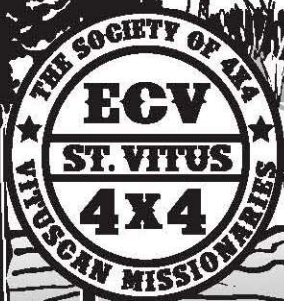
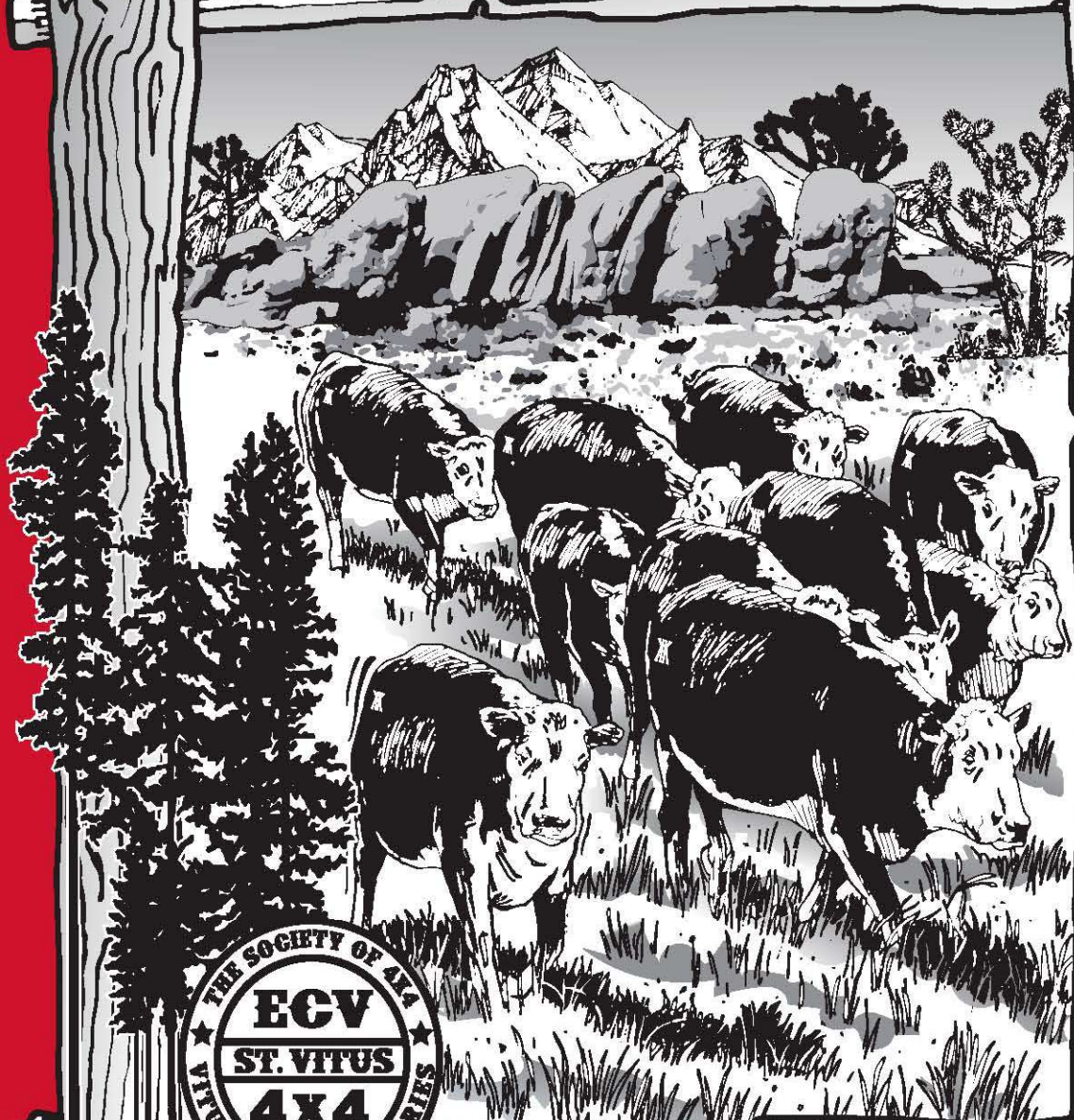


