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Up in Our Country

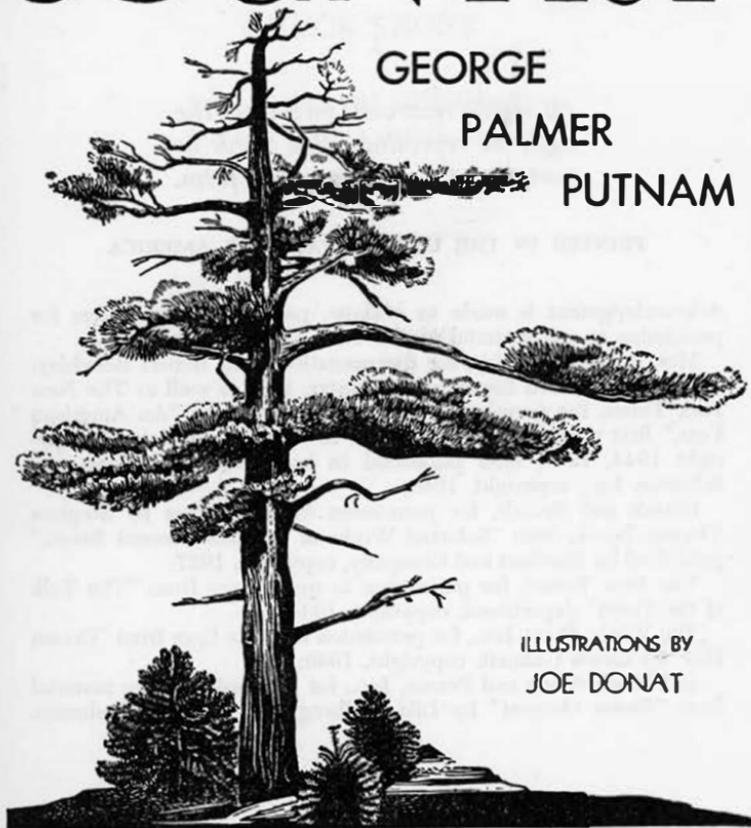
GEORGE PALMER PUTNAM

UP IN OUR COUNTRY

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PALMER

PUTNAM



ILLUSTRATIONS BY

JOE DONAT

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X. Buried Treasure

John Lubken is one who can remember the Lone Pine. Seventy years ago he was a youngster almost within sight of where it stood.

John is a cattleman, a county supervisor, a bulwark of the community when bulwarking sometimes was rough business. His father, a German immigrant, built a little brewery at Lone Pine in 1869, when every commodity from "the outside" was freighted in by wagon two hundred miles from Los Angeles, then a

scrawny pueblo, or came a longer way from San Francisco, already the metropolis of all this western land.

Old John, weather-beaten as an ancient Joshua tree, his face the color of good tanned leather, is a link between a robust past and the comparative civic meekness of today.

Not that our remote world is without its color. Ranchers like John graze their cattle each winter on the desert, or feed them alfalfa on the home ranches brought beneath the fruitful magic of the irrigation ditches. Each summer the herds are driven up the dusty trails to the mountain meadows, just as cattlemen have done since the early longhorns came in 1870.

When John and I meet on Lone Pine's main street, we sometimes sit ourselves down on the curb to pass the time of day.

"When was it you took your first cattle up to Monatchee Meadows?" I asked, knowing John was just back from the mountain drive.

John's memory is sharp as a Sierra skyline. "In '89 I was there," he said. "But it was '99 before I trailed my first bunch of critters up."

"In sixty years there've been plenty changes?"

"Plenty. About all that stays the same is the critters. And the mountains. Though," John added, "it's a lot different up there now what with campers thick as

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fleas on a houn' dog and grazing permits and regulations an' fees an' taxes an' God knows what every time you slip a saddle on a hoss."

I suggest the years might have brought some improvements, too. John thought that was possible.

"What with autos and the slick highways we can get to Los Angeles in four hours now," he ruminated. "Used to take us four days with horses. Hard driving, too. But at that" . . . he added slowly . . . "I'm uncertain if getting that much closer to the City is an improvement!"

Anyway, today cattlemen, like old John and his good neighbor Russ Spainhower and many another, prosper. The prospectors of the Cosos, the Panamints and Inyos are as optimistic as ever, the Indians as numerous, the Sierra as high, Death Valley as hot, the snows as deep, the deserts as dry.

