

# THE SAGA OF TURTLE VALLEY

By: W. Bernard Marston



TURTLE VALLEY – November 2003  
View from Turtle Mine

On March 3, 1877 the Desert Land Act passed by Congress became the law of the land, its purpose to encourage and promote the economic development of the arid and semi-arid public lands of the Western United States. Individuals could apply for a desert-land entry to reclaim, irrigate and cultivate those lands. The Act applied to government lands in twelve western states, including California. It originally allowed an entry on 640 acres, a full section, but in 1890 the Act was modified to limit to 320 acres the amount of government land one person could acquire. It was further modified in 1891 to require that improvements costing \$3.00 per acre be spent toward reclamation of the land and that persons could associate together in an irrigation project for their mutual benefit.

It was under these provisions of the Desert Land Act that my father, Walter Charles Marston, then aged 23 and unmarried, made application on March 22, 1912 to the General Land Office in Los Angeles for a desert land entry in San Bernardino County about twelve miles east of Victorville. Three hundred twenty acres were surveyed and staked out by my father with the assistance of a retired surveyor.

They were able to locate the bench-marks and monuments established by the original government survey performed around 1857, and an adjacent one hundred sixty acres was located by my uncle John B. Marston. My father's land comprised half of Section 27, Township 7N, Range 3W, San Bernardino Base & Meridian. My uncle's was partly in Section 27 and part in Section 22. I don't know when or how the area became known as Turtle Valley, but that is the designation on current USGS 7.5 minute topographical maps. It was apparently not called that in 1912.

My grandfather Edward Marston , born in England in 1856 and brought to America in 1871 at age 17 with his family, had in 1904 sold his grist mill in east Tennessee and moved to Los Angeles with his wife and three sons; my father Walter and uncles Julian and John. An accident involving a runaway team of horses left my grandfather unable to resume his job in Los Angeles as chief miller for the Globe A-1 flour mill, so in 1912 Edward joined his sons in their desert adventure.

Victorville in 1912 had not yet entered the automotive age. Although the AT&SF Railroad had reached there in 1883, local transportation in the desert was still largely by horse, mule or the prospector's burro. The cars available were expensive and notoriously unreliable. The revolution in the automobile industry by Henry Ford's introduction of the Model T had begun only three years earlier and had not yet made an impression on the desert southwest.

The Marstons decided to purchase a team and wagon in Los Angeles to serve their transportation needs in the new venture. A wagon and a pair of horses named Black and Roan were acquired and then the one hundred mile trip over the mountains was planned. At that time the road over the Cajon Pass was still a rutted wagon trail. My grandfather and uncle Julian loaded the wagon with camping equipment and household goods, left the Marston home on Towne Avenue in Los Angeles and headed east through the San Gabriel Valley.



Leaving Towne Avenue home, Los Angeles 1912

They camped the first night on Baldwin Avenue in Arcadia, near the location that many years later was to become my long-time home. The second night they were at Devore at the foot of the Cajon Pass.

