

BILLY HOLCOMB CHAPTER 1069  
THE SOCIETY OF 4x4VITUSCAN MISSIONARIES  
PRESENTS ITS ANNUAL  
WINTER ICE EVENT

JANUARY 19, 20, 21, 2023

**BACK**   
**TO BALLARAT**



HELD UNDER THE AEGIS, AND DURING THE REIGN, OF  
MARK GERMAN, HEAD ABBOT XI  
ARTICLE COMPILED AND WRITTEN BY  
DR. MICHAEL "DOC" JOHNSON, XNGH, HEAD ABBOT II

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**OR, IN THE RECKONING OF OUR ORDER**

**CLAMPYEAR 6028**

**BEING AN OFF-ROAD EXPEDITION**

**BACK TO BALLARAT**

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## **EARLY DAYS IN THE BALLARAT REGION**

Ballarat, on the eastern edge of Panamint Valley, should be on the must-see list of anyone interested in the California desert. Unprepossessing in appearance, it is nonetheless rich in history and worthy of a closer look. The surrounding region has been a witness to many chapters in the development of California: Native Americans, Death Valley '49ers, miners and prospectors, desert freighters, the Manson Family, recreation seekers, and Clampers of all stripes. Although many of the original buildings are returning to the soil from which they were originally constructed, the history remains.

Long before Death Valley received its current name, the area was home to the Timbisha Shoshone people, who moved into the region at least 1,000 years ago. Apparently forbidding, it was nonetheless successfully exploited by the Timbisha, who knew the ways of the land and adapted their lives to them. The altitude change from Telescope Peak at 11,049 feet, to Badwater Basin at 282 feet below the sea level, is twice the depth of the Grand Canyon. During Death Valley's generally mild winters, the Timbisha lived in the lowlands. When the heat became oppressive, they moved into the Grapevine and Panamint Mountains to take advantage of the lower temperatures. They were perfectly adapted to their environment, had no problem making a living from the land, and thrived here for many generations.

The first recorded activity in today's Panamint Valley took place in 1849. In that year the first non-Indians appeared on the scene. They were part of a group of more than 100 wagons headed for the California gold fields, led by Jefferson Hunt, formerly a company commander in the Mexican War Mormon Battalion. At that time, he was as familiar with the southern portion of the Old Spanish Trail, then becoming known as the Mormon or Salt Lake Trail, as any man on earth. The emigrants arrived dangerously late in Salt Lake City, and the memory of the Donner Party's disastrous crossing of the Sierra Nevada, only three years previously, weighed heavily on their minds. They signed on with Hunt to travel via the well-known Old Spanish Trail to southern California, thereby avoiding a winter crossing of the Sierras. Although the route would deliver the travelers to Los Angeles, hundreds of miles south of the gold country, it had the great advantage of being well-traveled, safe, and dependable.

Soon after leaving Salt Lake City the caravan encountered a pack train, unencumbered by wagons and moving quickly. The emigrants were told by the packers that they were following a shortcut to the west that would shave 500 miles off their journey. Even though they had no idea if the packers' story was true, the

vast majority of the wagons decided to break off from the Old Spanish Trail and strike west. The packers were already far ahead of them, and could not serve as guides for the slow-moving wagons.

This group of wagons encountered so much trouble over the next several weeks that almost all of them eventually backtracked to the OST and reached Los Angeles without any undue difficulties. About thirty wagons, however, continued to seek a route directly west to the gold country. Christmas Day of 1849 found them lost in the middle of Death Valley, running out of provisions, and without a clear plan as to how to proceed. It quickly became a case of “every man for himself.” The emigrants fragmented into smaller and smaller groups, and some decided to abandon their wagons, kill their oxen and jerk the meat, and strike out on foot.

One such group, the Jayhawkers, along with other unidentified members of the wagon train, crossed the Panamints and camped in Panamint Valley. They utilized the brackish water of today’s Post Office Spring, just south of Ballarat. They moved on westward and eventually arrived safely in the gold country. A year later, a U.S. Geological Service expedition camped at the waterhole, and both groups left written descriptions of the spring and its environs.

The famous Bennett-Arcane party, trapped in Death Valley with their wagons and families, sent two of their young men, William Lewis Manley and John Rogers, to seek help. They crossed the Panamint Mountains, traversed Panamint Valley, and reached civilization near present-day Newhall. They returned with supplies, and the group eventually escaped via the Slate Range to the south. This is an epic tale, very much worth the telling, but is a story for another day.

