

THE OLIVAS FAMIL

As told by Ethel and Henry Olivas to B. C. Dawson

My name is Henry Lester Olivas. People call me Leakey Olivas. That's short for Enrique which is Spanish for Henry.



Henry Lester (Leakey) Olivas
(Photo courtesy of Leilauni Holtz)

My grandfather was Frank Olivas. He was born around 1830 and died around 1910. He came from the northern part of Sonora in 1885 with my father, Carmen and Carmen's brother Joe. The Apaches ran them out of Mexico; Frank rode a horse and the boys rode burros. They came first to Los Angeles, and shortly after to Inyo County, finally settling in Lone Pine where he was a packer and miner.

My father was Carmen Olivas. He was born in 1869 and died in 1939. He was a freight packer to the mines - groceries and lumber, rails, machinery, explosives, drinking water to the dry mines. He packed to Beveridge, Keynot, McElvoy Canyon, Cerro Gordo, Burgess, Hunter Canyon, the Bunker Hill Mine at the north end of Saline Valley, Louis Camp on the Kern River, etc. He packed tourists in later years in the summer. He packed highgrade ore and piñon firewood out. I started going on packing trips with him when I was six years old. He quit packing in 1930.

Around 1912 my father homesteaded over near Lone Pine Peak. That's up Whitney Portal Road to where the sheep crossing is, on Lone Pine Creek. A road takes off to the left with 3 ranches on it. The one at the end of the road was ours. We had 85 acres, with potatoes and fruit trees. We irrigated from natural springs on the place.

In 1916 he packed salt to the last sheep camp in the Sierras. This sheep outfit left the sheep too long, up around Rock Creek Lakes, and they got snowed in. We went in with a pack train to get them out. We had to go thru 3 feet of snow. Each mule carried two bales of hay. Next morning we drove the mules out first and the snow was packed down enough so the sheep could follow. We came out over Diaz Pass.

A woman named Kate Wells owned the Burgess Mine, on the summit of New York Butte. Around 1917 we packed highgrade ore out for her to the Lone Pine Railroad Station. Kate came along with a shotgun to make sure nobody stole it.

A couple years later Kate Wells was loading timber on mules at the Burgess Mine, with a miner named Smalley. One mule whirled and the timber caught Kate on the side of the head, breaking her neck. My father packed the body to the salt tram station at the crest and the tram took it to Swansea.

I was born Sept. 19, 1905 in Lone Pine. I have been a packer, a cowboy and cattle rancher all my life. I was six when I went with my father on a packing trip to the top of Whitney from the west side.

I was 18 when my mother - Petra Diaz, died. She was only 42. That was in 1923. In 1924 I drove cattle into Monache Meadows and in 1925 I worked for John Lubken. In the 1920's we drove cattle many times, up and down Cottonwood Canyon to Templeton Meadows, Ramshaw, Little Whitney, Big Whitney, Mulkey Meadows, Horseshoe Meadows. Now we drive mostly over Olancho Pass from Sage Flat to Summit Meadows.

Around 1912 to 1923 my father had a man cut piñon firewood above Swansea. We ran trains of 8 to 10 mules at the time and we figured about 5 mules to a cord. When we didn't pack out highgrade ore, we would pack out this wood on return trips. This wood was in 4 foot lengths and it was my job on school weekends to saw this up into stove lengths. As I usually had other plans, you can guess what I thought of all this. For all this work we got sixteen dollars a cord.

In 1937 I joined the Teamsters Union, so I could wrangle for the movie companies, making films around Lone Pine. I also did tourist packing for deer hunters and fishermen and furnished saddle horses, teams, and pack mules for the movies. These deer hunting parties went as high as 6 packers, 40 mules and 30 horses to a party.

For the movies, I wrangled anything they had. This was all off-camera as I did not join the Screen Actors Guild. In 1949 I drove a 4-horse team from Lone Pine to Death Valley, for the series, "Death Valley Days." I also drove a 20-mule-team outfit when the script called for one.

At Monache, where we ran some cattle, I built a large log cabin in 1938, and later on two smaller ones. Our brand was PO. We sent in half a dozen combinations of family initials with our application for a brand, and PO was what we got, but only for use on the ribs, as somebody else had the brand for the flank.

The following information is by Leilauni Holtz

[One of the last of the 20 mule team drivers of this area, Leaky Olivas, 76, of Lone Pine, CA, passed away March 28 at Southern Inyo Hospital. Leaky was born Sept 19, 1905 in Lone Pine. He is survived by his wife, Ethel; three children, Joe Ruiz, Margaret Terry and Charlotte Olson all of Lone Pine; a brother Pete, of Lone Pine; 5 sisters, Pauline Parker and Margaret Wilson both of Lone Pine, Carmelita Southey, Independence, Louise Woods and Carrie Gill of Los Angeles and Christine Foster of Lucerne Valley; four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.



Leaky worked with Russ Spainhower and Bruce Morgan in organizing and training the 20 mule team for the 1949 centennial trek from Lone Pine to Death Valley in October of 1949. He drove the team on the trek, and on later appearances of that team elsewhere in California and Nevada. Last Memorial Weekend he worked with local packers in training a 20 mule team that hauled the 99 year old Borax wagons in Mule Day

events at Bishop. Leaky knew how to rig the team, repair the equipment, and train mules to work the equipment.



He had been active in the packing industry in the days when there was an Olivas Pack Station, founded by his Dad in Lone Pine. He had worked with the movie industry as a wrangler in promotion of westerns filmed in the Inyo-Mono, and furnished horses and other livestock for scores of movies.

Besides his own livestock interests, he had worked for Spainhower, Lubken, Lacey and other cattle operations in Southern Inyo.]