

Other Days at Aberdeen

By Raymond Steffen

Aberdeen 1915.

My dad, Peter Steffen, was born in France, came to the United States in 1878 at the age of three, and learned the machinist trade in Minnesota, becoming a journeyman for Southern Pacific Railroad in Los Angeles. My mother was born in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and was one of the best cooks in the world, I think. She made bread, biscuits, pies, and other bakery goods. After they were married, they came to Los Angeles, where they lived for 11 years until we came up to the Owens Valley to take up a homestead on the east side, by the red mountain.

We came by the railroad, the broadgauge line to Mojave, where we unloaded one broad-gauge car. It took three little narrow gauge cars to carry all of our, belongings to the Valley. There were six children - eight of us in the family.

Coming up the Valley, we could see the Owens Lake; the railroad ran right close to the lake and I asked my mother if that was an ocean. As we went a little farther, she pointed out Mt. Whitney to me. I recall, when we came through the stations, like Keeler for example, they locked the toilets because at that time, you could look through and see the ties.

When we arrived at Aberdeen Station, we had to unload everything and take it to the homestead, which was a mile north. We brought everything to build a house, as well as horses, cows, chickens, horseshoeing equipment, forge, anvil, vise, drill press and all the tools necessary for a blacksmith and millwright.

We hitched the team we brought with us, a bay named Babe and a white named Bob. We had to assemble the wagons and load our supplies with no outside help. Dad took the lumber, box car doors first, with the help of my brother Peter, ten years older than I. My brother Stanley, two years older than I, led the two milk cows, Tiny and Blackie, to the homestead where Dad quickly built a temporary shelter out of the boxcar doors.

My sister Irene (four years older than I) was outside when Mother called supper that first evening, and I said to her: "Let's run to the top of those White Mountains." The air was so clear one could reach out and touch them, beginning just out of the smoky Los Angeles city area.

It was May, raining and snowing, and those boxcar doors made a good shelter. In the morning we woke up to four inches of snow on the ground. Then Dad started to build the house and we dug a well, by hand. We made a tripod and used a horse to pull up the dirt.

We finally dug three wells on the ranch while we were there. Two were windmills, and we called one the big well; it was 6' x 8', 30' to water. Then we dug a 4'x4', 18' deep, using redwood 2 x 6s to make a round perforated hole. Then we put a centrifugal pump on the bottom and a Fairbanks Morris 15 horsepower engine on the top, with a belt on an angle to the pump. We'd start the engine on gasoline and switch to diesel. Dad made a landing ten feet down; we'd go down one ladder 45 degrees to the first landing, then walk around and go down on another landing with a ladder to the bottom of the well where the pump was. We'd turn that pump on and it would water twenty acres of alfalfa, corn, sudan grass, milo maize, corn flowers, trees and whatever we could plant at that time.

We were the only family on the east side of the river, about twenty miles from Independence and twenty miles from Big Pine, the closest places you could buy anything. But all the food, bedding, name it, Mother brought all the necessary items.

My mother would order groceries from Los Angeles, from Ralphs. When we were in Los Angeles, she always traded with Ralphs Grocery; I recall a Mr. Benedict was the clerk. So when we came to the Valley, my mother would send down orders to Ralphs and they would send it up on the train. We'd just go the mile to the station to get the groceries, and she would send them a check at the end of the month. Just try that today!

We bought coffee and lard in 25 pound cans; rice, oatmeal, and cornmeal in 50 pound sacks; salt 10 pounds at a time; beans, flour, and sugar in 100 pound bags; and bacon by the slab. We got Carnation condensed milk 48 cans to a case; cocoa in 10 pound cans; Royal baking powder, dry yeast in cakes which kept a long time; salt pork in 50 pound kegs; and pepper in 2 pound cans. Crackers came in big cartons about three feet long and 14" x 14" square. Fresh fruit was not sold in the stores, but you could buy it from the farmers or gardeners. We also bought our potatoes from the farmers. In season, we stocked our cellar for the winter.

When I was eight, Dad had invited some friends from L.A. up to go duck hunting - a Mr. Miller and a Mr. Blaheart. He was busy, so he told me to take them to a place we called Calvert's Lake where there were always ducks and cottontail rabbits. Mr. Miller took the east side and Mr. Blaheart and I took the west. Mr. Miller was maybe 75 feet from us when some ducks rose up and he let loose. I got three shotgun BBs in the neck, and Mr. Blaheart got a full charge that penetrated his leather coat. No one was hurt but me, so when I went home, my mother took the shots out of my neck. The next morning, Dad's friends went back on the train and he said, "No more of that."