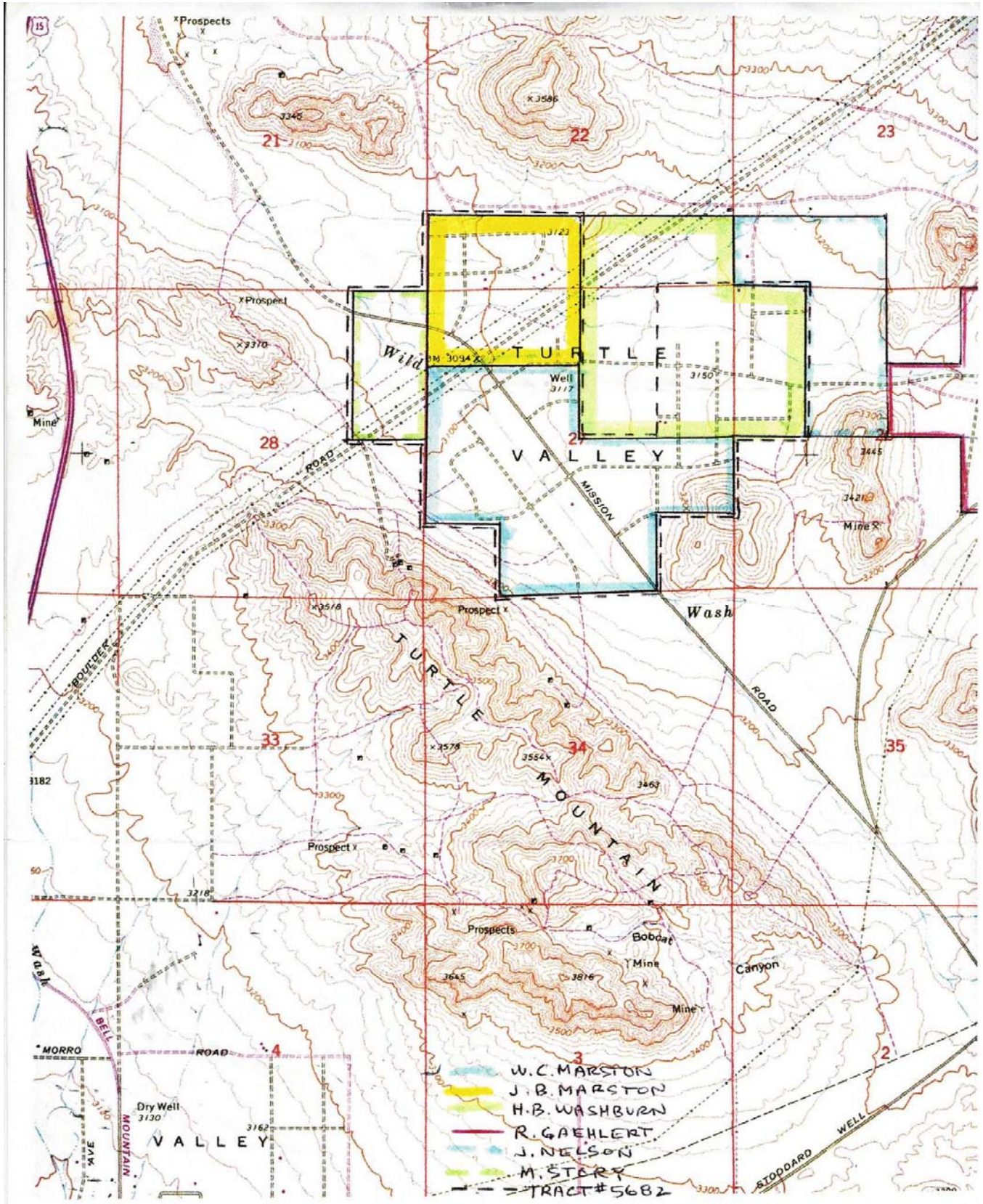


Edward Marston camped at Devore – 1912



Cajon Pass – 1912

# TOPOGRAPHIC MAP OF TURTLE VALLEY SHOWING SUBDIVISIONS



Late on the third day they arrived in Victorville after traversing the primitive wagon road over the pass. The final 13 miles from Victorville to the selected property by way of the old Stoddard Wells road and other desert traces was accomplished the next day, passing through the sizeable black community then existing in the Bell Mountain area.

An area of twenty acres was cleared and they built a double tent-house and shed/stable for the horses.





The next need was for a well to alleviate the chore of hauling water in barrels from the Sidewinder well several miles away.



