

Allen Matlick History

By Carol Stephens

Allen (Al) Matlick (b.8-31-1848 in Preston Co., VA—d.6-19-1936 in Bishop, Inyo Co., CA) married Wilhemina (Minnie) Sereta Clauson (b.8-7-1857) November 27, 1879, Thanksgiving Day, in Benton, California. Rev. F.M. Willis of the Methodist Church officiated.

Born in Virginia, Allen Matlick moved to Missouri with the rest of his family in 1865. Working on his parent's farm in Clark County he always felt a responsibility for their care. But, as a maturing young man, he grew restless.

At the end of the year in 1870, at the age of 22, he had \$75.00 in cash, his horse and his saddle. He thought there must be a better way. Taking the \$75.00, his horse and saddle—all his worldly possessions—he rode to Kahoka, Missouri, where he sold them for \$75.00, which gave him \$150.00 total. With this, he bought his train ticket to Montana.

In November 1871, he went to Nevada and worked for a year in the silver mines. In 1873, he moved on to California where he got a teamster job with B. F. Tade driving a freight wagon over what Al referred to as “the old Aurora trail.” This route was the Aurora and Owens River Wagon Road established by the Nevada Territorial Legislature February 20, 1864. Over this toll road a wagon with two animals could pass for a fee of \$1.00. Empty teams returning got a bargain at half price. A carriage with one animal was 75¢ with each additional animal, as well as saddle animals costing 25¢. Aurora became an overnight boomtown when gold was discovered in 1860. In 1864 there were 6000 people and 10,000 a few years later. It was the largest town in the area until 1875.

When Aurora began to decline, it went fast. Gold bonanzas had been genuine but shallow. By the 1870's, when Al was freighting along the trail, the glory of Aurora was fading. For years after, Aurora was a magnificent ghost town, intact except for some frame buildings, but later the blocks of buildings were razed for their bricks.

Freight was shipped to Mojave, Kern County, California by wagon trains and then taken to other parts on huge freight wagons, sometimes taking as many as 18 horses to pull the loaded wagons over the mountain passes. According to an unidentified newspaper clipping, Al freighted goods and provisions “between Bishop creek country and Carson City, Nevada.” He had two wagons, one for freight and the other to carry several barrels of water to serve horse and driver from one water hole to the next and feed for his 16 horses, of which there were eight in a hitch. He was on the freight route for eight years. It is uncertain, but he may have been working for the Cerro Gordo Freighting company, based in Mojave, California.

His travels took him through Bishop in the beautiful Owens Valley. It captivated Al from the moment he first saw it. Its crystal clear streams and soft green valleys are fringed on the east by the White Mountains, home of the ancient Bristlecone Pines, the oldest of these trees being over 4,700 years old. The “Patriarch,” the world's largest Bristlecone Pine, measures 36 feet 8 inches around its trunk and is 1,500 years old. On the west are the High Sierras with Mt. Whitney, the highest point in the conterminous United States. At an altitude of 14,494 feet, Mt. Whitney is capped with snow year round.

There were Paiute Indians living along the Owens River and Bishop Creek. They were a friendly people and few incidents of friction occurred between them and the white settlers who invaded their land before 1860. Trouble began in 1861 when a cowhand shot a starving Indian who was “stealing” a cow he found grazing in his pinyon pines hunting area. The Indians retaliated by killing a white settler—and the war was on. By May, the Indians, being more numerous than the settlers, controlled the Valley. Miners prospecting the hills and the settlers and cattlemen were terrified and pleaded with the U.S. Army for help.

In March, 1862, a small volunteer detachment under Col. George S. Evans came into the Valley. In June, a well-equipped force of 200 men from the Second Cavalry California Volunteers, came from Los Angeles. It was a difficult fight. The Indians protected their homeland with knowledge about the terrain. It was particularly tough on the soldiers, who did not have time to build housing and had to live in caves dug in the walls of a large ravine.

In May 1863, the Paiutes’ “Chief George” asked for a truce. Nine hundred Indians walked wearily into camp under a white flag. They were then rounded up and taken by force from Owens Valley to San Sebastian, near Fort Tejon. Peace seemed to come to the Valley. Many more settlers came in and mining activities increased. The post (Camp Independence) was abandoned since the Army felt the war was over, but some of the Indians did not like the restricted life of the reservation and returned to their homes in Owens Valley.

