

THE ANCIENT AND HONORABLE ORDER OF E CLAMPUS VITUS  
SLIM PRINCESS CHAPTER 395 • BILLY HOLCOMB CHAPTER 1069

# BALLARAT



JOINT FALL CLAMPOUT

OCTOBER 12, 13, 14, 6006

WRITTEN BY

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BILLY HOLCOMB CHAPTER 1069

**SLIM PRINCESS CHAPTER 395  
AND  
BILLY HOLCOMB CHAPTER 1069  
OF THE  
ANCIENT AND HONORABLE ORDER OF**

**E CLAMPUS VITUS**

**ANNOUNCE THEIR JOINT**

**SPRING CLAMPOUT  
HELD IN BEAUTIFUL DOWNTOWN**

**BALLARAT**

**OCTOBER 12, 13, 14, 2001  
(IN THE RECKONING OF OUR ORDER CLAMPYEAR 6006)**

**AND REQUEST THE ATTENDANCE OF ALL  
VITUSCANS AND FROLICKING FRIARS  
THROUGHOUT THE KNOWN WORLD**

**FEATURING THE GRAND RE-ERECTION OF  
A COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUE  
ORIGINALLY PLACED IN 1963 AND SINCE LOST TO  
TIME AND THE ELEMENTS**

**TEXT BY MIKE JOHNSON, XNGH**

## BALLARAT

The first recorded history of what is today Panamint Valley dates back to 1849. That year marked the appearance of white men in this part of the desert. The intruders were members of an emigrant party bound for the California gold fields. They were originally part of a group of over 100 wagons led by Jefferson Hunt, noted guide and former member of the storied Mormon Battalion of the Mexican War. The party was behind schedule, and instead of continuing westward from Salt Lake City, they traveled south over the Old Spanish Trail in order to avoid a winter crossing of the Sierra Nevada.

Soon after departing Salt Lake City, the party began to fragment as they sought a shortcut westward to gold country. Most soon came to their senses and rejoined the main body, which reached Los Angeles without any untoward difficulties. Approximately 30 wagons, however, continued to stubbornly seek a route west, and Christmas of 1849 found them lost and discouraged in the middle of today's Death Valley. It became a case of "every man for himself", and the travelers split into smaller and smaller parties as they searched for a way out of the valley. One such group, calling themselves the Jayhawkers, as well as other unidentified travelers, crossed the Panamints and camped in Panamint Valley. They utilized the brackish waters of Post Office Spring, just south of Ballarat, before they moved on westward. Only a year later a United States Geological Survey party camped at the spring. Both groups have left written descriptions of the spring and its environs.

Post Office Spring received its name during the boom period of the 1870s. Outlaws hiding out in this remote and desolate area left outgoing mail and cash in a box nailed to a mesquite tree at the spring. Stage drivers and freighters in on the scheme would bring back mail and provisions and leave them at the spring. The outlaws could then leave their mountain hideouts and retrieve their supplies after carefully scrutinizing the open plain around the spring for any would-be pursuers.

By about 1860, there were many prospectors active in the region around Ballarat as a result of the tales of Goller's gold, the Lost Gunsight Lode and the Lost Breyfogle brought back by the 49ers who had traversed

this country. Despite all this activity, no important claims were located until 1873. Early in that year, three outlaws held up a Wells Fargo stage west of Panamint Valley. While hiding out in the Panamint Mountains and waiting for things to cool down a bit, they discovered a rich silver ledge in Surprise Canyon, worth far more than the proceeds of the robbery. One of the robbers was an acquaintance of William Stewart, the U.S. Senator from Nevada and namesake of Chapter 10 of *E Clampus Vitus*. Stewart arranged for amnesty for the crooks in exchange for the return of the loot to Wells Fargo. His price was to be allowed to buy a portion of the claim. John P. Jones, the other Nevada Senator, also became a partner. The Panamint Mining District was quickly formed, claiming to be "the New Comstock." In November of 1874, The *Anaheim Gazette* stated of the new boom town, Panamint City, "there are 700 men, 10 women, and 4 inches of snow up at Panamint, and lively times are expected." The name of the town, the surrounding mountain range, and the desert valley below derive from the name of the Shoshonean Indians living in the area.

Panamint City soon gained a reputation for lawlessness, with 50 to 60 men being killed there during its brief existence. The town stretched for more than a mile along a steep canyon too narrow for a second street. Heavy freight wagons had a hard time negotiating the steep grade, so most supplies came in by pack train. The population eventually reached 5,000.

Right from the beginning Wells Fargo refused to handle Panamint City bullion because of the multitude of highwaymen in the vicinity. In a desperate bid to foil the thieves, the refined silver was cast into 400-pound cubes about one foot on a side (not 750-pound "cannonballs" as is sometimes reported), which were simply too heavy for the desperados to carry off. The lone attempt made on the wagons carrying the heavy blocks of silver resulted in no loss of bullion and one very irate group of robbers.

A steam engine and boiler were laboriously freighted up the steep canyon in pieces and reassembled at the top, where a 20-stamp mill was eventually built. As a result of the mining activity, stage and freight lines began to run regularly between San Bernardino and Panamint City, and the crossroads that would later become Ballarat began to take shape.

