

# Lillian's Keeler

By Henry Raub

Keeler, an almost-ghost town, drowsing in the sunshine on the eastern shores of Owens Lake, surely must be one of the most unlikely places to abound with hot news for the press.

But when Lillian Larson Hilderman lived there and mailed her reports to Chalfant Press newspapers, the news did not have to be "hot" to be avidly read. Veteran fans opened the pages first to her column, naturally titled *KEELER* by Lillian Hilderman. Then they refolded the pages to scan Page 1.

It wasn't that the front page provided inferior reading. It was that Lillian wrote news unlike that known anywhere throughout the world of journalism.

Where can you pick up a newspaper and read **James Smith has a new set of choppers?** Or notice a society tidbit reporting that **Extra special sundaes were served to Mrs. Viola Race and Mrs. Osburn because one dislikes whipped cream and the other one specializes squirting people with it.**

As Keeler's self-appointed official in charge of weather reporting to the press, she might dispatch an item of interest mentioning that a strong north wind had blown all the tumbleweeds out of town into the desert. Then the next issue of the paper announces that a south wind had blown all the tumbleweeds back into town.

Where can you get news like that? The locals loved it, and big town travelers benefited from the contrast with the sensationalism of their metropolitan scandal sheets.

An understanding existed between correspondent Hilderman and Chalfant Press that her news items appear in the paper exactly as submitted. Editor Todd Watkins, it is said, notified the staff that not one jot nor one tittle of Hilderman's material was to be altered in any way. The Keeler scribe had fired in some critical remarks about tampering with her copy. Seemingly unavoidable typographical errors in her reports caused immediate response in the following news from Keeler.

**Last week's paper gave Glenda Coburn's name as Brenda.**

**The Murrells have been at Morning Star four months, not four years, and their daughter is Densie, not Denise.**

Then, as if Inyo County was proving to be no match for her, critic Hilderman, like a feminine David went after newspapers' Goliath, the prestigious *Los Angeles Times*.

**L.A. Times has its errors too. Feb. 3 Issue spelled Catholic as Cotholic ... Connie as Commie.**

But a hypocrite she was not because she even included herself.

**Error on my part listed Tommy Davidson as Tommy Fuller when eighth grade graduates were mentioned fast week.**

**First a correction on my part. Gary Fuller was eight years old on his birthday, not seven.**

Then along came a blockbuster in 1969 that brought the Keeler reporter bolt upright in her easy chair. *True West* magazine published a story about Keeler titled "How to Tame a Town" that was riddled with mistakes, as judged by Hilderman's memories. In no time the editor received 20 paragraphs from the Keeler reporter. Her printed story covered nineteen column inches of newspaper. Hilderman's article tore to pieces the magazine yarn about Deputy Marshall Dan Thomas with his trusty gun and holster cleaning up Keeler's community of 8,000 souls.

**Keeler was a cross section of other Inyo county towns, she wrote, and I along with many others did not know it required a cleanup.**

As for girls coming from Mojave, not required as **there were two and more at Lee's "Laundry" and one had a dugout room south end of Laws St., which we knew as "Bachelor's Row," there being a number of cabins.**

**Joe You spelled his name thusly and so pronounced. The cellar under his gambling room led by tunnel to Lee's "Laundry." Joe was not the storekeeper. Sam Kee Chan was owner and was registered as a voter, Sam Yuensang. The wife was Choy Foo, and daughter Rossie Foo, why I do not know.**

Critic Hilderman emphatically stated that Owens Lake bed was not dry in 1918, as stated in *True West*.

**I remember Thomas Isaacson complaining of lake water jumping over a 20 ft. vat wall and spoiling soda in vat which was ready to harvest.**

Other strange statements came under Lillian's fire such as, **Don't understand about Dan Judge receiving a direct phone call from Cerro Gordo as that was a private line ... I never heard of a man falling 400 feet at Cerro Gordo ... Why was Shepherd's Canyon affair listed as a part of Keeler? That goes for Ballarat, too ... Keeler population 8,000??? The great register of 1918 gives voters as 114, total of county 3106.**

**As for arrests, June 1918, Logan and Thomas arrested a man for insanity; June 29 Logan and McAfee made an arrest on a liquor charge, then Aug. 23 Dan made an arrest on a pro-German charge, ditto for Aug. 25. Four arrests for a year ... would you say town needed taming?**

Lillian Larson Hilderman was born May 18, 1886, in St. Peter, Minnesota. In 1909 she came to Independence to be the bride of Ludvig Linde, and to establish a homestead half a mile south of town. They had one son, Lawson. Lillian's husband was killed in WW 1. She moved to Keeler to become Postmaster in 1919 and to marry Harry Hilderman in 1929. Harry lived only four years more. Life held many sorrows for Lillian, and not the least of these was the death of her son and his wife and their younger son in an airplane crash.