## **OUTLAWS, MINERS, AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PANAMINT CITY**

By about 1860 there were many prospectors working the Panamint Mountains, drawn by the ‘49ers’ stories of Goller’s Lost Gold, the Lost Gunsight Mine, and the Lost Breyfogle. Despite all this activity, there were no really productive claims located until 1873. Early in that year, three outlaws held up a Wells Fargo stage west of Panamint Valley. While hiding out in the Panamints, lying low until things cooled off a bit, they discovered a rich silver ledge in Surprise Canyon that was worth far more than the proceeds of their robbery.

By sheer chance, one of the robbers was an acquaintance of William Stewart, U.S. Senator and one of the namesakes of ECV Chapter 10. In collusion with the crooks, Stewart arranged amnesty for the perpetrators in exchange for the return of the loot. His reward for his efforts was to be allowed to buy a share in the rich

claim. John P. Jones, the other Senator from Nevada, also became a partner. The Panamint Mining District came into being, taking its name from that of the local inhabitants.

During the boom of the 1870s outlaws frequented the area. Since they couldn't just go into town for supplies, they left "grocery lists" and cash, as well as outgoing mail, in a box nailed to a mesquite tree near Post Office Spring. Stage drivers and freighters who were in on the scheme would pick up the lists and correspondence, then bring back mail and supplies and leave them at the spring. After carefully scrutinizing the scene from the safety of the Panamint Mountains to detect any would-be pursuers, they would emerge to retrieve their goods, thereby giving the spring its name.

Like all mining booms, it was built on hyperbole and self-promotion, and the Panamint District claimed to be "the new Comstock." Panamint City, with its iconic brick chimney, sprang into existence in Surprise Canyon, high up in the Panamints. The *Anaheim Gazette* in November of 1874 stated that "there are 700 men, 10 women, and 4 inches of snow up at Panamint, and lively times are expected."

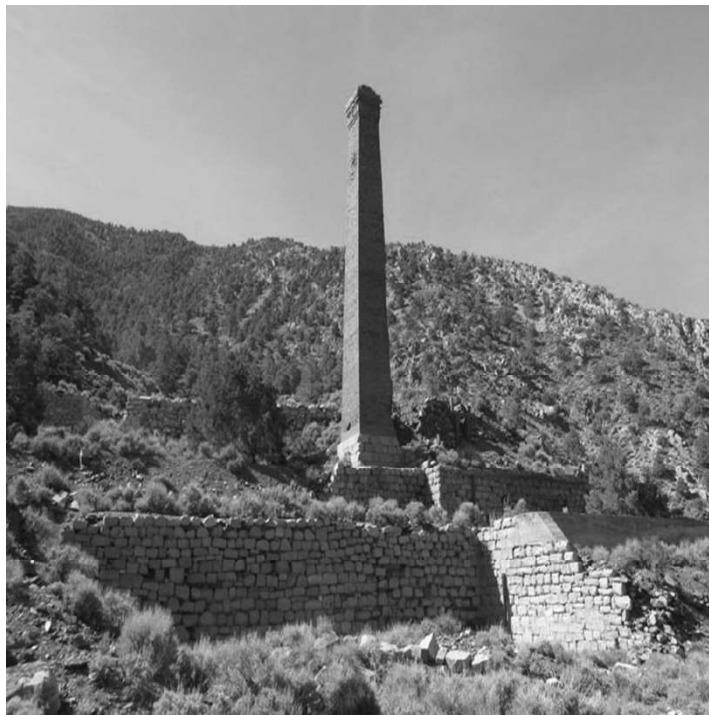
The new town soon gained a reputation for lawlessness, with 50 to 60 men, depending on the source, killed here during its short existence. It stretched for more than a mile along a steep canyon, too narrow for a second parallel street. Heavy freight wagons had a difficult time negotiating the steep grade, and many of the supplies had to come in by pack mule. Nevertheless, the population soon soared to 5,000.

Right from the start, Wells Fargo refused to handle the Panamint City bullion because of the multitude of highwaymen plying their trade nearby. In order to foil potential thieves, the silver was cast into 400-pound cubes about one foot on a side, not in 750-pound spherical "cannonballs," as is often and erroneously reported. [Casting spherical objects is labor intensive and technical, as spherical molds are very difficult to manufacture. Round castings would also be difficult to store and handle, while providing no offsetting benefit]. Such chunks of metal were just too heavy for thieves to carry off quickly. The heavy ingots were routinely carried in the unguarded wagons of freighter Remi Nadeau, without any loss. The one attempt made on the wagons resulted in nothing more than a very irate group of would-be robbers!