One time I was working with Ben Tibbets, an Indian, in his garden by Taboose Creek. We were watering and I got hungry. He told me, "If you're hungry, dig right down here." And I dug down and ate taboose nuts until I didn't have any more hunger. I also remember Siguerons, who had a homestead about six miles south of ours, at the end of our trapline, so I'd stop by to see them. Those 25 pound pails were pretty good sized buckets with a good lid and Sigueron would seal toasted bread in these buckets, which kept it very well.

In the early days on the homestead, we used to hunt ducks. We'd wait until they bunched up so we'd at least get two with one shot. At that time cartridges and shells were expensive, so we'd wait until we got something for our money!

In the winter, we set out a trap line. It went six miles south and about six miles north, on the other side of the Valley. It was my job to go down and look the traps over and get what game was in the traps. I was pretty young and always had to find a rock or a railroad fence so I could get up on the horse; he was very tame. I would possibly bring back one or two coyotes or lynx cats, or a skunk - a civet cat at that time - and some badgers, but mainly coyotes. One time I was running to a set in the sagebrush, and a lynx was hiding behind the brush, caught in a trap. As I went by, he jumped out and tore my pants off with his claw and drew a little blood on my backside. The coyotes always brought in good money during WWI. In those days if we got \$18 to \$20 a hide, we were doing excellently. Fur was really in demand.

Our closest neighbor was two miles away, a Mr. Jones at that time. He took care of the aqueduct intake. We had another neighbor, Calvert, three miles away; both were on the west side of the river.

Dad and my brother Peter built the house. It didn't seem to take very long; then of course we built the cellars, a barn, blacksmith shop, garage, granary, chicken house and fences. We got willow wood and branches from the mountains and the river; we made posts and put two branches on the bottom and two on top between the posts. Then we stuck willows in between, making a fence.

We were out in the open, so we made windbreaks from willows and sagebrush on the same order, wiring limbs to posts and stuffing them full of sagebrush. Then, when we milked our cows, we got behind the windbreaks and kept out of the north winds, which were very cold.

When the wind would blow and the fine sand would pile up by the buildings, my dad used it to grind valves when he worked on motors. It did an excellent job. When the wind blew from the south and the Owens Lake started drying, the dust off the lake bottom would come up and even darken the skies, it was so black. The smell was terrible.

My father, brother, my sister Irene, who would work out in the fields the same as the men, and I put up hay on shares. A man by the name of Winterton grew wild hay in the slough fields halfway between Aberdeen and Independence, on the east side. At lunch time, Irene would start a bonfire and make our lunch.

We used to take cattle to market in Independence and Lone Pine. We'd have to sleep out at night on our saddle blankets. We had a little bedroll and a little lunch. We'd cook - usually potatoes and beans and bacon, and we'd probably be gone for three or four days. A lot of times when we had to round up the cows, they'd be several miles from the ranch, so if we got too far away, we'd also have to stay out. One time we met an Indian Chief on the bridge; he had a beautiful set of spirited horses and his buggy was neatly painted. He just sat in his buggy and looked at us and didn't bat an eye. His name was Vice Olds.

When we went through Independence, there was a restaurant, American style, and boy, did they put on the food! They had cakes and pies of different kinds, steaks, and platters filled with all we could eat.

My Dad and Peter went to Mina to work for the Southern Pacific. They would come down on days off and vacation, and we were all interested and excited when they were coming. Dad would go to work on the homestead and do what had to be done. He'd shoe the horses, and if a rim on the wagon wheel got loose, he'd tighten it. He showed me how to shoe horses, repair wagons and wagon wheels, welding them in the old forge, and how to repair engines and our 1914 Model T Ford.

We had bought our Model T right after WWI, in 1918. It was a good car, with a brass radiator and the gasoline tank under the seat. When we took a trip to Goldfield, over Westgard Pass out of Big Pine, the gasoline couldn't get to the carburetor, and we'd have to turn around and back up the hill. We sure thought that Ford was something, I'll tell you. It was a lot better than horses, but we did a lot of pushing and a lot of cranking!

There were lights on the body right below the windshield, one on each side, filled with kerosene. The headlights in front were Prestolite and you had to go out and light them. Of course, in those days there was no generator, no starter. Everything was magneto; when you cranked a Ford, you made your current to the spark plugs. There was only a door on the right hand side, and no door on the driver's side. We had a touring car. Of course, the first winter we lost the top; the wind just took it off and blew it away.

