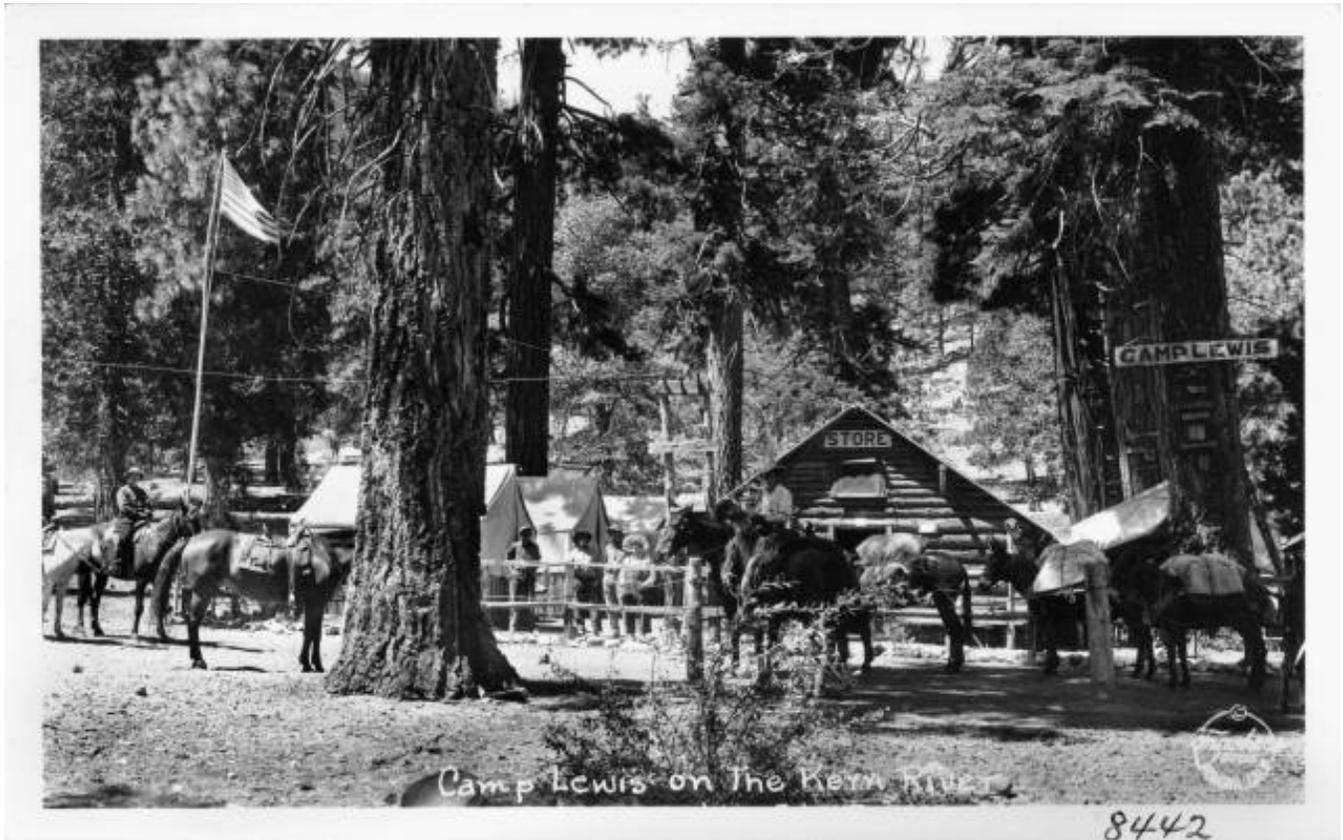


Lewis Camp

(From the March 1969 issue of *Los Tulares*)

By Henry M. Brown

“to hold a pack upon a packsaddle against a gale
is no high industry, but it serves to occupy and compose
the mind.” -- *Travels With a Donkey*.