The Indians became restless when many more people moved into their homeland. They killed Mary McQuire and her son, Johnny, at Haiwee Meadows, where there was a small way station, which the Indians burned. The settlers at Lone Pine then massacred some 40 Paiute men, women and children and destroyed their meager winter food supply. The Army then sent in three companies of infantry and one of cavalry to show their force. The remaining Indians were compelled to give up their struggle.

After peace came to Owens Valley, the Indians lived and worked in the Valley, held their Pine-Nut festivals and became active members of the community.

About 58 miles south of Bishop the largest earthquake in California’s recorded history shook the town of Lone Pine on March 26, 1872 at 2:30 a.m. It measured 8.3 on the Richter scale. Twenty-seven people died. Lone Pine suffered the most damage because the majority of buildings were just blocks of dried mud piled on top of each other and plastered with more mud, which toppled over on top of the sleeping residents. West of Lone Pine the earthquake produced a “scarp,” a sharp slope 20 feet in depth.

Al Meets His Bride-to-Be and Settles in Bishop, California

Al stopped to change horses northwest of Bishop in Benton, California. At the Benton Hotel, he met Minnie Clausen (also spelled Clauson). Her parents originally came from Germany to work in the gold mines of Aurora, Nevada and later owned the hotel in Benton. Minnie’s father and her uncle, Peter Clausen, built one of the first houses erected in San Francisco, California. Minnie had 2 sisters: Jennie Clausen and Matilda (Tillie) Clausen. There could have been other children.

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Jennie Clausen married Will Engles. Jennie and her husband had one son, Will Engles. They lived in Goldfield, Nevada. Now another ghost town, Goldfield once boasted a population of 30,000 where lots sold for \$45,000 in 1906. The town's most famous saloon, Tex Richard's Northern, had a bar so long 80 tenders were necessary. By 1922 Goldfield had joined the ranks of the has-beens.

Matilda (Tillie) Clausen married Mr. Couch. (First name not available.) Tillie later lived with Al and Minnie. Al carefully saved his money and was finally able to buy 320 acres on Bishop Creek in Owens Valley in 1877 and settled on the site in 1879. The original land deed reads:

"The State of California hereby grants to the said Allen Matlick and to his heirs and assigns forever, the said tracts of lands, located as afore said, and which are known and described as follows, to wit: The West half of Section Thirty-six <36> in Township Six <6> South, Range, Thirty-Two <32> East Mount Diablo Meridian, containing Three Hundred and Twenty <320> acres, (I can't make this out), with all the privilege and appointment appertaining and belonging. To have and to hold the afore granted premises to the said Allen Matlick and to his heirs and assigns, to him and their use and behoof forever."

Al also brought in Dugan and Russell's first trout. In a newspaper column from 1915, Al was quoted as saying, "I started with 200 of those trout, but they all died except 40 odd. Traveling in barrels of water carried for the horses did not agree with them. Oh yes, teaming agreed with me well enough. When the dusk came, there I camped and slept. I had all the desert." The article went on to say, "[Mr. Matlick] has in pasture 115 acres and has 38 milk cows (probably Durham cattle)...He finishes up about 50 head of beef creatures annually. This year he will have about 60 head ready for the butcher. He has a fine bunch of sheep, black-faced, long-wooled and running to mutton sufficiently to cut up well. He markets about 50 head of hogs, handling the Poland/China. His 80 clean, well-trimmed apple trees are cultivated about once in two weeks and carefully sprayed as necessary in season. They originally cost \$1.00 each and are 88 years old. There is an apricot tree on the place [planted about 1895] already so loaded with 'cots that they are beginning to stay the limbs with wires. It is 20 years old, and Charlie Matlick declares it is the biggest apricot tree in Inyo County."

After Al and Minnie were married they built a small house with a room on the second floor. Here they had six children: Alvin, Samuel, Harry, Edward, Charles and Mable.

Al was a good farmer and a good manager. He purchased an additional 160 acres in Bishop. Soon he had cattle and owned 600 acres of pasture land in the Upper Meadows for a summer range north of Bishop near Benton. He had the first creamery in the Valley and made butter and cheese to ship south to Los Angeles, California and north to Reno, Nevada. Later he added a slaughterhouse and supplied meat to the stores in the Valley. Across the road from the house there were beautiful apple and peach orchards.