In the springtime, I've seen the Owens River get a mile wide. We wouldn't be able to go to town or get out of the ranch until the water receded. Of course, in later years the City of Los Angeles started taking the water and controlling it with dams, and you won't see that any more.

We put gravel on the road by the Owens River bridge where there was so much mud. We used wagons; ours was about ten feet long and four feet wide, holding about three-quarters of a ton. We put 2 x 6s on the sides and 2 x 4s on the bottom. When we dumped it, we'd take out one 2 x 4 at a time and let it fall out the bottom of the wagon.

One August, in 1918, we took off for Los Angeles in our Model T. It took two days to reach the city, with a stop at Little Lake. Coming home, a flash flood out of Freeman Gulch caught us and we were stuck in the mud and debris. We got a farmer from Lelighter to pull the Ford out with a team. It took us three days to clean the mud and debris from the car, coming up the Valley from Mojave to Olancho Station, then home to Aberdeen.

Around 1917 there were a lot of people coming in on the east side of the river, taking up homesteads: the Balls, Cowserts, Migerons, Siguerons, Smiths, and Armstrongs.

In 1918 several people died from the 'flu; one was Harry Ball, our closest neighbor. His wife had to leave because she couldn't keep up the homestead. Some others died, too, but the 'flu missed our family.

My father took sick, so my mother sent my brother Peter to get the doctor. He went to Big Pine and the doctor was gone, so he left word. On the third day after that, the doctor came to see Dad, who was still sick in bed. By that time, all the neighbors were concerned. Mrs. Calvert gave Dad a mixture of "whatever" - salt and other things. His fever broke and the illness left him, so you see what the pioneers did for doctors. My mother did the home doctoring herself.

One night we were coming home from school, my brother and I riding double, when the horse fell on my foot and broke my instep. My mother put it in a cast and it healed. Another time, my brother

and I were taking honey from our four stands of bees in the fall. We had some makeshift veils but somehow we didn't smoke the bees well enough and they got mad. You talk about killer bees! They started after me and I threw my veil off because they were getting underneath it and stinging me. I ran north in the wind fast enough that they weren't catching up with me, but I turned around to see a long cone of bees coming after me. How far I ran, I don't recall, but I remember starting toward the house and passing out about three-quarters of a mile away. When I came to, I was in bed and Mother was doctor again.

One time my dad and I were going to get some wood. There was just a two-by-twelve between two bolsters for us to sit on. We hit the bottom of some ruts in ten-foot deep washouts, the two-by-twelve broke and I went right down. The wagon ran over me, but I happened to fall into a little ditch in the bottom of the wash out. It took two fingernails off of my right hand. The wagon ran over my back but the small ditch saved me from getting hurt. Dad, holding the reins, didn't get hurt. So Dad took me back to the ranch and Mother soaked my hand in some antiseptic, and she was the doctor again, always there to take care of us, regardless of the problem.

A School was five miles away, south of the Aberdeen Store. At first, there were three of us going. We took a buggy and after my sister graduated, my brother Stanley and I either rode double on a horse or took the buggy. A Japanese boy from the Aberdeen Store, named George, rode a bicycle to school. The road was sandy and my brother would turn the buggy out at the sandy ruts, but when George hit the sand he would spill and we would laugh. He would say, "Some day you no laugh!"

Sometimes we'd have to walk to school because the horse would be working on the ranch. Finally, Stanley graduated and then I took the horse alone - if I had the horse. If not, then I had to walk. Sometimes in the winter I wouldn't get home until just about dark, and boy, I can remember it was cold! It would be snowing or sleeting or windy.

One of my chores was to put the cows in the pasture by the river each morning and take them home to milk each night. The house was about 300 yards from the railroad track, the fence about 50 feet farther, then the tower line was halfway to the river, and the river approximately half a mile from the railroad fence. When I'd take the cows to pasture, the range cattle used to chase me, so I'd either make for the railroad fence, the river trees, or a highline tower. One late afternoon, going out for the cows, I saw a hobo coming my way. We had hobos up and down the railroad and they'd always beg for a meal at the ranch house before they went walking on.

This time, the hobo decided to chase me. was pretty alert, always watching for range cattle because they had horns and would attack people, even a man on a horse. When the man started after me, I ran home. No one was there but Mother and my little sister, so Mother said she'd come with me to get the cows. We got down to the tower line, about half a mile from the ranch, and here came Mr. Hobo. I don't know what they said to one another but Mother said, "If you take another step to me, I'll kill you." She took a nickel-plated forty-five caliber revolver out of her apron, and Mr. Hobo turned around and left us.