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HIGH COUNTRY CATTLEMEN



SUMMER VITUSCAN 2022

ERWIN LAKE, CA

CATTLE IN THE SAN BERNARDINOS

By Michael T. "Doc" Johnson XNGH, HA II

When one thinks of the San Bernardino Mountains, what probably comes to mind is ski resorts, alpine scenery, Big Bear and Arrowhead Lakes, camping and hiking, 4-wheeling, etc. However, there is also a rich history of mining and lumbering. In addition to these obvious attractions, there is another major, although less well-known, aspect of the history of this beautiful mountain range. That is the development of a thriving cattle industry that flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It still continues today, although in a greatly reduced state. Our Clampsite, the Hamilton Ranch, represents seven generations of cattle ranching in these mountains. It is a greatly underappreciated fact that livestock raising, including horses, oxen, sheep, goats, and pigs, as well as cattle, was more important economically in the local mountains than either mining or lumbering. The purpose of this article is to shed some light on this relatively unknown history of the San Bernardinos.

EARLY DAYS IN THE SAN BERNARDINO VALLEY AND MOUNTAINS

There is a long history of raising cattle in the region, beginning with the San Gabriel Mission, founded in 1771. Outlying mission ranchos had cattle, but the range was so extensive and the pasture so lush that the stock wasn't so much raised as grew wild, requiring only the most minimal attention from the Mexican *vaqueros*. The cattle were so plentiful that they were valuable only for their hides and tallow (rendered fat), which was used, among other things, to make candles. In the days before refrigeration, only a portion of the meat could be eaten fresh or dried to make jerky. These weren't cattle ranches in the modern sense, as the herds were allowed to roam wild and were not closely managed, but nevertheless their numbers increased steadily.

With the Mexican government's Secularization Act of 1833, the rich mission lands which supported these vast herds were taken from the Catholic Church, which thereafter retained control only of their religious parishes. The land was divided into huge parcels which were granted to private owners. This was the time of huge land-grant ranchos and "Cattle on a Thousand Hills," the title of a famous 1941 book by historian Robert Glass Cleland.

There were five such ranchos in the San Bernardino Valley and its environs. *Rancho Jurupa*, which encompassed first the area of West Riverside, later to become Rubidoux and then Jurupa Valley, where the author grew up, was granted to Juan Bandini in 1838. It is also the site of a Billy Holcomb historical plaque commemorating the first grist mill in the region, powered by the waters of the Santa Ana River. Tiburcio Tapia was granted ownership of *Rancho Cucamonga* a year later, followed by the grant of *Rancho Santa Ana*

del Chino to Antonio Maria Lugo in 1841. Michael White was granted *Rancho Muscupiabe*, at the mouth of Cajon Pass, in 1843. He was, in return, to help guard the region from the depredations of desert Indians, who soon stole all his livestock and caused him to abandon the rancho a short time later. By far the largest of the land grants was *Rancho San Bernardino*, located in the heart of the valley. It was granted by Governor Juan Alvarado to Carmen, Jose Maria, and Vicente Lugo, and Diego Sepulveda, the three sons and cousin of Antonio Maria Lugo.

The huge, loosely supervised herds encouraged raiding by desert Indian tribes via Cajon Pass, with losses becoming increasingly costly and troublesome. There had always been low-grade theft of stock during the mission era, but as the number of animals increased markedly, stock rustling reached alarming proportions. Chemehuevis, Mojaves, Piutes, and even Utes from as far away as Utah and Colorado carried out the raids. They were often abetted by renegade mountain men like Jim Beckworth and Thomas “Pegleg” Smith, who found themselves out of work with the ending of the fur trade era and therefore had to find a new livelihood.

By about 1840, the theft of stock grew to unprecedented levels as Indian marauders regularly materialized out of the desert via Cajon Pass to raid the ranchos. As mentioned earlier, Michael White, despite building a bunker-like residence in the pass, had all of his stock stolen and was forced to abandon his 30,145-acres (more than 40 square miles) after only nine months.