A steam engine and boiler were freighted up steep Surprise Canyon piecemeal and reassembled at the top, where a 20-stamp mill was eventually built. As the boom expanded and traffic increased, a small settlement sprang up around Post Office Spring. It served as a supply and transportation node for the mines in



20-stamp mill at Panamint City during its heyday



Mill after the boom

Surprise Canyon, and stage and freight lines began to run regularly between San Bernardino and Panamint City. The remote crossroads that would later become Ballarat began to take shape.

By 1875, however, the silver had pretty well played out. There was a slow but steady exodus to the new mines at Darwin, just a short distance to the west. A flash flood in 1876 is said to have carried away much of what remained of the town. The mill shut down in 1877, leaving only foundations and the tall brick chimney. The boom at Panamint, rich but short-lived, was over, although a post office remained until 1895.

In the mid-1970s, after obtaining his first 4WD vehicle, a '74 Toyota Land Cruiser, the author made a total of three attempts to reach Panamint City. In those days, barring a recent flash flood or other calamity, one could drive relatively easily to the site. On two of those attempts I was successful, and was able to view the chimney and other remains of the former boomtown. In later years, landslides rendered the spot impassable except to extreme rock-crawling vehicles and requiring multiple winching operations. It is now within a designated Wilderness Area and accessible only to hikers, and very difficult to reach even on foot. I am glad to have had the opportunity to visit.

Ballarat, not yet known as such, dwindled, but managed to hang on. It continued to serve as a social and commercial center for the locals. Also, the Modoc and Minnietta Mines, a short distance north on the other side of Panamint Valley, were very active during the late 1870s, helping to keep the settlement alive. The smelters at the two mines were the destination for the charcoal produced in the famous Wildrose charcoal kilns. Prospecting and mining continued on through the '80s and '90s, and by 1900 the town boasted a store, saloon, and blacksmith shop.

### **GOLD STRIKES NEAR THE TURN OF THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY**

In 1896 gold was discovered in Pleasant Canyon, in the Panamint Mountains 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 came into existence. [In geographical terms, park means an open valley or basin in the mountains, as in Estes Park, CO]. Located at around the same time were the Anthony, Cooper, and World Beater Mines. Meanwhile, there were similar finds in adjacent canyons: the Oh, Be Joyful (named after a brand of whiskey popular at the time) in Tuber Canyon and the Gem

in Jail Canyon. [Tuber is a corruption of “tuba,” the Shoshonean word for pinyon nuts.].

As a result of these finds, it was decided to lay out a proper town on the flats below Pleasant Canyon, where there was room to grow. Accordingly, in 1897 a 40-acre townsite was surveyed and christened Ballarat after the Australian mining district which boomed near Melbourne in 1851 (more on this later). It is said that the name was proposed by one George Riggins, an Australian emigrant and resident of the town.

A few months later a post office (other than the mesquite tree at Post Office Spring!) was established, and by 1900 the town reached its peak population of about 500 residents. It was home to the two-story Callaway Hotel, with a lower level constructed of adobe and an upper story of wood with a veranda on all four sides. It also boasted two stores, a Wells, Fargo office and stage depot, a jail, and a schoolhouse, as well as a red-light district and about a dozen saloons, all overseen by a constable and a justice of the peace. For some years it served as the seat of government of southern Inyo County, but the small town never did have a church.

Of the aforementioned saloons, that of Chris Wicht was generally conceded to be the best and most popular, probably because it had the town’s only pool table. The table came around Cape Horn to San Francisco, and was then laboriously freighted up to Panamint City during the boom. Chris obtained it when the silver camp died. Unlike some desert towns, water was never a problem, as there was an ample supply from a well drilled out on the flat and pumped by a windmill.

Ballarat’s importance was not so much based on its own merits, but rather on the fact that it was on the way to somewhere else. It became an important supply center for the mines in the Argus Mountains and the Slate Range to the west, as well as those in the Panamints. It was a major factor in the development of the entire region. Stagecoach and freight lines ran three times a week to Johannesburg and Darwin. At first there were two rival camps in the vicinity, one at Panamint City and one at Post Office Spring, but both were eventually absorbed by Ballarat. Although it sometimes pretended otherwise, the town was actually relatively sedate. Ironically, its only homicide occurred in 1905, when the constable shot and killed the justice of the peace!