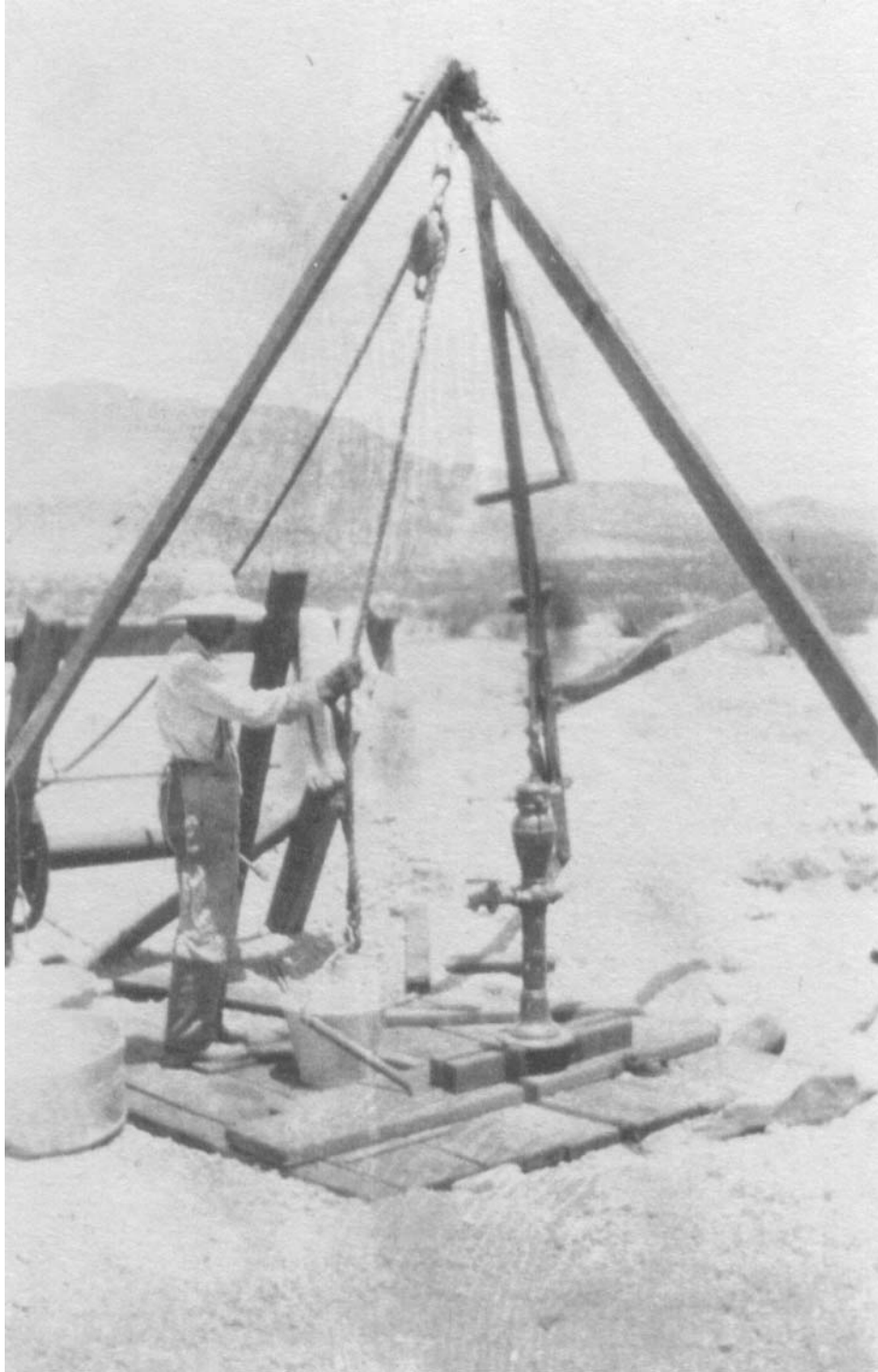
E.J. Marston hauling water with Black & Roan.

A one-legged black man and his young son dug a well about 130 feet deep with a shovel, bucket and winch that provided water for domestic use, but it was unlined and rather hazardous.