WALKARA’S EPIC HORSE RAID OF 1840

A key player in this epidemic of stock theft was the Ute Chief Walkara, sometimes referred to as “The Hawk of the Mountains.” Anglo ranchers and settlers promptly corrupted his name to Walker. He was head of a group of about 200 Piute and Ute Indians which had raised the art of stealing horses to a very high level. In 1840 he conspired with Beckworth and Smith to plan and execute perhaps of the greatest horse-stealing raids in history.

It started with Beckworth, operating under cover as the leader of a pack train down the Old Spanish Trail through Cajon Pass. He tasked his men with scouting the ranchos and determining where the largest horse herds were located. He rendezvoused with Walkara in the pass and relayed this information to him. Then, on the full-moon night of May 19, 1840, Walkara’s men systematically struck many ranchos simultaneously, capturing an estimated 5,000 horses and running them through Cajon Pass and its neighboring canyons out onto the Mojave Desert. Pursuing *vaqueros* quickly cut perhaps 2,000 of these out of the stolen herd. When other pursuers went after the remaining 3,000, Walkara even managed to steal their mounts! Instead of a triumphant return with recaptured horses, they had to walk home, perhaps the greatest ignominy possible for a cowboy. Similar, albeit smaller, raids continued through the 1840s. It was said that the

Old Spanish Trail could be followed by the bones of dead horses from Cajon Pass all the way to southern Utah, and the route came to be known as “Walker’s Trail.”

DON BENITO RETALIATES

The *Californio* rancheros made strenuous efforts to combat these losses, but never seemed to be able to strike a telling blow. In 1845 Benjamin Wilson, known colloquially as *Don Benito*, was *alcalde* (justice of the peace) of the Jurupa region and owner of a portion of the *Jurupa Rancho*. [Wilson was a most remarkable man, and worthy of further study. He was the grandfather of Gen. George S. Patton and is the namesake of Mt. Wilson in the San Gabriel Range, among many other major accomplishments.] In that year Mexican Governor Pio Pico gave him the task of leading a punitive expedition against a group of Indian horse thieves that were camped on the Mojave River. He assembled an 81-man volunteer party, sending the majority of them with a pack train bearing food and supplies through Cajon Pass to meet him on the river. He personally led a group of 22 men on what hopefully was a shortcut over the northeastern portion of the San Bernardino Mountains, which was almost *terra incognita* at the time. His personal account of the event states that:

“I organized the expedition in San Bernardino, sent the pack train and soldiers (less 22 which I retained with me) through the Cajon Pass. Myself and the 22 went up the San Bernardino [Santa Ana] River through the mountains, and crossed over to what is now Bear [Baldwin] Lake. Before arriving at the Lake, we captured a village, the people of which had all left except two old women and some children. On the evening of the second day we arrived at the Lake, the whole lake and swamp seemed alive with bear.

The twenty-two young Californians went out in pairs, and each pair lassoed one bear, and brought the result to the camp so that we had at one and the same time eleven bears. This prompted me to give the Lake the name it now bears.”

Modern research seems to indicate the Wilson followed the Santa Ana River into the vicinity of Converse Flat, then headed north directly over the ridge to the valley that now holds Big Bear Lake, not formed until 1885. Wilson’s Bear Lake is clearly today’s Baldwin Lake, just a short distance west of our Clampsite. After the bear hunt they descended to the desert, likely via today’s Cushenbury Canyon, and continued on to the Mojave River. There they met and skirmished with the Indians in question. In the battle, Wilson was shot in the shoulder with a poisoned arrow. His friend Lorenzo Trujillo reportedly saved Wilson’s life by sucking out the poison. [The Trujillo Adobe owned by the

Trujillo family still exists just a short distance from Spooner's Ranch in north Riverside. The Trujillos came over the Old Spanish Trail to California, where they were granted land that became the twin villages of La Placita and Agua Mansa in exchange for defending against Indian marauders, who they did faithfully and effectively.] Wilson went on to report that "On the return by way of Bear Lake, the same twenty-two men...repeated the feat of bringing eleven bears to camp, making twenty-two killed on the trip. We all returned and had our rendezvous at my ranch at Jurupa."