The most important mines in the region were the Ratcliff claims, whose best years were from 1898 to 1903. More than 300 miners were employed here, and it is estimated that perhaps one million dollars in gold was extracted. At one time there were mills of twenty stamps at the Ratcliff, ten at the Oh Be Joyful, five at the Anthony Mine, and four at the Cooper, all operating at the same time. The Ratcliff



shut down in 1905, but the tailings were subsequently reworked between 1927 and 1942 using the cyanide process, yielding another \$250,000.

1901 saw a major rush to the new finds at Tonopah, Nevada. For a while mining activity around Ballarat shut down almost completely, and although some of the local claims gradually resumed operations, Ballarat never really recovered. It continued to serve the locals, although at a much-reduced level. The town finally folded around the time of World War I, and the post office closed in 1917. Two of the most legendary desert rats of the Death Valley region, Frank “Shorty” Harris and Seldom Seen Slim, became long-term residents of the dying town, and today lend their mystique to the ghost town of Ballarat.

### **THE “OTHER,” ORIGINAL BALLARAT**

Probably many readers of this article have heard that Ballarat derives its name from a mining district in Victoria, Australia, but know little beyond that bare fact. It therefore seems appropriate at this point to give a little background on the town’s namesake. The original Ballarat is located in the southeastern portion of Australia, approximately 60 miles northwest of, and inland from, Melbourne. Today it has a population of about 116,000, making it the third-largest city, after Melbourne and Geelong, in the state of Victoria, one of six states that make up the island country.

The Ballarat region was originally populated by Indigenous Australian people. It was first visited by Europeans in 1837, when a group of settlers from the coast entered the area in search of grazing land for their herds of sheep. Among that party were two Scottish brothers, Archibald and William Yuille, who returned a year later and squatted on a 10,000-acre sheep ranch. Originally known by outsiders as Yuille’s Station, the area was called Ballaarat by Archibald Yuille. It is generally accepted that the name derives from the Aboriginal words *balla* and *arat*, meaning resting place, although another claim is that it comes from the words *Baile Ararat*, which in Yuille’s native language, Scottish Gaelic, means Town of Ararat, alluding to the last resting place of Noah’s Ark on Mt. Ararat. The current spelling, minus the double “a,” was only officially adopted in 1996.

In 1851 Victoria separated from the original Australian colony known as New South Wales. A few months later, on August 2, 1851, gold was discovered nearby, kicking off the Victorian gold boom. Prospectors immediately rushed to the area, and on August 19 a second gold strike was recorded in the area. Within days, thousands of miners rushed to the Yarrowee River and Valley, and the district

became known as the Ballarat diggings. The alluvial deposits were rich, typically yielding from one-half ounce (more than the daily wage at the time) to five ounces of gold per man per day. This was considered a very rich strike, and there was a huge influx of miners, many of them from Ireland and China. Within a few months the population had swelled to over 1,000.

The region was surveyed in October and a post office opened in November. The first newspaper, *The Banner*, was established in September of 1853. The rush included a sizable group of miners from the California gold rush, who were dubbed “Ballifornians.”

In November of 1854 a large group of miners assembled in protest of the government’s regulation of the gold mines, perceived by the miners as unfair and heavy-handed. The protest grew, and British troops were sent in. On December 3, the soldiers fired on the crowd, resulting in the deaths of 22 miners and 6 soldiers. The Eureka Rebellion, as the uprising was known, coincidentally led to the introduction of male suffrage in Australia, and today Australians consider this a defining moment in their country’s history and the beginning of Australian democracy.

By 1858 the population peaked at 60,000, mainly transient male miners. As the gold played out and miners left for richer diggings, this number fell to about 23,000. This level, however, was sustained by a stable economy based on a shift to deep underground mining, which persisted until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, an anomaly in the typical gold rush cycle of “boom and bust.” Today Ballarat is a thriving modern city, and is considered the commercial capital of the area called the Central Highlands. Although its original industries of mining and agriculture still persist, it is known today more for its history and colonial heritage and is a significant tourist destination.