Friends point out that she had great compassion for the sick and injured, and was the first to visit them with handmade gifts. She traveled in her car to bring cheer to people all the way between Bishop and Lone Pine.

Sick and injured dogs constantly received mention in her column. They seemed to be high on her list of friends.

**Friday several dogs decided hunting they would go, later in the afternoon they came back, mouths, jaws and feet covered with quills from rodent porcupine. Two dogs required help from veterinarian.**

**Last week Mr. and Mrs. Van Hoose went to Hunters Mt. and dog Gomer received a tick bite on inner ear causing an infection, hence Gomer had a week's stay at Bishop Veterinary Hospital.**

**Mrs. G. Hernandez and Mrs. Bessie Stark have used Dirty Sox pool several times through past week. Mrs. Stark did not bring her dog, as stated last week.**

**Sunday afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Earl Murphy, Diana, Susan and Gus, the police dog, called on me. If you don't think the dog counted, you can't realize the space he used in the Murphy's small car.**

Hilderman included other animals, if they made news, and even if they didn't.

**The Jim Merrills while at Ubehebe Mine have accumulated a number of animals, four goats, guinea hens, banti chickens and rabbits. They had two dogs, cats and chickens.**

**Of animal interest are the travels of Mrs. Suprenant's Dickie Bird who went with her in auto to Bend, Ore. After visit, daughter, Mrs. Joanis, took mother and bird to Reno, where bus would not take bird to Lone Pine. Back to Bend went poor bird, where it was expressed to Lone Pine. Now home, it is happy.**

Keeler plant life appealed to the writer for favorable publicity.

**Some towns may be in the red - just now Keeler is pink with the African Cedars (tamarisk) in bloom for Easter. Come and bring your color film.**

**It is noticed that sunflowers as grown here turn their heads with the sun while they are small but when larger, all face east.**

Hilderman made a big thing out of that boring old hat topic of the weather. It sounded like maybe there was more of it in Keeler than any place else.

**We thought spring slow in arriving, then on Wednesday a regular hot summer day, Thursday suddenly cold, no excuse for Friday's weather except opening for fishing was due. At 2 p.m. the biggest wind of many years began to show its strength by tearing large limbs from trees and the sign from Gandera's Grocery. Roofing paper and general litter of twigs, dried bushes, papers and**

**tin cans move with gusto. Neither of the mountain ranges could be seen. Through night snow fell on Inyos and Sierra. actually cold Sunday. At 3 p.m. a hail with rain. When I got home shortly before 8, highway had been posted with caution sign, sand covered part of road and diversion ditches from Inyo mountains and the Coso Range was white to foothills with clouds hovering east, south and west. Puddles of slush at Keeler and gauge registered a generous .40. Monday normal as usual.**

**Last Wednesday began with dark clouds overhead, wind and dust added to the dullness. Snow at 2:30. No power between 5 and 6 p.m. which meant no dinner, to many, also no light, no ice box, no radio. no heat, no iron, and so on, and if it keeps up no water, as tank empties rapidly.**

**Thunder and lightning Thursday a week ago caused a switch to Cerro Gordo mine to burn out. The fireworks were awesome.**

Hilderman observed with dread the sometimes reckless antics of the War Department's fly boys, competing overhead with nature for the attention of mankind in Keeler.

**Friday a plane or jet flew so low at 10 a.m. that 20 foot trees swayed as if there was a wind. That altitude is too low for residents' peace of mind.**

**Two thunderous booms 9:30 Friday as jets passed overhead.**

**A jet flew low at 11 a.m. Friday and broke the sound barrier, shook houses and people like a giant dynamite charge.**

And no obvious improvement at ground level, either.

**Atom bomb as set off In Nevada Friday seemed like an opening shot for Lone Pine Stampede.**

Lillian liked to report a distinctly more pleasing sound that came irregularly from the tracks of the old Carson & Colorado Railroad. Running just about as it pleased, the little narrow gauge steam locomotive came down from the north to the southern terminus of Keeler with the dusty, creaking swayback box, flat, cattle cars, gondolas and ancient open-end platform passenger car, used as a caboose. They were so old they retained their original archbar trucks with wooden beams, truss rods and queen post supports. Rumbling, thumping and swaying down the undulating, well-worn tracks, they faithfully followed the tiny Baldwin locomotive. With blowing of the steam whistle and ringing of the bell the engineer, probably Mr. Ferguson, adjusted the Johnson bar to bring his freight consist to a fine wheezy, screeching and clanking stop at the yards.