CATTLE COME TO THE HIGH COUNTRY

Although it can never be determined with certainty, the first people to graze livestock in the San Bernardinos were probably Mormon lumbermen, who used oxen, horses, and mules to move logs to the mills, and sawed boards to the Mormon town of San Bernardino, founded in 1851. They also likely kept dairy cattle for home use.

In 1862 Francis Talmadge, patriarch of a large clan of Talmadges who first logged, then raised cattle in Little Bear Valley, site of today's Lake Arrowhead. His modest herd initially consisted of five oxen, three cows, and five steers. By 1863 John Rowland ran so many horses and cattle at Huston Flats, near modern-day Crestline, that his herds were valued by the county assessor at \$15,000. By 1857 a claim was recorded for grazing sheep in Mill Creek Canyon, and in 1858 an article in the *Los Angeles Star* stated that cattlemen would soon be moving their herds into the mountains.

Up until this point there was ample rainfall, and the lush, well-watered pastures in the San Bernardino Valley supported cattle herds year-round. However, Mother Nature intervened in the form of the epic flood of 1862, which literally inundated huge stretches of the valley for a long period of time. Low-lying areas were waterlogged, and many cattle literally drowned in the fields. Ironically, the great flood was followed by three years of extreme drought, and cattle died by the thousands.

Ranchers became desperate, and began to look for ways to save their herds. Increasing numbers of cattle and sheep ranchers began driving their thirsty, starving animals into the mountains in search of summer pasture. By 1864, Bear and Holcomb Valleys, Big and Little Pine Flats, and Coxey Meadows were full of grazing cattle and sheep. Many of these animals fed the hungry miners in Holcomb Valley.

The first real cattle ranch in the area was H. E. Parrish's Mojave Rancho in Summit Valley, in the desert foothills of the San Bernardinos near the west fork of the Mojave River. His stock weathered the drought in good condition, and in 1863 he sold out to Elijah Dunlap, who added 400 more acres to the ranch. The Dunlap Ranch was a major operation throughout the 1860s. Early in 1866 the San Bernardino County Supervisors named Dunlap *Juez del Campo* (Judge of the Plains) for the region, with jurisdiction also over Bear, Little Bear, and Holcomb Valleys. As such, he had the authority to settle disputes over cattle ownership and to arrest rustlers and thieves. He immediately faced a crisis when three cowboys were killed nearby by marauding Piutes in March of 1866. This

tragedy is commemorated by Billy Holcomb Chapter's very first historical monument on the grounds of Las Flores Ranch, placed in October of 1969.

In 1867 another group of Chemehuevis and Piutes, angered by the occupation of their traditional homeland, attacked lumbermen and settlers in Little Bear Valley. The Talmadge sawmill there was transformed into an impromptu fort, which successfully withstood the assault. In response, an expedition was gotten up to end the threat from the desert tribes once and for all. After a month-long campaign which ended with a desultory attack by the posse near Rabbit Springs in Lucerne Valley, the Indians were not so much defeated as just gave up the fight and disappeared back into the desert. Although it seemed inconclusive at the time, the "battle" marked the end of Indian-Anglo hostilities in the region, with the single exception of the killing of a Mormon merchant near Dunlap Ranch in 1869. The site of "The Last Indian Fight" is marked by a Billy Holcomb Chapter plaque erected in May of 1986.

CATTLE RANCHES PROLIFERATE

Elijah Dunlap was one of the first to graze his cattle in the high meadows of the San Bernardinos. In what would become the classic pattern, Dunlap wintered his herds in the desert, in his case along the upper Mojave River, then moved them up into Little Bear Valley as the weather warmed up and the snowline retreated. John Brown, builder and operator of the Cajon Pass Toll Road, also ran cattle along the Mojave River. Cattle trails ascended Huston, Deep, and Hook Creeks to reach the mountain pastures. Stock from farther east in the Mojave came up the Van Dusen Road (subject of the Summer 2017 Society of Vituscan Missionaries 4WD excursion) to Coxey Meadow, Big Pine Flat, and lower Holcomb Valley. Little Bear Valley was a prime grazing ground until the coming of the Arrowhead Reservoir project in the 1890s.

