man for stealing his burros. He said, "Brother, them days have passed. We can't do it that way any more."

Stealing was an unforgivable crime, and justice was often meted out on the spot. Let a man in need ask for help and he was given it immediately, but let him steal and he often paid with his life. Such was the case with Crowen and Randall, who had some horses stolen from them. They caught up with the thieves and returned to town with the outlaws strapped on the horses. Their only remark was, "We found the horses and two dead outlaws." They were taken at their word and nothing was done. This manner of justice was common in the frontier districts.

Max could string yarns by the hour. He told of the man who was hanged, in Skidoo. Word was sent to the Sheriff, but, knowing it would take time for him to get there, the hanged man was cut down. Then word came through that the sheriff was on his way, and would arrive in Skidoo shortly, so the hanged man was strung up again.

Another story was one told him by "Spanish Joe." Joe said that at one time he went to Death Valley. At the ranch an old woman was sitting in a rocking chair. She was so still, and didn't move for so long, that he kept looking at her. Finally some one said, "You needn't be afraid of her. She's dead." She had been lost on the salt marsh, had died and become mummified ... He didn't say how long they kept her sitting in the rocker.



Harriet Skinner –  
One of the original "Harvey Girls"

In later years, Max went into business with Silas Reynolds in a General Merchandise Store. They did well and expanded to Darwin. Soon, they divided the business, and Max took the Lone Pine Store, while Silas took the Darwin Store. (Max's place of business was the house occupied at this writing by La Florista. He said it was one of the oldest and best-built buildings in Lone Pine). He was also Justice of the Peace for many terms.

In the early nineties, Max met Harriet Wilbert in Mojave. She was one of the original "Harvey Girls," working as a waitress in the Harvey House Restaurant, there. These waitresses were very attractive in their long black skirts, and starched white shirtwaists. Harriet and Max were married in 1896. They had three children. Catherine, Mary and William.

Postscript: Max and Harriet have many grandchildren, great-grand-children and great-great-grandchildren, many of whom live in this area. Max died in 1941. Harriet lived until the early seventies, dying at the advanced age of ninety four.