Flag of the Eureka Rebellion: white cross on a blue field

## FAMOUS DENIZENS OF BALLARAT

### SHORTY HARRIS

One of most iconic characters in the history of the Death Valley region is the self-proclaimed “single-blanket jackass prospector,” Frank “Shorty” Harris. Although short in stature, standing about five feet four and with legs short in proportion to his body, he nevertheless looms large in his contributions to the legends and tales of Death Valley.

Shorty was born in Providence, Rhode Island on July 21, 1857 (although his grave marker says 1856). His father was Irish and his mother Scottish. He became an orphan at age seven, and was sent to live with his father’s sister. At the tender age of eleven he was working in a textile mill making calico cloth. Such employment was evidently not to his taste, and when he was fourteen he ran away from his aunt, thereby beginning a checkered career that led him all over the country. This was the age of the hobo, and Shorty was a frequent rider of the rails, said to have once hitched a ride on a train carrying President Ulysses S. Grant.

By 1877 he had reached Los Angeles. From here he branched out, working odd jobs in Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, and Montana. The late 1880s found him in Death Valley. On St. Patrick’s Day of 1892, he and a partner located what would become his first claim, a modest strike in the Panamint Mountains. Having no desire to perform the heavy work of mining the claim, he sold his share and set off in pursuit of yet another strike. This set the tone for his continuing pattern of finding a rich claim and selling it off, leaving those who came after to reap the benefits. He was said to be able to find gold as easily as other people could catch a cold, but he never personally struck it rich.



Shorty Harris, a single-blanket jackass prospector, at work

His most famous find was the Bullfrog claim, named for the greenish color of the ore. He and partner Ed Cross located the find in early 1904 in southwestern Nevada's Amargosa Desert. The Bullfrog District is said to have produced \$1.7 million in gold between 1907 and 1910. Harris and Cross did not share in the wealth: Cross sold out early for \$125,000, and Shorty, again depending on the source, either was cheated out of his half or sold out for a pittance. In his own inimitable style, he promptly gambled or gave away the proceeds and set out to discover the next big strike. Stories like this, as appealing as they are, are to be viewed with a grain of salt, for Shorty was a teller of tall tales, and seldom related the same story twice in the same way.

Shortly after this episode, he located claims near Skidoo and another that came to be called Harrisburg. He discovered it with his partner at the time, Pete Aguerberry. The district probably was intended to be called Harrisberry, but the press corrupted it to Harrisburg, depriving Aguerberry of his rightful credit. Shorty did nothing to correct the error, but this seems likely to be due to apathy or disinterest, rather than evil intent, on Shorty's part.

Another story is that of Shorty's "funeral" in Ballarat. In remote mining districts where recreational opportunities were limited, the Fourth of July was a major holiday, often lasting several days. About the third day of one such celebration, when the festivities were beginning to wind down, it was noted that Shorty had been under the influence (passed out) for quite some time. A plan was concocted both to sober him up and to have a little fun at his expense. A rough wooden box the size of a coffin was banged together and Shorty, wrapped up in an old sheet so only his face was showing, was placed gently in the box. The box was displayed on the pool table at Chris Wicht's saloon, a main gathering place for the miners. Candles were placed all around, and the audience began its vigil.

Around dark, Shorty began to come out of his stupor. The whole town was alerted, some of whom weren't in on the scheme and thought Shorty was really dead. The candles were lit, and amidst outpourings of grief, some real and some feigned, Shorty opened his eyes and took in the scene. Then the pranksters blew out the candles and announced that they were ready to take the coffin to the cemetery, at which point Shorty recognized the seriousness of the situation and began to yell. It is reported that he promptly left the comfort of his "coffin" and lit out for parts unknown, and was not seen again in Ballarat for some time.

Shorty was a drinker and a tale-teller, but he was also kind and trustworthy in his dealings with others. He often left pans of water out near his campsites for the local animals, and encouraged others to do the same. Although he was more

interested in working his jaws than working a mine, he would feed a hungry miner or help another human being in need without a second thought, and was respected by his peers for his uncanny ability to find gold in the desert. He was a friend of all the early pioneers, including Charlie Brown, Pete Aguerberry, Bob Montgomery, Dad Fairbanks, H. W. Eichbaum, Old Man Beatty, Jim Dayton, and many others, and he knew the desert trails as well as any man alive. He had a burning passion for prospecting, and is quoted as saying "When I go out, every time my foot touches the ground, I think 'before the sun goes down I'll be worth \$10 million.'" When reminded that he never obtained such riches, his reply was "Who in the hell wants \$10 million? It's the game, man—the game!"