In the southeastern part of the mountains, cattle and sheep were grazed in the Oak Glen area. Dr. Benjamin Barton, a leading pioneer in the San Bernardino Valley, brought large herds of sheep from today's Redlands up into the mountains during the drought of 1862-1865 to what is now Barton Flats. The sheep fattened up so well that they were thereafter brought up to the flats every summer. This annual migration continued well into the 1880s. Both cattle and sheep were likewise raised in the Yucaipa-Oak Glen area for several decades. In Summit Valley, the Dunlap Ranch was bought up and expanded, changed ownership several times, and eventually became the Las Flores Ranch. It remained one of the largest and busiest cattle ranches in the region up until modern times. The ranch's main barn, which the author once had the privilege of visiting, was the largest structure in San Bernardino County when it was built.

BEAR VALLEY BECOMES THE CENTER OF THE CATTLE INDUSTRY

Despite the proliferation of ranches in and near the mountains, the epicenter of cattle ranching in the San Bernardinos was the Bear Valley-Holcomb Valley region. For seventy years, right up until the 1950s, hundreds of cattle were wintered in the desert, then driven up into the two adjacent valleys to fatten up on the rich summer pasture. This was the finest grazing land anywhere in southern California. The first to maintain large cattle herds in Bear Valley was Gus Knight, Sr., who originally came to the mountains as a lumberman. He sawed timber and made shingles for nineteen years, then built a hotel in Bairdstown, near the Lucky Baldwin-Doble Mine, finally entering the cattle business in 1879. He partnered with Peter Davidson in 1884, and for many years they grazed their stock in Bear Valley in the summer, moving them to Rabbit Springs in Lucerne Valley in the winter.

One of the most famous cattlemen in the area was James Smart. After trying his luck as a miner, Smart filed a homestead claim in southern Bear Valley, present-day Moonridge, and started ranching in 1882. While in San Bernardino, Smart had a blacksmith fashion a “JS” branding iron. According to the story, as he returned home to the mountains via Cajon Pass and Cushenbury Canyon, the iron was somehow dropped, breaking the tail off the J. When this came to light, Smart decided it wasn’t worth the trouble to return to San Bernardino to repair or remake the iron, and simply used it was, now IS, to mark his growing herd. The IS brand still exists today. In 1890 Smart purchased an additional 160 acres on the south shore of recently-formed Big Bear Lake. He ran cattle there, as well as at Moonridge, while continuing to work his various mining claims. His mark on history is the tale of the broken branding iron and the legacy of the IS Ranch.

Perhaps the most familiar name in ranching and logging in the San Bernardinos is Talmadge. Francis Lebaron Talmadge, the first of a long lineage of cattle ranchers which continues today with the Hamilton Ranch, came to the mountains in 1853. Talmadge and his sons were lumbermen and ranchers in Little Bear Valley for many years. 1892 marked the family’s arrival in Bear Valley, when Francis’s son Will bought the Smart Ranch and the IS brand. Will and his siblings Frank and John eventually gained control of 1,640 acres south and east of Big Bear Lake. Ranch headquarters were south of the lake, and the cattle grazed here and along the north shore. Around Halloween, the cattle were gathered and driven to winter pasture first at Old Woman Springs, and later at Pipes Canyon and the Whitewater Ranch. Around the first of May they were returned to their mountain pastures.

In Holcomb Valley, operations centered around the Hitchcock Ranch, today a Boy Scout camp. The ranch was started by Will Hitchcock, and was later run by his son and grandson, both named Rob Hitchcock. The herd grazed freely through Holcomb Valley, sometimes interfering with mining operations there. The animals roamed as far away as Big Pine Flat, Coxey Meadow, and Heaps Ranch, wintering in Apple Valley. Other nearby

operations were run by John R. Metcalf, George Rathbun, Robert Garner, and the Quiroz brothers, Ramon and Felipe.

THE SHAY AND BARKER RANCHES

In 1906 Will Shay purchased George Rathbun's property southeast of Big Bear Lake. Eight years later, Shay and Charles Barker, a prosperous Banning merchant, purchased 3,500 acres of land and 600 head of cattle from the estate of Elias J. "Lucky" Baldwin for \$30,000. The land, located just south of Baldwin Lake and close to our Clampsite, consisted of a mixed bag of houses, barns, and cattle pens. The Shay and Barker Ranch, soon to be simply the Shay Ranch, immediately became the largest cattle-ranching operation in the San Bernardino Mountains. The stock grazed south of the normally dry lakebed and to its west, where Big Bear City now stands. Winter pasture was in the Little San Bernardino Mountains, site of Joshua Tree National Park.