One morning, when I was putting the cows in the pasture, one of them we called Tiny stepped on a sidewinder. It bit her leg and she kicked. The snake flew through the air, but Tiny never had any ill effects that we could tell.

There were a lot of those sidewinders. There were also diamond backs and some pretty good size rattlers, but mainly sidewinders. One day my younger sister Lucille, who was then eight years old, went to the well to get water for dinner. I went to help her, and on the way back I was carrying the bucket and as we were running toward the house, a sidewinder was running right alongside of us. I told her and hollered at her, and finally just reached over and grabbed her out of the trail. That sidewinder was running just as fast as we were.

Mr. Whitecotton was a rancher on the north edge of Fort Independence. One afternoon two men on horseback stopped at our ranch and borrowed a canteen from my father. One was Mr. Whitecotton and the other a mining engineer from Los Angeles. Early the next morning, they stopped to return the canteen, very excited about the sample they took from Mr. Whitecotton's claim. A few months went by, and we heard Mr. Whitecotton fell off his wagon hauling hay and broke his neck. We never heard any more of the mining engineer, so there is a very good claim of gold and silver ore north of the red hill in the White Mountains an authentic lost mine.

While I was going to school, riding back and forth from the homestead, I believe in 1918-19, the State laid an eight-foot wide strip of concrete - cement - from Division Creek to Fish Spring Hills, as we used to call it (where Tinemaha Dam is now). Every quarter of a mile there was a turnout, and when two cars were passing, whichever was closest to the turnout waited until the other passed. The concrete was laid because so many cars stuck in the sand. The men mixed the cement right on the road and then spread it. The State didn't work people in summer in those days because of the heat; they just worked in the winter. Going north, on the south side of Fish Springs Hill, if you look to your right, or east, you can still see part of the old concrete. Brush has grown around it, but the outline can be seen. We kids took turns riding on the roller.

In the early '20s my dad thought of having what he called the Waucoba Fish and Game Club. We built a cabin up in the mountains at Waucoba Springs on the east side of the Inyos, north of Saline Valley. We had a good Indian friend by the name of Watterson who went hunting with us; he and I carried a 110 pound cook stove up there with a 2 x 4 on our shoulders for the weight.

The cabin made it very good when we went hunting because we could always get out of the weather. Even though we had to sleep on the floor, we could keep dry wood and with the cook stove, make some pretty good biscuits, bacon, beans, flour, and potatoes. Some deer hunters who didn't know what they were doing went up there and burned the cabin down. We never rebuilt it.

I had started to do chores on the ranch when I was eight years old - milk the cows and get the wood, take the cows to pasture, and go out on the trap lines. Stanley was working at Fort Independence on ranches, and for the State of California.

My first job was with the Southern Pacific Railroad as a gandy dancer, changing ties and straightening rails; in the summertime, the heat would stretch the steel rails and we would have to cut out two inches at a time. Then in WWI, help was hard to get, and I was fireman on the narrow gauge from Keeler to Mina for a short time. During summer, I would work on ranches and for the State of California.

My brother was section foreman at Aberdeen. I went to work for him when I was eleven years old, as a gandy dancer. We just had to shovel and replace ties. Mr. T.L. Williamson was the railroad master on the line. One time my brother had a day off and left me in charge; we had four Mexicans working and I couldn't speak Spanish. We were out looking for broken fish plates - one inside and one outside to hold the rails together. I knew there was a passenger up and a passenger down, a freight up and a freight down, each day. We found a broken fish plate. I knew the trains had gone, but when we took the rail apart it popped right up about six inches. At that instant, around the curve, here came a special. I could just see an accident coming, because we didn't have time to stop it, so I just ran out of the way. But the Mexicans got together, stood on the rails, put half a broken fish plate back - just a bolt in each rail, the train went right over, and everybody was happy. Especially me!

We used to hold dances at the Aberdeen School. We had a four-piece orchestra, Mr. McAfee on the drums, Horace Harvey on the saxophone, my sister Irene on the coronet, and my brother Peter on the violin. Sometimes Robert Cromwell, an accomplished musician, would come, to our pleasure. People would come from Big Pine, Lone Pine, Bishop, and Independence and have a lot of fun.

We charged the men \$1 and the ladies were free. We paid the overhead for the school building. When Les McAfee wanted to dance, I would keep time on the drums. My brother Stanley was called "The Shiek of Aberdeen" by Mrs. Bell and Mrs. Vaughn.