Lewis Camp on the Kern River

The story of Lewis Camp begins in 1861 with the building of the Hockett trail connecting Visalia and Lone Pine. This trail crossed the Kern River at Kern Flat, about 12 air miles below Lewis Camp.

In December, 1867, a large rock slide at a narrow place in the canyon formed Kern Lake and Little Kern Lake. The slide had come down opposite one of the large "Kern buttes" that were formed by the glaciers and are characteristic of that part of the canyon. Another butte formed the barrier between Little Lake and Dig Lake. Big Lake was about one mile long and one half mile wide, and with the river flowing through it, made a fisherman's paradise.

Two miles upstream at Lewis Camp, with Coyote Creek on the west, and Golden Trout Creek on the east, added small stream fishing. These, with considerable useable land and some naturally irrigated pastures, were the basic resources of the area. The main obstacles to its use were the abrupt walls of the canyon, approximately 2000 feet above the Lewis Camp elevation of 6500 feet.

The people of Lone Pine came down the Golden Trout trail to what they called "the fishing grounds", and by 1875 Dick Runkle had a pasture and a small store. In keeping with early mountain custom, his wife was said to have been Indian. He made several dugout boats (we don't know his ancestry, but the French Canadians and voyageurs specialized in dugouts - pirogues). He put several fish traps in the river at the head of the lake and kept his fish in a holding pond. Weekly he went to Lone Pine with 300 to 400 pounds of fish which sold for 50c per pound.

Runkle filed on 160 acres of land in 1889. In 1891 he died and the property went to E. H. Edwards. Edwards leased the camp to different people and in 1898 to John D. Lewis after whom it was named, though to the Owens Valley people it was still called the Runkle Place. The old Lewis cabin may still be seen in a thick pine grove. Edwards had a cattle ranch and the general store in Lone Pine. Lewis, a lawyer and brother-in-law of Edwards, worked at the Reward Mine.

Lewis operated the camp until 1912 at which time Jules Conterno came to help. Conterno was a graduate of Annapolis and an engineer. He was a fluent talker and a controversial promoter of the Keynote Mine. He purchased Lewis' equipment in 1916 and the land in 1926 for \$8000. The name was changed to Camp Conterno. 1926 was also the year that the upper Kern basin became a part of Sequoia Park.



Original Kern River bridge near Lewis Camp

Conterno launched an improvement program which included a small water-powered sawmill on Coyote Creek. The remains of the mill can still be seen. Further improvements included the development of soda and iron springs, a log store covered with slabs from the sawmill, a dining room and outlying cabins built of vertical slabs of cedar bark to a height of four feet and in summer covered with canvas tops. All buildings had dirt floors.

By far the most ambitious project was Conterno's bridge, built of cable and split cedar, it was in two spans, supported in the middle by a large boulder in the river. Unbelievably shaky, it still served to get pack mules across the river. Packers said they would creep across. About 1940 a steel suspension bridge was built a half-mile downstream by the Forest and Park services. This made the old bridge a beautiful relic, fun to fish from. About 1954 the Park service demolished the old bridge as a hazard. My cabin nearby is roofed with floorboards from it. Conterno's bridge replaced an earlier one, which was a large tree felled across the same boulder in the river.



New Kern River bridge

Conterno and his wife Mae obviously enjoyed the mountains as much as their guests did. He had his own golf driving range to indulge that hobby, and later a riding ring was added. In 1928 an agent for Sequoia Park offered the Conternos \$10,000 for the camp and all their land west of the river. They accepted this offer, reserving a life tenancy in the property. The Park Service moved in and built the present ranger station that year. Thirty acres of unimproved land along the east bank of the river, mostly manzanita and rattlesnakes, remained in private ownership.

Conterno died in 1943 and Mrs. Conterno offered the 30 acre parcel to my uncle, Ben Fish. No agreement was reached and the following year Mrs. Conterno died. The land went to her brother, Dwight Johnson, who again offered the property to Ban Fish. In 1946 Ben took title on behalf of himself, Frank McGowan, Hugh Weldon and myself.