The twice-yearly cattle drives of the era were major events, always to be remembered by anyone who witnessed them. After wintering on the desert, the various herds intermingled in the region between Old Woman Springs and the Whitewater River. Skilled cowhands drove the cattle into the mountains to a series of holding pens near the Rose Mine. Here the cows and newborn calves were separated, branded, and then driven to their respective ranges in Bear Valley. The cattle were fattened up during the summer, and by late August the best animals were gathered for sale. In early September, meat buyers, some from as far away as Los Angeles, bid on and purchased animals for slaughter. The chosen cattle were then driven to the railroad at Victorville. Those not selected would continue to graze before being driven onto their winter ranges as the mountain weather turned cold.

This cycle continued undisturbed until the coming of the great Big Bear land boom around 1916. After that, the cattle could no longer graze undisturbed around the lake, and operations shifted to the eastern end of Bear Valley, Holcomb Valley, and the northern and northeastern slopes of the mountains. Ironically, this created a new opportunity for the ranchers: a rodeo for the entertainment of the increasing number of Big Bear residents and visitors. Will Talmadge organized the first such event in 1921, where more than a hundred cowboys from the Hitchcock, Shay, and IS Ranches performed for an audience of more than 1,500.

In 1923 Shay and Barker decided to sell of the bulk of their land and herds. Their first act was to sell 1,130 acres to the Talmadge brothers. Five years later, Will, Frank, and John Talmadge bought the last 700 head of Shay and Barker cattle, as well as 40 acres of winter grazing land near Twentynine Palms. Their herd, now the largest in the mountains, numbered over 1,000 animals.

THE TALMADGE-STOCKER-HAMILTON ERA

The Talmadge brothers remained the main cattle growers in Bear Valley until 1943. In that year Jim Stocker, a cattleman and rancher from Yucca Valley, bought out the 1/5 shares of Frank and John Talmadge and went into partnership with their brother Will. Their cattle continued to graze in the eastern end of Bear Valley, but instead of roaming free they were now fenced off from the rapidly expanding Big Bear metropolitan area. In the fall the stock was driven onto the desert for winter grazing in the traditional manner. Here the herd was divided, with Talmadge taking his animals to Whitewater Ranch and Stocker to Warren's Well, site of Billy Holcomb Chapter's Spring 2002 Clampout. This relationship continued until the death of Will Talmadge in 1946. Stocker continued in the business until 1951, when he sold out to Tom and Lawrence Hamilton, of whom we will hear more of later in this article. The Hamilton range was steadily encroached on by urban development in the post-WW II era, especially by the growth of Big Bear City, thus bringing an end to the era of free-ranging cattle in Bear Valley.

THE HEART BAR RANCH

Although cattle ranching in the San Bernardinios centered on Bear Valley for many years, there was also activity farther to the south in the upper canyon of the Santa Ana River, site of the historic Heart Bar Ranch. Cattle and sheep had been raised there since the 1860s. Willie Button and Charles Martin had homesteaded in Big Meadows, and in 1884 registered the Heart Bar brand and began running cattle on their range. Martin was something of a shady character, and for many years his main occupation was cattle rustling. He was connected with the infamous McHaney gang, a group of accomplished cattle rustlers, who were eventually driven out of the mountains by a posse composed of outraged San Bernardino Valley ranchers. Martin somehow escaped his past, reinvented himself, and assumed the cloak of respectability in his later years, eventually being appointed as San Bernardino's Chief of Police in 1917!

The heyday of the 1,280-acre ranch began in 1907 when Al "Swarty" Swarthout purchased a one-half interest in the ranch and became partners with Martin. Albert Riley Swarthout was born into a pioneer San Bernardino County family in 1872. His grandfather came to the region with General Stephen Watts Kearney's Army of the West during the Mexican War in 1847, and his father settled near Wrightwood in the 1850s. He bought Old Woman Spring Ranch, site of Billy Holcomb's Fall Clampout in 2004, for winter range. He erected a sturdy log house and refurbished the barn and corrals, making the Heart Bar into a first-class cattle ranch.