In 1922 we also paid for the first radio in the Valley there, an Atwater Kent. We received KHJ and KFI, and would listen before the dances while we were putting wax on the floor and bales of hay around to sit on, and during suppers, box socials, and meetings. As time went on people had to leave the Valley because it was drying up and there was no work, so we had to eliminate the dances. One can see where the old school was, just south of Gooddale Creek.

My brother Stanley would go to Saline Valley with a Mr. Bev Hunter and get wild horses. Mr. Hunter, the son of a guide and packer out of Lone Pine, was an excellent horseman, and he told me my brother was an excellent shot. He said Stanley could take a pistol and while riding a horse, shoot

hawks out of the sky when they were flying. Some men thought he was kidding, so he shot three out of the air, with three men watching, and they finally knew he wasn't kidding.

At Fort Independence, they had what was called the Thibault Gun Club. A lot of people out of the city would come up to shoot quail and ducks. There was lots of vegetation and trees, just a wonderful place to hunt, and a lot of game. In fact, you could just about name any kind of game and it was in that Thibault Gun Club. Of course, when the City of LA dried up the country, the Gun Club just faded away.

Stanley owned a pack outfit at Aberdeen, taking people over the treacherous Taboose Pass. We would untie the mules and take them over the dangerous places one at a time for fear they'd jerk each other around tied together. A lot of packers did lose mules on Taboose Pass. Stanley had as many as 27 mules and horses packing back at one time, having bought out Pete Lavishott's outfit and purchased a lot of new gear. He packed into Bench Lake and Sixty Lake Basin, and over Sawmill Pass to Woods Lake, and many others in the backcountry. He had his outfit and headquarters at Aberdeen.

When I graduated from Aberdeen School, the first year I went to the school in Independence. Maude, Carl, Helen, and Marvin Lutzow and I drove to school in the Model T. After the first year, I went to Big Pine and drive the school bus for Frank Rossi. We had a Reo Speed Wagon, an excellent automobile, really done up in good upholstery. High school kids would come in from the Black Rock Ranch (Frances Culp), Aberdeen, and Red Mountain Fruit Ranch (Bess Alcorn). I drove the bus during my freshman, sophomore and junior years. I would take the bus north of town and leave it at the red barn, which is still there, and pick it up when school was out. One time when Francis Culp and I were coming home, north of Taboose Creek the drive shaft on the Reo broke and stuck in the ground, and we had to walk to Aberdeen.

During my last Nip years of high school we had a basketball team and were the Valley champions in '27 and '28. My mother passed away February 10, 1928 and while we were gone for four days, laying her to rest in Los Angeles, they took pictures of the team. I felt kind of left out because my picture wasn't taken with the team, although I was the center for two years.

After selling the homestead to the City of Los Angeles and leaving the Aberdeen Store, my father was a taxidermist. He moved to McGee Creek where he raised silver fox, then to Arizona for his health. He passed away at the City of Hope, of bone cancer, laid to rest at age 85 in the Pioneer Cemetery. My mother passed away at Aberdeen at the age of 48, in February of 1928 and was laid to rest in the Calvary Cemetery in Los Angeles.

Peter had three children, was an engineer for T & G Railroad in Tonopah, then worked for the Mono County Road Department until he retired. He passed away at the age of 86. Cecelia married Ike Williams, who worked on the Courthouse built in Independence in 1922. They were the first couple to be married in that Courthouse and when they had their 50th anniversary in 1982, they visited Independence. The Inyo Register and county officials treated them like royalty, giving the key to the town. Cecelia and Ike spent most of their lives in Nevada, mining. They had four children, and Cecelia died at age 75 in May of 1976. Irene married Horace Harvey (who played the saxophone for the dances), and they moved to Los Angeles. They had one child, John Harvey, who is now a supervisor of Idaho Power Company in Boise, Idaho. After a divorce, Irene moved to San Diego, where she remarried and lived until her death in March of 1989 at age 85. Stanley passed away after a long illness from a spinal injury and is also buried in the Pioneer Cemetery. Lucille married Bud Hurlbut and lives in Buena Park. They are the owners of Castle Amusement Park, considered one of North America's most beautiful and elaborate family amusement centers.

Editor's note: Raymond Steffen, author of this family record, worked for the State of California, was a foreman for Inyo County, worked for Lockheed for ten years during the war, then came up to Mono County where he built many of the pumice buildings in Benton. He was postmaster, deputy sheriff, and a member of the school board in Benton, and later went back to work for the State as a mechanic. He is now retired and living in Bishop.

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