



SAGE and TUMBLEWEED

By Inyokel

November 14, 1937

Inyokel had a few comments that gave the story behind the story of the event:

Highlights from the Mt. Whitney-Death Valley Highway dedication - Mrs. Bennett, clasping her two-year old daughter Melissa, to her heart, never ceased to pray during the long vigil in Death Valley in '49, and her cry upon the return of Manly was a fervent "Thanks be to God." Mrs. Patrick Breen recited her rosary and Litany for nine days at Donner Lake in 1847 while her husband endeavored to coax her to feed the children portions of the bodies of those who had died, a grim repast in which the rest of the party had already shared, but she would not consent. On the ninth day help came. On the Feast of the King of Kings Melissa Bennett's daughter and Mrs. Patrick Breen's great-granddaughter attended Mass on the lawn of the Padre's church. They had returned for the linking of the Sierra and desert. Another attendant was the Rev. Mr. E.W. Mecum, Baptist minister from Los Angeles, himself the son of one of the Jayhawker party, which parted from the Bennetts in Death Valley. A photographer for Life snapped pictures throughout the Mass ... Afterward he assembled many of the congregation who were dressed in old-fashioned costumes and posed them for a group ... Several were non-Catholics ... The altar steps were of travertine from Death Valley. As the Padre stood on them, he could look over the heads of the congregation at Mt. Whitney.

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The Padre drove Jose Arias and his Mexican orchestra up to Whitney Portal for the arrival of Jerry Emm, the Indian runner, with the water from Lake Tulainyo. The rapidly climbing road and the drop to Owens Valley had the customary effect on city visitors. "Padre, Padre, be careful." "This is nothing," replied our pastor. "I'll bet that if we had two more miles of this I could get the whole carload of you to go to Confession." "Si, Padre, con mucho gusto"...Jack Hopkins had provided a piece of burlap sacking for Russ Spainhower, who was to play the part of the Pony Express Rider, to wrap the gourd in to prevent injury in his ride. But at "Godspeed, Pony Express!" Russ got away so fast, with the gourd strung out straight behind him, that Jack was left standing open-mouthed. Bill Boyd, the movie cowboy, was afraid of slipping on the town pavement, hence would not carry the gourd on the last relay from Whitney into Lone Pine. Not so, Bert Johnson, son of the first man to climb Whitney. He clattered up to the bank like John Gilpin and Paul Revere rolled into one.

Sam Ball, the old desert rat who took the role of the burro man, resented the repeated posing and passing of the gourd for photographic purposes. He told the newsreel men that they were "making a damfool out of him" and that "all the boys are laughin' at me." The covered wagon was a bona fide prairie schooner, which was driven across the desert into Yolo County in 1849 by John Bremmerly. It has been on exhibit for years, but has not rolled on its own wheels for a generation. There was real pathos in the attempt of the old men of the Mecum and Doty group, sons of the original Fortyniners, to keep up with the spirited oxen as they plodded along on their tryst with the twenty-mule team. Neither the mules nor the oxen cared for each other's company, and did some haughty nose-lifting. The ox-tender confessed to a lump in his throat as he saw the muscles of the wheel mule ripple as he strained ahead at the signal. He was recalling that this was the last time the 20 mules will ever be assembled. Governor Merriam rode atop the stagecoach with Ollie Dearborn, old-time master of the reins. The Governor bore the rifle brought through Death Valley by Captain Doty of the Jayhawkers. From the loudspeaker a voice, "Buck Merriam rides again."

The Slim Princess, the proud passenger train of our hundred-and-sixteen-mile narrow gauge railroad from Nevada to Keeler, was fitted out as never before. And probably as never again. For these were not freight cars, and behind the two baggage cars and the coach were attached the official car, with iron bedsteads, tin bathtubs, and all. Jess Hession, deputy state attorney general, donned a brakeman's cap because he once held that post on this line, and tried to collect cash fares from the Governor, Fred Stewart, Chief Cato, and the rest. Scores rode on top of the cars for the six miles to Keeler, many of whom had never ridden on a train before. Lou Meyer,

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three-time winner at Indianapolis, seemed oblivious of the fact that the car carrying the gourd had arrived in California only the night before for a preview.

There was a genuine thrill in the hearing the click of the telegraph sounder as the President pressed the button at Hyde Park. The key he pressed was a nugget from the Mother Lode at Virginia City. At the instant, Captain Hardy, world-renowned sharpshooter, and two members of the Los Angeles sheriff's pistol team cut the ribbon with three bullets. The Los Angeles police band broke into the "Star Spangled Banner," and Josephine Breen clasped hands with Sidney Doty across the line of the fallen ribbon. Not all romance is dead. The water from the sky rose to the sky again from Panamint Dry Lake in the huge white plane that took it on the last leg of the journey, over Telescope Peak ... The lavender hush of twilight had fallen over Death Valley as the great bird swooped across the placid pool of Bad Water, and Ray Goodwin, Superintendent of the Monument, removed the stopper from the gourd and poured the waters of Tulainyo into the lowest lake in America. It descended as a gentle rain, a fitting "Wedding of the Waters." Jose Arias's players strummed "I Love You, California."

The yellow beacons instantly began to blaze on Dante's View, Telescope, Cerro Gordo, and Whitney, carrying the story back to Tulainyo. Inyo folk were happy at a job well done, a task that brought the county more publicity, says Will Chalfant in his Inyo Register "than any peaceful event in its history." The magazine Time, with its customary turn of phrase, said of the Wedding of the Waters that "the local citizenry hope that the offspring will be tourists." Here's hoping.