In 1893, they built a beautiful mid-west style two-story house. There was a huge fireplace in the dining room and another in a bedroom upstairs. It had five bedrooms but none of the five boys were allowed to sleep in the house. They stayed in the old house, which was then a bunkhouse for the hired

men. Many years later when Al's oldest son, Alvin, became ill and came back to the ranch to live, he refused to sleep in the house. For a while, he slept in the barn until his sister, Mable, had her washroom turned into a bedroom for him.

In 1908, Al succeeded in talking his youngest brother, Samuel, into moving his family to Bishop. They were followed in 1909 by Al's nephew, Charles, and his family.

Five years earlier, in 1904, Los Angeles began using the water of the Owens River for its needs. By 1907 the first portion of the aqueduct was completed. In spite of this the Valley still produced corn, wheat, potatoes, alfalfa and grapes a decade later. But in 1921, Los Angeles was expanding rapidly, due partly to all the mining activity in this part of the country. If the city's growth was to continue, it would be necessary to acquire more water rights. A system of aqueducts had been planned to bring the water from Mono Lake, north of Bishop, to Los Angeles. The city started buying up land along the Owens River and Bishop Creek. A Los Angeles businessman, Fred Eaton, bought a sizable tract of land below Mono Lake in Long Valley with the intent to sell the land for a reservoir. Huge prices were being paid for land and the people got money mad—before they knew what was happening, Los Angeles owned most of the Owens Valley. One of Al's recalled a time when Los Angeles representatives were buying property. Hiding in the bushes outside the Matlick House she saw a group of men approach Al again about selling his ranch. He met them on the porch, shotgun in hand and said if they didn't get off his land he'd kill 'em. The little girl was so frightened she ran home to her mother and cried, "Grandpa has a gun and he's going to kill a bunch of men!" She doesn't recall what happened after that, but Al was successful in dissuading them. The Matlicks were one of the few families that were well-off enough that they did not sell-out to Los Angeles when the city bought the water rights in Mono and Inyo counties. Al originally paid \$10 an acre for his ranch and, in 1930, was quoted as saying he would not sell it for \$1,000 an acre. After his death, the farm was passed down to his children. Other families able to say no to L.A. were the Evans in the Round Y Valley, the Cashbaugh and the Barlow family.

Eventually, water was pumped into the aqueduct and the farms faded. In 1891 Owens Lake measured 15 miles long, 9 miles wide and was 50 feet deep. Though water levels had begun to drop before completion of the aqueduct, partly due to farming, by the 1940's Owen's Lake was drained completely dry. Today minerals are mined from the surface. It poses a health threat to those living to the north when the wind blows the white, alkaline dust up through the narrow Valley, and there has been talk of putting a small amount of water back into the lake.

Many people of the Owens Valley lost hope when their farming water was diverted, destroying their livelihood. Father Crowley, known as the Desert Padre, knew the land was beautiful and visitors would appreciate and enjoy its beauty. He rode up and down the entire length of the Valley on a burro encouraging the people of the Owens Valley to cater to tourists. The recreational opportunities in the lakes and streams for boating and fishing, the mountain slopes for skiing and the forest lands for summer resorts supplied revenue for the people.

Piece by piece the original Matlick Ranch has since been sold. Stores line what is now Highway 395 and the beautiful meadows have mostly been sold for housing. Two large trailer courts, owned by Al's grandchildren, are located on what was once part of the ranch, and the ranch house has been turned into a Bed and Breakfast on Highway 395 called The Matlick House. Nothing else is left of the ranch or its out-buildings.

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“The Matlick Ranch was home to me when I first went to California on February 17, 1934. At that time Aunt Minnie had passed away and their only daughter, Mable, had moved to the ranch to care for her father. Aunt Tillie Couch was also living there. I have only the fondest memories of Uncle Al and his hospitality.”—Marie Bowen Phillips

In 1996 only about 2% of the land along Highway 395 was still privately owned, the rest being owned by Los Angeles. Land prices were estimated from \$300,000 to \$400,000 an acre.

A man named John Nelson Matlick is buried at the Pioneer Cemetery in Bishop, California. There is a large cottonwood tree growing from the center of the grave. Reportedly, this John Nelson Matlick was not a blood relative of the Matlicks. He was a Native American man (probably Paiute) employed by Al on the ranch. It was sometimes the custom for Native Americans in this area to take the last name of their employer. Another Native American, a woman, was supposed to have taken the name Minnie Matlick.

Many of the trees in the Bishop area were planted by Al. He and Minnie were highly respected and were truly one of the pioneer families of the Owens Valley.

They are buried in the Pioneer Cemetery in Bishop, California.