By 1875 the silver at Panamint had pretty much played out. There was a gradual but steady exodus to the new mines at Darwin, a short distance to the west. In 1876 a flash flood carried away much of what remained of the town. The mill shut down in 1877, and today only foundations and a lone brick chimney remain. Although the post office remained until 1895, the

boom was over.

The small community at the base of the Panamints, not yet known as Ballarat, dwindled but managed to hang on. It served as a supply point and “entertainment center” for local miners and prospectors. The Modoc and Minietta Mines, across Panamint Valley in the Argus Range, were very active during the late 1870s. The smelters there were the ultimate destination for the charcoal manufactured at the famous Wildrose charcoal kilns. Prospecting and mining in the area continued on through the ‘80s, and by about 1890 the little town sported a store, saloon, and blacksmith shop.

In 1896, gold was discovered in Pleasant Canyon, directly above the town. The most important discovery was a group of claims filed by Henry Ratcliff, which became known as Ratcliff Consolidated Gold Mines, Ltd., and the South Park Mining District quickly sprang into existence. Also located at about the same time were the Anthony, Cooper, and World Beater mines. Meanwhile, there were similar finds in nearby canyons: the Oh Be Joyful (named after a popular brand of whiskey) in Tuber Canyon, and the Gem in Jail Canyon.

As a result of these finds, it was decided to lay out a proper town on the flats at the mouth of Pleasant Canyon where, unlike Panamint City, there was level ground and room to grow. It was christened Ballarat after a famous Australian gold city near Melbourne. A few months later a post office was established. By 1900 the town had reached its peak population of about 500. It was home to the two-story Callaway Hotel, notable for a lower floor of adobe construction surmounted by a wooden upper level encircled by a veranda. At this time Ballarat boasted two stores, a Wells Fargo office and stage depot, and a schoolhouse, as well as a red light district, several saloons, a jail and a constable and justice of the peace. For some years it served as the seat of government of southern Inyo County. Ballarat never did lay claim to a church.

Of the saloons, that of Chris Wicht was generally considered the most popular, probably because it had the town’s only pool table. The table had come around Cape Horn to San Francisco, was freighted up to Panamint City during the boom, and was later acquired by Chris when the silver camp died. There was always plenty of water, supplied by a well drilled out on the dry lakebed and pumped by a windmill.

Ballarat’s importance had always stemmed from the fact that it was on the way to somewhere else. It became an important supply point for the mines in the Argus and Slate ranges, as well as the Panamints. It played a

pivotal role in the development of the whole region. Stage and freight lines ran three times a week from Johannesburg and Darwin. Originally there were two rival camps, Pleasant City in the canyon near the mines, and Post Office Spring one-half mile to the south, but both were quickly eclipsed by Ballarat. Although it at times pretended otherwise, Ballarat was a relatively sedate place. Its only homicide occurred in 1905, when the constable shot and killed the justice of the peace.

The biggest producer and main employer was the Ratcliff. Its best years were from 1898 to 1903. More than 300 miners worked here, and it is estimated that perhaps one million dollars in gold was extracted. At one time there was a mill of 20 stamps at the Ratcliff, one of 10 stamps at the Oh Be Joyful, 5 at the Anthony, and 4 at the Cooper, all operating simultaneously. The Ratcliff shut down in 1905, but between 1927 and 1942 the tailings were reworked using the cyanide process, yielding perhaps another \$250,000.

In 1901 there was a rush to the rich new strikes at Tonopah, Nevada. For a while, Ballarat nearly disappeared, and although the local mines gradually resumed production, the town never really recovered. It continued to serve local miners and prospectors, though at a much reduced pace. Ballarat finally folded around the time of World War I, and the post office closed in September of 1917.

The legendary Shorty Harris, "last of the single-blanket jackass prospectors" and co-discoverer of Bullfrog and Harrisburg, lived out his last days at Ballarat. When he died on November 10, 1934, he was buried on the floor of Death Valley next to his old friend Jim Dayton. The site is marked by a large stone monument containing a commemorative plaque.

In later years, the population of Ballarat eventually dwindled to one man. He was Charles Ferge, better known as Seldom Seen Slim. Since he was seen so seldom, not a lot is known about him. He was born on November 21, 1881 in Springfield, Illinois. He prospected and worked at all kinds of odd jobs in such places as Tonopah, Goldfield, Bullfrog, and Rhyolite. He settled in Ballarat around 1913. He was the self-appointed mayor, postmaster, dogcatcher, and tax collector of the town. He even set the speed limit in Ballarat, proclaiming it to be "100 miles an hour--in low gear." When someone once stated that Slim hadn't taken a bath in 40 years, he denounced it as an outright lie, assuring his tormentor that he had had one as recently as last July. He also allowed that he sometimes poured water over his head to cool himself off.