**Regular passenger went out on train Tuesday, ticket and everything.**

**After dark Friday, the whistle of engine was heard. Seems RR crew had been hauling for three days for northern points and overtime piled up, requiring a 10-hour rest. Agent Crieman after being gone over four months was recalled from Lone Pine and saw Keeler by night for the first time.**

**Engine No. 9 Monday puffed out with three gondolas of bulk talc and twelve closed box cars.**

**Several wondered at the shrill whistles made by train as it came in Monday. Later learned two of our small fly took their sweet time in crossing right of way. Thank you, Mr. Ferguson for being alert.**

Some of Mrs. Hilderman's news items prove that her touted healthful air at Keeler did not always guarantee perfect health.

**Mrs. 8. Dillard and Cheryl were ill with colds last week.**

**Mrs. 0. Hanger went to hospital at Lone Pine fast Wednesday, returning Saturday feeling much better.**

**Andy Pedneau fell out of bed Wednesday night. Doctor's attention received Thursday a.m.**

**Charles Withrow and Richard Osburn in playing football fast Wednesday had a mishap which places Ricky in hospital with bumped Adam's Apple.**

Of course, Hilderman's column came to the reader as a grand mix of news at Keeler as it occurred. A sample might be something like the following.

**Moths were everywhere for a while, but the new moon ... enticed them elsewhere. Since have come many scorpions and cinch bugs, and a few stray grasshoppers. Even the white cabbage butterflies are here. So far, no rattlesnakes, but Harvey McMorris and Frank Wasson saw a larger than usual chuck-a-walia near their mine in Saline Valley.**

**Mrs. Hilderman went to Bishop fast Monday.**

**A box of brass fittings and fixtures at one house, grew legs and walked off through Thursday night**

**A truck of about 20 tons of Saline Valley salt was unloaded here Tuesday. Via Lee Flats - which means about 65 miles back and forth.**

**All through this weekend I've been told, "No Keeler news fast week (in the paper)!" Certainly / know, but only two items were available.**

**A bulldozer went up Cerro Gordo hill on Friday.**

**Yes sir we are fully aware school began Thursday, September 9. Everything was so unearthly quiet.**

**Mrs. Frank Osburn brought me swiss chard from her garden Sunday.**

**Not to mention names, but three Keelerites were seen at Hawthome, Nevada, on New Year's Day.**

**It may not be carrying coals to Newcastle but fast week an Inyo county lady shipped a dog to Kansas. Kansas ships dogs to California, but, of course, not as good.**

**Bean dip, onion dip, shrimp dip are well known and enjoyed. Coming home from Independence Friday I noticed a Caution Dip.**

**Water pipes have been installed, cutoff valves and a few miniature red fire plugs installed. Last article should be appreciated by Pomeranians.**

As of yesterday, vagrant breezes roll tumbleweeds out of Keeler, and tomorrow they will be blown into town. Children have birthday parties and parents hold meetings. Sand blows over the highway while lightning flashes overhead and thunder echoes through the nearby hills. War Department's killer planes roar over Owens Lake and break the sound barrier to make the citizens cringe. The everlasting Sierra peaks cast their lengthening purple shadows across the nation's Deepest Valley as the golden sun sets slowly in the western sky.

In fading memories old timers see proud and fiesty Lillian Larson Hilderman return from Independence in her alkali-dusted, bluish mouse colored sedan, to emerge slowly at her modest Keeler home like a true lady leaving her chauffeur driven Pierce-Arrow limousine. Here was one of the truly great characters in Inyo's golden treasury of folk lore.

"She is gone now," wrote the late Ed Rosendorf, correspondent for the Inyo Independent, 'but her columns will always remain classics in the memory of the many who each week turned at once to read what was going on in Keeler, one of the most unlikely sources of news in Inyo county.

"For her news was like the air she breathed. The flight of a bird, the winds rustling the trees, the soda ash over the lake, the shifting sands, a strolling dog, all of these were duly recorded events. And of course there were the comings and goings of the people of Keeler to be dutifully chronicled and faithfully read by a most loyal clientele."

After a life distinguished by being wife, mother, nurse for Inyo's noted "Doc" Irving J. Wooden, Keeler's postmaster, Eastern Star's Past Worthy Matron, historian, compassionate friend of the sick, and Chalfant newspapers' famous correspondent at Keeler, Liffan Larson Hilderman left this life February 7, 1976, at age 89.