As he grew older, he spent his days at Ballarat, where he lived in the abandoned adobe schoolhouse while continuing to prospect in the surrounding mountains, always hoping for the next big thing. In 1933 he yanked on a random piece of wire sticking out of the wall of his home, causing the adobe wall to collapse on him. He lay there for 60 hours with broken ribs and other serious injuries before being discovered. He was taken to the hospital in Trona, where he hovered near death for several days, not expected to recover.

He defied the odds, however, and was taken in by friends who nursed him for months. He returned for a short time to Ballarat, but relapsed while once again out prospecting in his weakened condition. While being driven back to Ballarat, he asked to stop at the grave of his friend, Jim Dayton, on the valley floor on today's Westside Road. He placed a few wildflowers on the grave, and stated that he wanted to be buried here, next to Dayton, and said "Above me write, 'Here lies Shorty Harris, a single blanket jackass prospector.'"

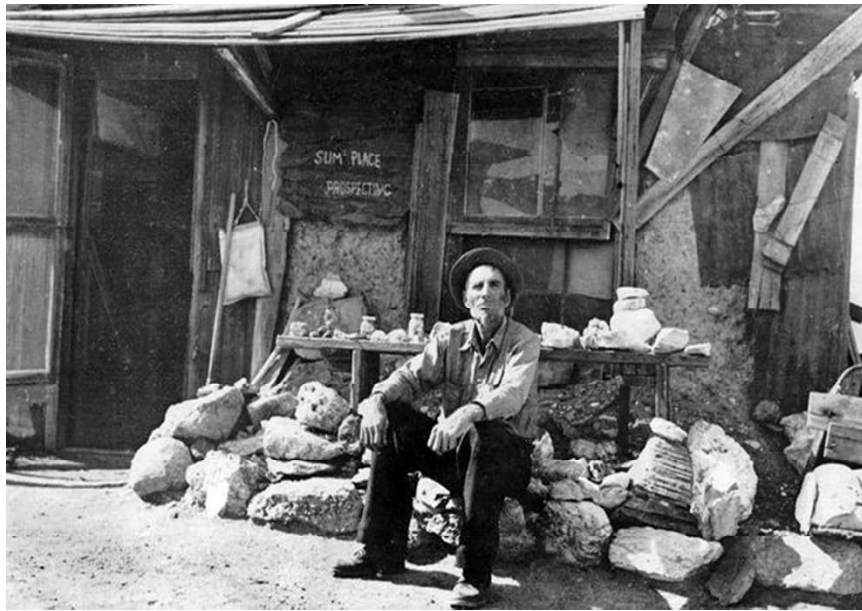


At home in Ballarat

Shorty died at Lone Pine on November 10, 1934. The next day, his body was brought to Furnace Creek, where a large caravan of friends and admirers was gathered. About one in the afternoon, the procession started out, reaching the gravesite late in the afternoon. The grave, having been dug with a short man in mind, was too short for the casket. While the hole was being lengthened, the casket was opened and the mourners paid their respects. A proper funeral was conducted, "Taps" was played, and Shorty Harris was laid to rest in the valley he loved. Fifteen months later the National Park Service erected the monument and bronze plaque that may still be seen today. A pilgrimage to the site is highly recommended to any Clamper with an interest in the history of the Death Valley region.

### **SELDOM SEEN SLIM**

After the death of Shorty Harris, the population dwindled, and Ballarat eventually supported only a single permanent resident. His given name was Charles Ferge, but he came to be universally known as Seldom Seen Slim. Perhaps because he was seen so seldom, little is known about his life. He was born in Springfield, Illinois on November 21, 1881. He prospected and worked at all kinds of odd jobs in places like Tonopah, Goldfield, Bullfrog, and Rhyolite, settling in Ballarat around 1913. He eventually became the self-appointed Mayor of Ballarat, as well as postmaster, dogcatcher, and tax collector. In his official capacity, he set the speed limit in town, proclaiming it to be "100 miles an hour—in low gear."



Slim in Ballarat, sometime prior to his trailer-dwelling days

Slim was notorious for his lack of personal hygiene. When someone once asserted that he had not taken a bath in 40 years, he denounced the slur as a damned lie, assuring his accuser that he had taken one as recently as “last July.” He did admit, however, that from time to time he poured water over his head to cool himself off. He further clarified that he had a haircut and a bath once a year in Trona. In answer to the inevitable questions from visitors as to his being lonely, he replied “Me lonely? Hell no! I’m half coyote and half wild burro!” This sentiment is inscribed on his grave marker and serves as his epitaph.