Slim lived in various of the old adobes in town until they became too

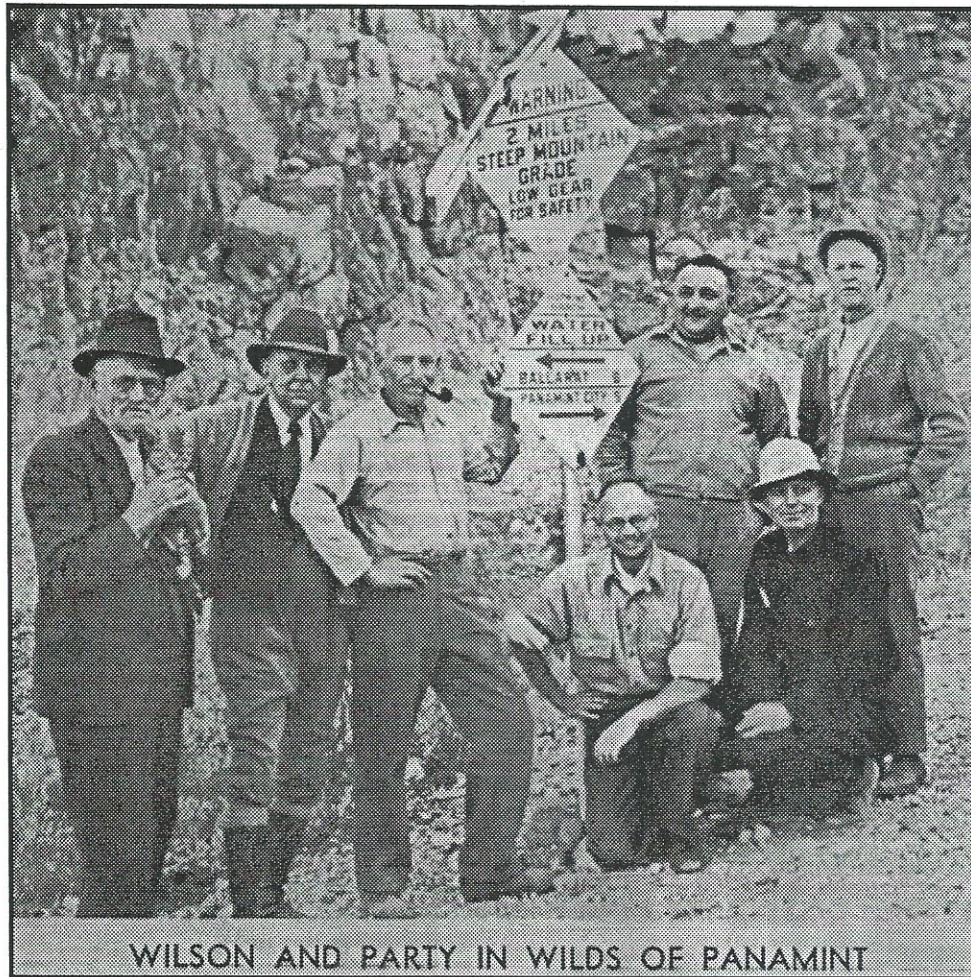
dilapidated to inhabit. For many years thereafter he lived in a trailer at the end of Main Street. He tidied up the Ballarat cemetery from time to time, perhaps in recognition of the fact that he would one day reside there.

Seldom Seen Slim died of cancer in Trona on August 17, 1968. Approximately 400 people attended his funeral in Ballarat, including an NBC television crew. All in all, it appears that Slim would have been good Clamper material.

A year after Seldom Seen Slim's funeral, the Ballarat area saw some excitement of a different kind. In the fall of 1969, shortly after the infamous Tate-La Bianca murders in Los Angeles, Charles Manson and several members of his "family" were arrested a few miles south of Ballarat. They had been hiding out at the Barker and Myers Ranches, in an offshoot of Goler Wash near Sourdough Spring. They were transported to the Inyo County Jail in Independence, and then on to Los Angeles. This incident was portrayed in the television movie "Helter Skelter."

For a long period it appeared that large-scale mining in the Panamints was to be found only in history books. The last few years, however, have seen the establishment of the Briggs Mine in Redlands Canyon, a few miles south of Ballarat. This large open-pit operation is easily seen, day or night, from the Trona-Wildrose Road. Although not as picturesque as early-day operations, it continues a history of mining in the Panamint Mountains and Panamint Valley region that goes back for a century and a half. This area has rich history, spectacular desert scenery, and the Death Valley mystique that will keep visitors coming back for many years to come.

***WHAT SAYETH THE BRETHREN...?***



WILSON AND PARTY IN WILDS OF PANAMINT

Standing, left to right: Elbridge A. Burbank, famous western painter, holding Norma the cat; Gabriel Moulin, San Francisco photographer; Chris Wicht, owner of the most popular saloon in Ballarat; unidentified friend of Lee Stopplpe, who took the picture; and Walter J. Wilson. Kneeling, left to right: Neil Wilson and Oliver Kehrlein. All except the elder Wilson, Chris Wicht, and Norma were active members of Yerba Buena Chapter 1 in the early days of E Clampus Vitus Redivivus. Date of photograph is 1937. Photo supplied courtesy of Earl Schmidt, XSNGH and former President of the Death Valley 49ers.



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