In 1947 I rode in with Ben and we built a stove and started an irrigation system. Other improvements followed gradually on a volunteer basis.

The story of Fred Goble was linked with the Kern. A native of Tulare, he rode in with older brothers in 1893. Occasional trips followed and in 1923, with family and friends, including his pal Bill Keefe, it was decided the outing should be an annual affair. I was lucky enough to be present on their last trip in 1963, which was Fred's seventieth anniversary in the Kern.

My uncle, Ben Fish (1888-1968), a native of Carpinteria, was an unpredictable and colorful person who felt at home in the Kern. Long active in the Sierra Club, and with an endless supply of stories, he was my main source of mountain lore.

In 1909 he made a forced march from Carpinteria to Visalia with a team and cart to join friends bound for the mountains. They had gone on ahead of schedule, so he visited his college chum Cary Demaree on the Demaree peach farm. After resting his horses he went into the Kern canyon via Mineral King. The first camp was at Big Lake, and from there he ranged to Mt. Whitney and Giant Forest, leading his pack horse. The other had been eliminated with a broken leg. During this time he lived mainly on hardtack which he borrowed (begged) from the army troops and the tour ended when both he and his horse were out of shoes. Like Fred Goble, he eventually made the Kern trip an annual affair with family and friends.

Dr. Philip Buckman of Exeter, son of Clem (One Arm) Buckman who freighted supplies to Mineral King in mining times, started working as a packer for Phil Davis' pack station at Mineral King. In the 1920's they packed many noted people into the Park. The Station was under Buckman's management in the 1930's and Ike Livermore was one of his packers. Livermore later was a noted packer at Independence.

Phil's cousin, Ray Buckman, took over the pack station in 1938 and also the concession at Lewis Camp. From then 'til its closing he kept operators at the camp and kept the store supplied. (The pack stations are a story in themselves.)

Guests at the camp would ride or hike from Lone Pine - 30 miles of trail, Mineral King - 24 miles, or Quaking Aspen - 28 miles, which would make this the most remote resort in this area. After a day of hiking or fishing guests and neighboring campers would gather at the campfire for a visit. The group would often include packers, trail workers and other mountain people of long standing.

Jack Neelis operated the camp in 1947 with his mother and an attractive young lady from an eastern ski resort, in charge. He would commute on occasional weekends from his job in San Francisco. He did this by flying to Lone Pine, catching the plane to Tunnel landing strip, and then hiking nine miles to camp. On one of these visits he brought a teenage boy from the city to help the ladies. The afternoon after his arrival, the boy came into camp with the news that he had been bitten by a rattlesnake. Neelis called Lone Pine and soon Bob White flew over and dropped an anti-venom kit which landed high in a tree. While trying to devise a way to retrieve the serum. Neelis also wondered how a snakebite could cause slashes over half an inch long in the boy's boot.

It developed that the boy was already tired of the mountains and this was his way of revealing it. The following morning he was given breakfast and pointed toward Mineral King. The camp was still in a state of mild shock when I arrived the following day.

The difficulties of running the camp for an occasional hiker proved too much and the Neelis family didn't return in 1948. Instead the Winter family from Indio kept the camp for the next few years, operating in the casual manner appropriate to the surroundings. If the camp wasn't profitable, it was still a good excuse to spend the summers away from Indio. When they left, the commercial phase of Lewis Camp ended.

Big Lake in modern times has been closed to fishing. The Department of Fish and Game has set it aside as a natural spawning ground for trout. From there they work their way upstream with no formidable obstacles for twenty miles. A hundred years after forming, there are still two small lakes but Big Lake is gradually filling in and the cottonwoods and grass are moving in from the edges. A busy colony of beaver make it a jumble of fallen trees.



L/R (standing): Tony Brown, Henry Brown, Jean Goble Hagerman, Steven Brown

L/R (seated): Fred Goble, Bill Keefe

1963 Henry Brown photo

[NOTE: This photo is on the wall in the Kern River Ranger Station]