Slim lived in various old adobes in town until they became too dilapidated to inhabit. After a fire drove him out of one such structure, he sort of camped out for a while before obtaining a small travel trailer, in which he lived at the end of Main Street for many years. He tidied up the Ballarat cemetery from time to time, perhaps realizing he would one day be interred 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. He was buried in the cemetery he had tended for so many years. It seems that Slim, Shorty Harris, and other denizens of the town would probably have made good Clamper material!



Slim in Trona, date unknown

Long-time Billy Holcomb Clamper Don Odenbach, along with his brother Bob (now gone to the Golden Hills) related to the author that they had once visited Slim in his trailer. They told me that reports of his lack of attention to regular ablutions were definitely true, and said they were very glad to get out of the trailer and into the open air at visit's end.

### **LATTER DAYS AT BALLARAT**

Only 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-LaBianca 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. Most readers are probably familiar with these events, and it will be touched upon here only lightly. The prisoners were held for a while at the Inyo County Jail in Independence, then transferred to the LA County Jail. This incident was portrayed in the movie "Helter-Skelter" and detailed in Bob Murphy's 1986 book "Desert Shadows." The book is very much recommended for anyone interested in Manson's Death Valley adventures. It is said that the derelict Dodge Power Wagon at Ballarat still sports doodlings of several of the Manson Family girls on the inside of the cab.

For a long, long time it appeared that large-scale mining in the Panamints was to be found only in the history books. In 1996, however, the Briggs Mine in Redlands Canyon began operations. It is a large open-pit gold mine, utilizing the heap-leach cyanide process. Active mining lasted for about ten years, and after that period heap-leaching continued on previously extracted ore. The current status of the mine is unknown. Although not as picturesque as the remains of early-day mining operations, it continues a history of mining in the Panamint Mountains and Panamint Valley regions that goes back for a century and a half. This area has a rich history, spectacular desert scenery, and the Death Valley mystique that will continue to enthrall visitors for many years to come.

### **BALLARAT PLAQUES**

At the junction where the dirt road to Ballarat turns off there is a series of three plaques. One of them, painted bright yellow with letters cut out of a sheet of steel with a welding torch, gives a brief history of the town. At the bottom, it states



that it was erected by the Trona Chapter of the Death Valley Escape Trails Conference. This monument has intrigued the author for many years. Any attempts to Google up some information on such a conference yielded only a picture of the plaque itself, and diligent searching failed to turn up any additional data. However, while preparing this article, I tried once again, and was able to turn up a few snippets of information which seem to solve the mystery. This came about when members of the group, in response to such searches, spoke out on the subject.

From Bill Gossett, a.k.a. Wild Bill, a founding member:

Came across your web site [[www.4crawler.com/Death Valley](http://www.4crawler.com/Death%20Valley)] and saw the bit about Fish Canyon and the Trona Chapter of the Escape Trail Conference. The group was started to preserve the history of the routes of the Death Valley '49ers. Leonard Collard and I were the founders of the group. We put up several markers along the trail but unfortunately, Leonard was killed in a motorcycle accident. Leonard was the real mover and shaker of the group. His passion for the history of the '49ers was what really led to the formation of the Escape Trail conference....

From Elijah Collard, son of Rev. Leonard Collard:

I am Elijah Leon Collard and my brother is Aaron....Dad and I hiked out of Death Valley to Trona about 10 years ago with a video crew (documentary is still not finished).... Dad died in a motorcycle accident in the Yukon Territory...just three months after we climbed out of Death Valley. The Rogers Pass marker (up from Ballarat) was his last. If you notice the unique style you will also remember that the Ballarat turnoff sign on the highway is his work too. Quite a man.

...The Conference was a dream of my father's (Leonard Collard) who thought the trail used by the Bennett and Arcane families to escape the then-unnamed valley in 1849-1850 should be marked for hiking and for historical value....all the markers have a fresh coat of paint due to recent 4X4 trips of me, my nephew Bill Ahrens and my uncle Kenny Collard.

