Up in Our Country

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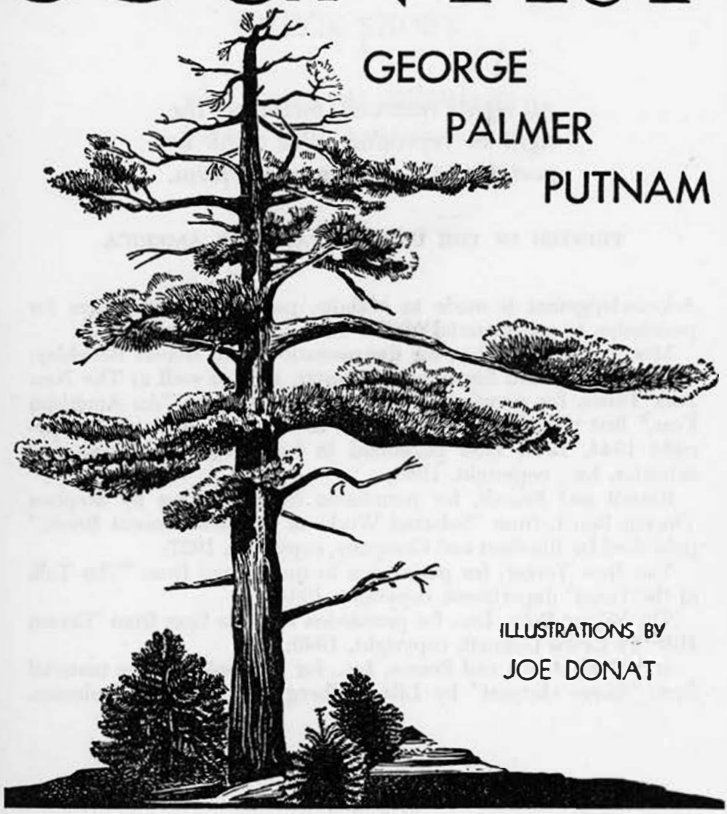

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JOE DONAT

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XVI. Picture Country

Wherever in America you happen to live, often you have seen our country—on the motion-picture screen. Though as it has been presented under various labels such as Afghanistan, Utah, the Himalayas, Africa, the Andes, or sundry choice slices of the lawless lands west of the Pecos, you would not be recognizing it.

Few locales in the West are more often used for actual movie making than the region around Lone Pine. The grotesquely rounded red rocks of the Alabama Hills, their sandy wastes, sheer cliffs, and eerie

defiles, the backdrop of the Sierra and its photogenic slopes have witnessed all kinds of goings-on in *Gunga Din,* the *Bengal Lancers, Stage Coach,* the *Light Brigade, Union Pacific, The Westerner, Wanderer of the Wasteland,* and a score of Hopalong Cassidy and similar guntotin' dramas.

Right up on our road to Whitney Portal *High Sierra* had its share of lethal thrills, with Humphrey Bogart's dead-pan techniques not much affected by the extreme altitudes. Others in the local celluloid repertoire, of a modern vintage, were *Three Godfathers, Yellow Skies,* and *Tycoon.*

The rounded rocks of the Alabamas still cherish, I am sure, memories of the spring days when Rita Hayworth, complete with those famous curves and silhouettes, gallivanted about the local landscape patronizing various aspects of *The Loves of Carmen.* It was poor weather for outdoor loving. That week winter came back for a last fling, and it was necessary to dust the snow off the rocks when the silken-clad Carmen reclined. Rita caught quite a cold and the shooting schedule was knocked askew.

It isn't just screen stars that decorate our countryside. It produces most anything on four legs an assistant director might need—bucking horses, colts, calves, longhorn steers, and massive Brahman cattle, gray and

dun-colored, with their characteristic hunchbacks. Willis Cline, brother of Charlie Cline the sheriff, specializes in such on his ranch tucked in among the Alabamas. His variegated stock, if not enlivening some nearby picture sequence, is forever trundling off in trucks to work in the rodeos that have become as much a part of Western community life as Chambers of Commerce, or as Chautauquas used to be in horse-and-buggy days back East.