Life is more docile, but there are incidents. For instance, our own house and some other isolated dwellings were robbed. A posse finally surrounded the robber—who had a score of different kinds of shoes, including high-heeled ladies' footwear, to confuse trackers—in a rocky hideout not far from the Portal. He was told to come out keeping his hands in the air. He came, but with a gun, and promptly was shot between the eyes by a Forest Ranger.

The Lubken ranch is a dozen miles from us, down

the Valley between the southern outcropping of the Alabama Hills and the lower slopes of the Sierra.

Shadowing the houses are three massive cottonwood trees, exactly as old as Mrs. Lubken. For she was born in 1876 and the tree slips were brought that year from Missouri when the woman who then owned the ranch journeyed back to the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia.

Mrs. Lubken came to Owens Valley as a school-teacher. Following a standard Western pattern, she married a rancher.

"Only John wasn't ranching then. He was a cattleman," she will explain. "I was raised on a ranch and hated ranches. I learned to teach school so that I'd get clear of 'em."

She sighed, while her rancher husband regarded her with twinkling eyes that looked like lapis-lazuli beneath his hat's broad brim.

"And then John bought this place and here I've been ever since. Thirty years *ranching!*"

At that, this ranch of theirs seems to be just about what such a one should be—if you aren't too set on being a teacher. There are alfalfa fields and grazing land, orchards, grapes, horses, cattle, sheep, turkeys, bees, and, when labor is to be had, a kitchen garden and flowers, too.

Plastered precariously beneath the Lubken roof

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eave beside the front door is the mud nest of a swift.

I had seen that nest in action and asked Mrs. Lubken to tell the story to Peg.

"The swifts came in June," our hostess explained. "They built their nests around the outbuildings, all but this one. Swifts, you know, make a tremendous racket, chattering from daylight to dark. That is, all except the couple who moved in beside the door. That pair and the youngsters they hatched never even chirped. They were on their good behavior. The rest of the tribe sat over there"—she pointed to a wire stretched between two trees, some twenty feet away—"squawking their heads off. Who's that fellow who specializes in tall tales?"

"Ripley?" I suggested.

She nodded. "Well, it's one for him. When the eggs hatched, the picket line of birds on the wire acted as if the new family were a community enterprise. They took turns feeding the fledglings in the lone nest. At least twenty of them lent a hand."

"A beak," John rumbled.

"And never made a sound and the baby birds didn't either. A queer going-on for loud-mouthed swifts, that was."

When we'd call at the ranch in succeeding summers it was evident that the civility carried over from one generation of swifts to the next. Actually, on my own

last visit there seemed to be a variation in the swifts' technocracy. The whole group seemed satisfied to have simply the single nest. Apparently they'd created their own housing shortage, though with laziness as the only obvious reason. The nest by the door was the only one. Mrs. Lubken said the moment one family moved out another lady swift moved in and at once laid her eggs. She thought at least six families had been served by the single maternity ward, though it was hard to see how the reproductive schedules could be so cunningly arranged.

Nature, as well as man, is violent at times in our country. There were earthquakes early in 1946; but, dwarfing all subsequent cloudbursts, blizzards, and winds, the superlative in natural rough stuff was the earthquake of 1872. That killed twenty-nine people at Lone Pine, opened chasms, changed the course of the Owens River, swallowed cattle, and produced some cherished stories.

One classic was about Mrs. George Burkhardt, great-grandmother of the same Irv Burkhardt who the other day loaned me five gallons of gasoline from his oil truck when *Petunia* inconsiderately went dry right in the middle of Main Street.

It was John Lubken who told me the story, the quake having knocked the gable off his father's brewery. It also knocked down the Burkhardt home next

door, a house built of adobe. John's father and George Burkhardt could hear the screams of Mrs. Burkhardt emerging from beneath the rubble. But no sound came from the boy Fred who they knew was buried there too.

"Hell!" cried Burkhardt, Sr., "the Old Lady's screaming, so she's all right. Let her lay. We'll get the boy first."

They dug out young Fred, pretty well suffocated, and revived him.

Then they exhumed his mother. She was undamaged, but considerably riled, having heard what her husband had said.

"For the rest of his life," John observed, "old man Burkhardt never lived that down."

I reminded John of that gem of contemporary description of the earthquake, a brief obituary that records, with delicacy, the passing of a lady of less virtue than a saint. It adorned the *Inyo Independent* of April 6, 1872: "Lucy Blank and two Frenchmen, names unknown, were found all dead in the same room."

Up in our country, mining is always apt to nudge into any conversation. Gold is a hard word to keep away from.