There are two types of markers. One is of sheet steel with the letters cut out with a torch. The others are 2"x 6" pieces of steel welded on top of a 4-foot piece of rebar, used to mark the trail of the Bennett-Arcane group. They show the letters ET with a directional arrow. There are seven markers of the first type, and the number of the second type is unclear. The author has personally only seen two of the first kind: the Ballarat turnoff marker and one commemorating the "Silent Sepulchre" in Fish Canyon in the Slate Range, and none of the second type. He now breathes a little more easily at night knowing that the mystery is now solved!



Death Valley Escape Trails Conference marker at Rogers Pass

There are also two Clamper plaques at the turnout. One commemorates the town itself. It was erected to replace a plaque placed by Slim Princess Chapter 395 in 1963, which was later stolen. It was placed during a joint Clampout held by Slim Princess and Billy Holcomb Chapters on October 12-14, 2001.

The third plaque commemorates the boomtown of Panamint City. It was funded and erected by a coalition of Yerba Buena, Slim Princess, Platrix, and Billy Holcomb Chapters in November of 2002 as a separate project not in conjunction with any Clamper event. It was primarily a plan of XSNGH Earl Schmidt, who was president of the Death Valley '49ers in 1990. It was the author's great honor to work with this legendary Clamper on the wording, and I felt a great sense of accomplishment when my efforts were approved by him without any corrections or amendments. There were very few people present for the erection, among them XNGHs Dave Dutcher, Mike "Smitty" Smith, and myself. The copper-pipe "telescope" which points to the site of Panamint City was my invention, for which I had to learn to solder copper tubing. I assumed it would be promptly stolen or vandalized, and am surprised that it is still present.

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- \*Belden, long ago gone to the Golden Hills, was instrumental in the founding of Billy Holcomb Chapter and served as its first Noble Grand Humbug.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Head Abbot Mark German, number eleven in a series of Head Abbots extending back more than three decades, for allowing me to be a part of his Society of Vituscan Missionaries excursion. History is the very foundation of our Order, and Mark's treks are always chock-full of it, along with a little plain old fun! The efficient operation of his "department" of our Chapter should serve as an example for others

Also, as always, thanks to Clamprinter XNGH Tim "Clearcut" Connacher, who routinely turns a bunch of files, images, emails, ideas, and opinions into an attractive, coherent history keepsake. It is an honor and a pleasure to do business with them both.

Mike "Doc" Johnson, XNGH and Dead Abbot II



### **A BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF HEAD ABBOT XI MARK GERMAN**

I was born in Corona in 1954 and graduated from Corona High School in 1972. I enlisted in the Navy at age 17. I served 6 years active duty as a Sonar Technician and rescue swimmer, leaving as a Petty Officer First Class (E-6). I then enlisted in the Naval Reserve, where I served 26 years, assigned to various ships and shore-based units. I retired in 2004 as a Senior Chief Sonar Technician, mostly specializing in anti-submarine warfare.

After leaving the military, I was employed as a firefighter by the Riverside County Fire Department and the U. S. Forest Service, working in both San Bernardino and Cleveland National Forests. While working for the Forest Service, I was assigned to wildland engine crews and did a short stint with the El Cariso Hotshots. That was followed by 29 years with the Long Beach Fire Department, working as Firefighter, Firefighter/Paramedic, Captain, and Battalion Chief. During that time, I managed OES (Office of Emergency Services) River/Flood Rescue Task Force 12 and OES Regional Urban Search and Rescue Task Force 3. I also worked for the Department of Homeland Security Pre-Position Support Team, for FEMA as an Operations and Logistics Specialist, and for the CDC during the Ebola epidemic. I have done a lot of traveling on the government dime!

Over that period of time, I earned Associate and Bachelor's Degrees in Fire Science/Technology, and a Master's Degree in Homeland Security.

I have been married for 44 years to another Corona High graduate, and we have three adult children, 2 boys and a girl. Both boys are Navy veterans, one serving as a "bird farm sailor" [aircraft carriers] and the other as a "sewer pipe sailor" [submarines], neither career as good as being a "tin can sailor" [destroyers and destroyer escorts]!

I entered the Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus in 2010 at Irvine Lake. I am proud to claim the illustrious "Turbo Dave" Hicks as my sponsor. I somehow let a couple of so-called Redshirt "friends," Scott "Scootertrash" Wall and Neal Samson, talk me into my current role as Head Abbot XI, and it's been all downhill since then! (Not really).

Now wake up and read this history of Ballarat and its colorful characters.