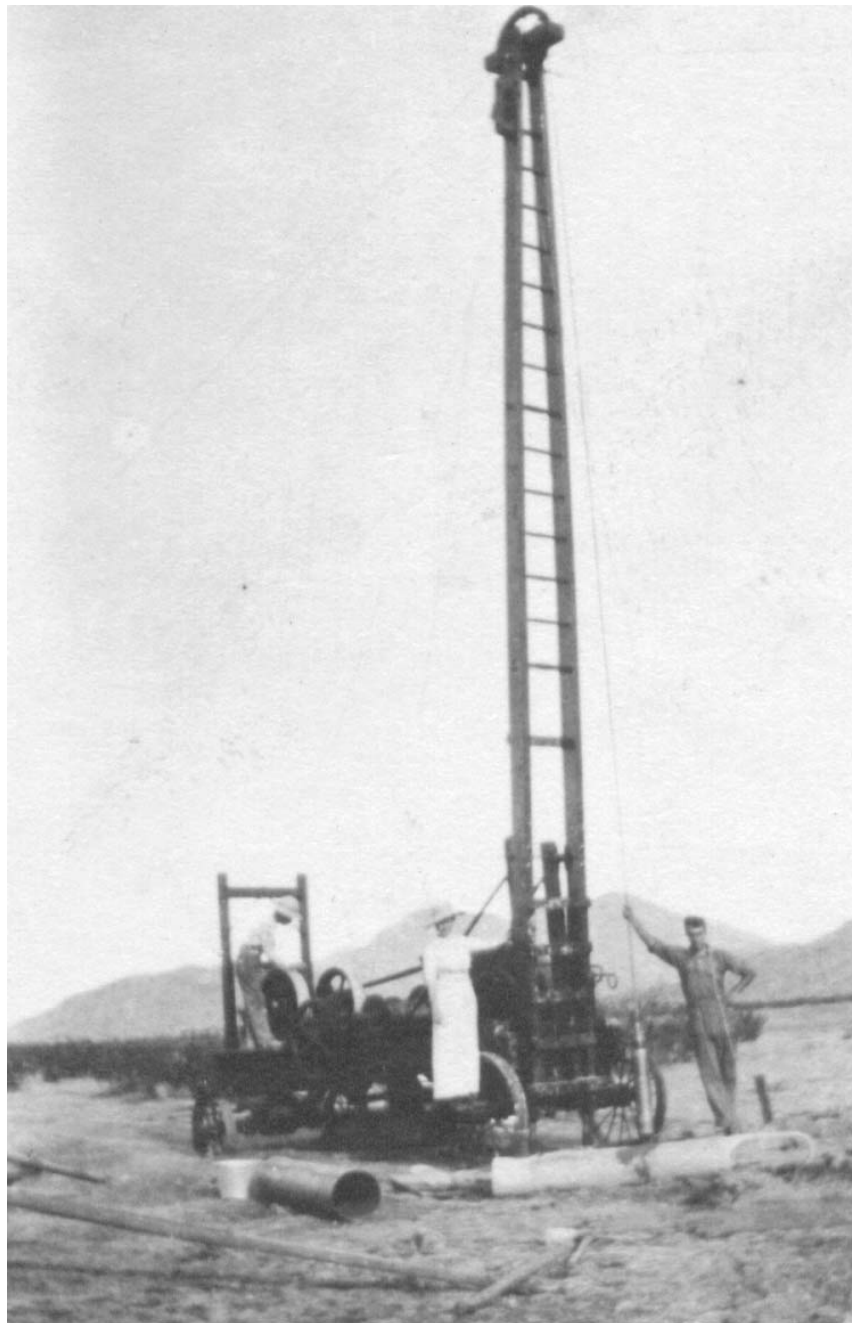


Anton Gloetzner & W.C. Marston at hand-dug well – 1913



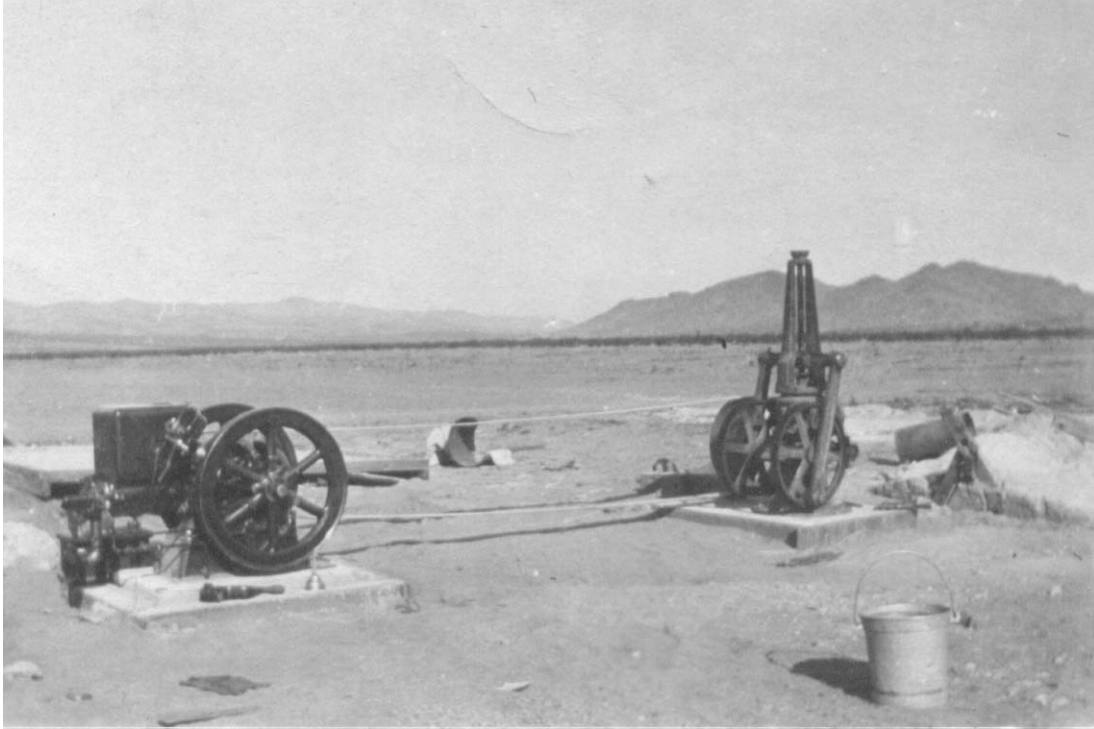


To meet the requirements of the Desert Land Act my father, my uncle John and Anton Gloetzner, an adjacent entryman entered into an agreement to jointly develop a source of water to irrigate their respective parcels. The agreement specified that the well would be on John Marston's property but the only successful well was on Dad's land.



Emma Mae Moncrief & W.C. Marston on drilling rig.

A used cable-type well drilling rig was purchased, and eight wells were dug around the area. Four were dry holes and three just produced a seepage of water. The one good well rewarding their efforts passed through water-bearing strata at 142-148 feet and at 160 feet they hit solid rock. After continuing to a total depth of 310 feet in the rock drilling was abandoned. They decided to let well enough alone and installed a pump and 4 HP Fairbanks Morse engine to operate it.



This well was lined with steel well casing and produced 20-25 gallons per minute. It was no great gusher but a significant amount in the desert, although not near enough to irrigate the amount of acreage specified by the Land Act. It has since been speculated that the presence of the Helendale fault under the property was responsible for the success of the single well. The pump and engine were enclosed in a barn-like pumphouse and a large elevated water tank was constructed.



Later were to come a chicken/turkey house and a ten acre apple orchard.





Edward Marston cultivating in apple orchard

After a change in the Homestead Act reducing the time for “proving up” from five to three years my father on March 2, 1914 filed an application with the Commissioner of the General Land Office to change his desert land entry to a homestead under the Enlarged Homestead Act.