The week before John's visit a character had come

up the hill to see us. He was working some claims over in the Panamints. When we'd had a bottle of beer on the terrace our visitor mentioned he just happened to have some samples in his car. Would I like to see them?

They were marvelous bits of rock. Heavy, and crusted with yellow gold. Tiny nuggets bugged right out of them. The loveliest, richest specimens you could imagine.

Our guest just happened (it's always that way) to have an assay report in his wallet. He fished it out. It was as amazing as his samples, showing better than \$70,000 a ton.

"Picture gold," said John.

That's what they call those showpieces.

"Remember how they looked?"

Peg and I described the two odd-shaped pieces, which were quite clear in our minds. We recalled how tenderly their owner replaced them in the worn doeskin pokes.

John grinned. "Yeah. I know 'em. They've been passed around for twenty years. Wonderful rich bits like that turn up once in a while, fused together like they've been melted. You find 'em in little fissures especially over in that Death Valley country where everything's been churned up."

I remembered then about the specimens of picture

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gold that are supposed to be buried beside our own house—eight hunks of ore, two of them almost massive nuggets, the others flecked with raw gold.

It was Helen Gunn who told us the story. Those lures, as she recalled, were used in diverse promotions, and even for the fun of it by Death Valley Scotty himself in the days when he was building the story of his mysterious desert mine, and making suckers of the gullible.

Some of the picture gold belonged to Helen Gunn herself. Any one of the eight pieces, she assured us, could have launched a gold rush.

They were given by Helen and other friends, to Father Crowley, the Desert Padre who started what became our home after his death in an automobile accident in 1939. The Padre planned to use the ore as decoration in the walls. While the house was building the golden rocks lay around, tempting souvenirs for the acquisitive. Helen urged the Father to safeguard the stuff, and he agreed to hide it. One day he told Helen he had done that.

"I buried it beneath a tree," he said. "I'll fix up a diagram so we can't lose it."

A few days later he was dead, with no record left of where he cached the small treasure.

"One day when I hear about you promoting a mine," John chuckled, "I'll know you dug under the

right tree. It reminds me," he continued, "of Old Man Atkins. And Queen Victoria."

The story started about the turn of the century, when Old Man Atkins ranched with a partner southeasterly from town. They sold a herd of cattle for \$4,000 in gold. Aftermath of the resulting celebration, and on a dark night, the \$4,000 was buried beneath a tree. The tree was near the bridge on the old Keeler road, which is quite a piece north of the present road. Soon thereafter the partner of Old Man Atkins disappeared. Atkins started out to find the buried money, but couldn't rightly remember which tree it was buried under.

So he started digging under every tree. It's a considerable job to turn over all the earth beneath a grove of good-sized trees. Old Man Atkins kept at it. After a bit he never did anything else but dig, every day, from daylight to dark. At the end of eleven years of digging, they had him committed to the Poor Farm.

"And what about Queen Victoria?" I asked.

"Oh, Atkins was English. He wrote a letter to Queen Victoria asking her to help him. He got an answer, too, though there wasn't much she could do."

Old Man Atkins died in the Poor House.

"Eleven years of digging!" said Peg. "Poor man."

Then John told us the second chapter.

"That was a long time ago, and I forget their

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names," John said, "but two Indians had a dream. The same night they dreamed the same dream. In the dream they saw under just which tree the \$4,000 was buried. So they went to work. After two days' digging, they were deep down right under the roots of a big cottonwood. Then suddenly there was a puff of wind, the roots gave way, and the tree fell. It fell right on the Indians. One of them was killed. The other left the country."

Later, we heard about the Indian's death from other sources, too. That's how it happened.

"There wasn't any money at all, I suppose," said Peg presently.

"Perhaps Atkin's partner got away with it," I observed.

"I don't know," said John. "It would have showed where he dug. There weren't any signs."

"How about the Indian who went away?"

John eyed us speculatively. "I dunno." Then he added, "A long time later I heard he'd bought a band of horses over in Nevada. And after a bit he got himself killed."

At five o'clock, though there was still much talk to be exercised, Mrs. Lubken said they'd better go.

"It's getting late, John. We ought to be back at the ranch."

John has a rumbling bass voice that starts near

that broad belt which clings precariously to his ample mid-region, with no help at all from hips slender in the architectural fashion of men who ride much.

John looked at our ship's clock set between walrus tusks above the granite fireplace.

"Sit down," he stated firmly in that booming voice. "Sit down. We'll go at six."

They did. We wished they'd stayed longer.