The ownership of the ranch followed a confusing course from 1914 to 1921. Martin sold out to Dr. E. S. Blair in 1914. Swarthout and Blair did not see eye to eye on how to run the ranch, and Swarthout consequently sold out to Bob Bryant in 1920. Bryant and



Old Woman Springs Ranch, winter grazing for the Heart Bar

Blair, in turn, did not get along, and Blair bought out Bryant that same year. Shortly thereafter, the doctor and his family were killed when a train struck their automobile as they were crossing the tracks in Hesperia in 1921. Swarthout bought back his previous half of the ranch from Blair's estate, and San Bernardino businessman Dale Gentry purchased the other half.

This time the partnership was congenial for many years, and the two men built the Heart Bar into a highly successful ranch. They decided to split up in 1938, but despite their previous cooperation, neither one wanted to sell out to the other. Years of litigation ensued, interrupted by WW II. Finally, in 1947, the court awarded the Heart Bar Ranch to Swarthout and the Old Woman Springs Ranch to Gentry. Swarthout continued to live on the Heart Bar, cowboying well into his 70s, and passed away in 1963 at the age of 91.

A string of lessees ran the ranch in following years, but it never again reached its former glory. Newly-built Highway 38 passed right by the ranch, and a large number of youth summer camps impinged on the range. In 1965 it became a state park, and in 1976 ownership passed to the federal government. It is currently the site of a Forest Service campground.

THE GOLDEN ERA OF CATTLE RANCHING COMES TO AN END

Around the turn of the twentieth century the Forest Service began to impose restrictions on cattle ranching in the mountains in an effort to prevent overgrazing. Beginning in 1910, fees were imposed for grazing animals on public land. Over 2,000 head of cattle grazed on San Bernardino National Forest land in 1927, and many more on nearby private property. Beef prices soared during WW I, but fell dramatically at war's end. Bear and Little Bear Valleys, the premier grazing areas in the mountains, were now under the waters of Big Bear Lake and Lake Arrowhead, and residential and recreational properties sprang up where cattle once roamed freely. Cattlemen, confronted with inflated land prices due to urban development, began to sell out. The era of great free-ranging herds on public lands in the San Bernardino came to an end, and a new period came into being.

Representative of this new era in the Hamilton Ranch, now owned by our hosts, Kemper family. It was originally named for the father and son team of Tom and Larry Hamilton. Tom was involved in the production of the world-famous Hamilton Standard variable-pitch propeller, a quantum leap forward in aviation technology. It allowed pilots to change the angle of the propeller blades, the degree to which the propeller "bites into" the air in flight, thus providing optimum performance in many different situations. It also allowed the propeller to be "feathered" on a dead engine. This meant that the non-powered blades could be pointed edge-on to the airstream to minimize drag. There had been variable-pitch propellers before this, but the Hamilton Standard was a great improvement on previous designs. During WW II, Hamilton Standard was the primary supplier of propellers to the Allies. Practically every American aircraft, whether a trainer, fighter plane, or multi-engine bomber or cargo plane, was equipped with them, as were a significant majority of RAF aircraft.

The Hamilton Ranch came into being when Jim Stocker got out of the ranching business in 1951 and sold his land and cattle to the Hamiltons. Son Larry Hamilton was not interested in aviation, and bought up several other local ranches. He was both a rancher and a developer, and had a vision of using the ranch land for a golf course and hundreds of condos. After several years of unsuccessfully trying to bring his ideas to fruition, he became discouraged and sold the ranch to the Kempers, who preserved the forest and developed 31 six-acre lots while keeping more than 100 acres of open area. Their brand, represented by the metalwork on top of Billy Holcomb Chapter's plaque, placed in August of 2018, is the Back-to-Back K. The Kemper family is the seventh generation of cattle ranching in the San Bernardinos, as well as the state of Idaho. They are a direct, living connection with the pioneer cattle ranchers of more than 150 years ago.

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