Dry farming was attempted according to the requirements of the Act. For three years oats, wheat or kaffir corn were planted without enough success to pay for the seed. An application for relief was made and granted on April 17, 1916 according to provisions of the Act to exempt them from the dry farming requirements. However, instead of changing the desert land entry to a homestead and in view of the \$2,700.00 dollars he had expended on improvements, my father was allowed to purchase the 320 acres for \$240.00 in addition to the \$80.00 per year he had paid for three years. In 1917 land patent No. 015115 was issued to Walter C. Marston and in 1922 a patent for the additional 160 acres was issued to my uncle John B. Marston. Adjacent homesteaders, Harry B. Washburn, John Nelson and Richard Gaehlert also received patents on their claims but some adjacent filers such as Anton Gloetzner later relinquished their claims without gaining title.

By 1918 my grandfather Edward apparently tired of desert life as he and his wife Annie returned to Los Angeles. By then my father had married and he and uncle John also had returned to employment in that city. My uncle Julian had taken off to build railroads in Mexico and South America. The Marston property was abandoned as were all the neighboring homesteads; however, my father faithfully paid the taxes until selling the acreage in 1945.

The author, Walter Bernard Marston was born in Los Angles in 1922. My earliest recollection of the Mojave Desert was at the age of six or seven on a trip in our 1927 Hupmobile. The road over Cajon Pass was paved by then and Dad considered it a tremendous improvement over the old wagon road. Even so we had our problems. Boiling radiators were common, and ours was no exception, although some years later a mechanic discovered that some cooling holes in the engine were blocked. We persevered and got over Cajon summit to enjoy our first glimpse of the high desert and the long straight downgrade into Victorville.

At that time Victorville was the same tiny desert cowtown that it had remained for decades; a far cry from the bustling city it is today. The old Highway 66 dumped one into the middle of town at right angles to D Street, which was paralleled by the railroad tracks and the Mojave River. To continue to Barstow one turned left on a long dogleg along the river to Oro Grande and Helendale before heading further east, but to get to our destination we turned right and crossed the river on the old bridge south of town.

There the pavement ended and we continued on the Stoddard Well road and various rutted dirt traces past Bell Mountain on the route Dad had often traveled many years before.

My six-year-old enthusiasm was kindled by my first view of the valley where members of my family had lived for several years. The buildings and equipment were much the same as they had been left in 1918. I remember my father saying that after ten years only the crank and battery box from the engine were missing. The water tank and pumphouse were in good condition, but the tent-house was showing it's age and the ten acres of apple trees had long since died, only their gaunt skeletons remaining. The other homesteaders in the area had all left by then. When we returned a year or so later one side of the pumphouse was missing as was the Fairbanks-Morse engine. The cast iron arms of the pump-jack were broken off, apparently just for the small value of the metal as scrap.

Trips to the desert ranch as we called it were few and far between in those days, largely because it took so much effort to get there. One incident that I remember concerns an elderly black couple, Tom and Eve, that Dad remembered from the time he lived in Turtle Valley. The couple had lived in the area around Bell Mountain for many years and Dad decided that he would give them a radio to put them more in touch with the outside world. We took out a set he had built and installed a long wire antenna. They had no electricity but most radio receivers in those days operated on batteries anyway. They had no battery charger and dry batteries were not as efficient as they are now so I don't know how long the set functioned but it worked well when we departed.

I first experienced the breathtaking speed of sixty miles per hour (We're going a mile a minute!) in a 1930 Model A Ford as we sped down that long straight stretch of highway from the Cajon Pass to Victorville.

Unfortunately, during the Great Depression of the 1930's the abandoned property was too great a temptation for desert dwellers and piece-by-piece everything disappeared until by 1932 all that remained was the well dug by my father in 1913. Even the pump had been taken out of the well casing. I remember a trip where Dad bolted a steel plate over the well to keep people from throwing things in it.



A short time after that Dad was approached by John T. Bennett, a cattleman living in Oro Grande who had somehow discovered our abandoned well. He had grazing leases in the vicinity and due to a series of wet winters the desert had sprouted a lot of cattle fodder. Bennett signed a lease to water his cattle. Two telephone poles were rigged over the well as a makeshift derrick to install a pump and a galvanized steel building was erected to house the pumping equipment. This building later also contained equipment to pump water to the Turtle Mine.