It was about 1920 that the first movie makers chose Owens Valley for their location. Mary Pickford herself furnished the initial thrill to the neighboring town of Independence. And guess who graced the original Lone Pine picture, complete with redskins and frontier trimmings? No other than Fatty Arbuckle.

All of which makes the community reasonably picture-conscious. A dozen times a year visiting movie companies tax to capacity the pleasant Dow Hotel, a sixty-five-room hostelry which Walter Dow had the foresight to provide in a hamlet which had less than a thousand population when he built it.

You're apt to stumble across a star in any taproom, and the adroit facilities of Russell Spainhower are taxed to supply horses, food in the field, and extras of any sort desired, but mostly in the cowboy and pioneer tradition. Then, too, on his home ranch Russell main-

tains a hacienda of sorts, very camera-wise, which has been made to look like a dozen different places in a dozen different pictures.

Even infants often earn an honest dollar. One of the babies carried by a plodding pioneer mother in the picture of *Brigham Young* was the one-year-old son of my doctor friend, Howard Dueker. The child's first birth fell on Tuesday. The man in charge of casting postponed using this particular extra until Wednesday. The day wage of a one-year-old is eleven dollars; on Monday, aged *under* one year, he would have rated twenty-five dollars.

Russell Spainhower, as I've indicated, is the local maestro of the movies, and many a famous story has revolved around his horses, his hacienda, and his wranglers.

But a tale of the Spainhower home that's not been told, holds more true pathos than most fabricated screen plays. It's about the deaf and dumb Indian who worked for Russ for twenty-five years. He came near being a part of the family. Certainly he was irreplaceable, in these or any days.

Mrs. Spainhower was sad that afternoon when we, who had not heard how the man had been struck and killed by an automobile a few days before, stopped at her ranch in the Valley to gather Snow-on-the-

Mountain plants she'd said we could have for our high garden.

For all those years Rollin Naylor, who was mostly but not all Indian, occupied a little room out behind the tank house. That was his hogan. It was all Indian, and less cleanly than it might have been. In the Spainhower house Deefy, as folks in town called him—though he never heard his name, was immaculate. He washed dishes thoroughly, and wiped them as well as any white woman. Deefy's weakness was firewater. Every payday some rascal would cash his check and help him get whiskey. Law or no law, that had gone on for a quarter of a century. Sometimes he would stagger home and try to help the women with the chores, like milking the two cows. Between drunks he was exemplary.

Even if he had not been dumb, Deefy would have been silent, in the way of Indians. Like all his people, he had a quality of stubborn perseverance. Among the memories of him is the matter of the Johnson grass, a pesky weed almost impossible to eradicate, particularly in this dry climate where the roots come up again.

Mrs. Spainhower showed Deefy a clump of Johnson grass and asked him to dig it out. A couple of hours later, not having seen him, she remembered about it and investigated. In a corner of the garden where the

pestiferous grass grew, the Indian's head and shoulders were all that showed above the ground as he worked in the hole he had dug that far. He intended to get the last of those roots if he had to follow them to China.

When Deefy was killed they gave him a white man's service and then turned the body over to the Indians. One of Deefy's sons, a soldier with fine ribbons of battle service on him, was home on leave and he took charge. It required all day to dig a grave on the rocky hillside of the Indian burial ground and there Deefy was left to join his fathers who likely were happy enough in the Valley before white men and firewater and dishes to be washed ever were heard of.

In Deefy's room they found many scraps torn from newspapers and magazine pages. Each was an advertisement of a wrist-watch. For years, evidently, Deefy had wanted a watch. But he never got money enough ahead to buy one, thanks to the liquor sellers. The old kitchen clock the Spainhowers had given him occupied the place of honor among his few possessions.

"If we'd only known," lamented Mrs. Spainhower, "of course Russell and I would have got a wrist-watch for him."

Indians don't tell what they want. Even the soldier son knew nothing of his father's yearning. He had, said the soldier, brought eight watches back from

Normandy, mostly, no doubt, found on Germans who had no further use for watches. And every one of the eight the boy had given away.

The soldier son had sent his father his Purple Heart. Deefy was very proud of that. Often he would show it to ranch guests of an evening when he would be sitting beside the lamp with the newspapers, for he loved to read.

The Purple Heart they found with Deefy's little bundle of wrist-watch advertisements. It went back to the boy.