John Bennett at his 100 year old cabin at Oro Grande – 1933  
with Mrs. W. C. Marston & the author , age 10.



A few months later the Turtle Mine was started on one of the surrounding hills and the miners needed water for a mill, so Dad sold water to them which they pumped through a pipeline they installed from our well to the mine.



Hoover Dam was nearing completion in the early 1930's and the 287,000 volt power lines linking the dam's generators with the city of Los Angeles were being built, the route cutting across one corner of our acreage. The Los Angeles Bureau of Power and Light, part of the Department of Water and Power, was looking for a site for a construction camp and became aware of the existence of our well, the only available water in the area. A multi-year lease with the Bureau resulted in the building of a camp housing two hundred construction workers. In conjunction with this they put in a new pump, pumphouse, water tank, generator house, mess hall, storage facilities and garage for vehicle maintenance as well as the tent-houses for the workers.



Victorville Construction Camp – LADWP – 1936





When it came time to negotiate for the power line right-of-way across our property Dad managed to make a very attractive deal. He asked for the pump, pumphouse, water tank, garage building and one tent-house. At first the powers that be at the Bureau of Power and Light would not take his request seriously, being accustomed to paying only a few cents an acre for desert right-of-way. Dad persevered and eventually they agreed to his proposal and we found ourselves with a useable week-end retreat when the lease ended in 1936. This was during my teen years and I enjoyed spending week-ends there, often accompanied by friends Kent and Earl Kuester.



Pumphouse built by LABPL

World War II came along to interfere with our lives and with gasoline rationing and the war production effort it was no longer possible to visit our desert hide-away. In 1944 Dad was approached by cattlemen from Texas ranching interests who wanted to run cattle on the land and it was leased to them. A couple of years later they bought Dad's 320 acres and also my uncle John's adjoining 160 acres. The new owners built a small concrete block residence, corrals, etc. and seemed to operate profitably for several years. Then a succession of dry winters produced no cattle feed and the place was again abandoned.

In 1963 I had occasion to travel to Las Vegas to pick up some equipment and on the return trip I mentioned to my son John that we could jog over from Barstow to Daggett and travel down the power line maintenance road that crossed Dad's old property. After a couple of hours working our way around various locked gates and dealing with other difficulties we arrived at the abandoned and vandalized house and remnants of the pumphouse, water tank and garage. Imagine our surprise when we heard traffic noise and looked to the northwest to see Interstate 15 about a mile away. Also surprising was evidence of a subdivision on the property with roads scratched out of the sagebrush complete with street signs.





Remains of LABPL Pumphouse - 1963

I have since visited the property several times; once about 1970 in a Cessna 185 aircraft piloted by Kent Kuester, one of my boyhood friends who had been my guest there years before and in the interim had been a Marine fighter pilot and airline Captain. We landed and took off on what was designated as Mission Road.



I did not return again for several years but when I drove in from I-15 in 1981 I found the place much as I had last seen it except for the evidence of considerable use by off-road vehicles. The subdivision streets had pretty much gone back to sagebrush and no trace of the buildings remained except the floor for the garage and the concrete around the wellhead, including the base for the original pump engine and one of the foundation blocks for the first water tank built in 1913. The steel casing of Dad's well was filled with rocks. I hauled the foundation block home for a souvenir.



LABPL Water tank – 1963 – Riddled with bullet holes





Well in 1981. Note original 1913 engine mount in foreground.

I have recently obtained more specific information about the subdivision. It was recorded in 1959 as Tract No. 5682 comprising 231 lots of approximately two and one-half acres each. I made a map overlay showing the boundaries of the subdivision in relation to the earlier homesteads and determined that the entire subdivision is on the acreage originally entered under the Desert Land Act by my father Walter C. Marston, my uncle John B. Marston, Harry Washburn, Marshall Story and John Nelson. The individual lots are still in private hands and individuals are paying taxes on them. Several have been sold at tax auctions over the years but most are current. There is no water within miles of the land and an aerial photo shows only five or six structures in the entire area. The proximity to I-15 would seem to make it attractive for future development but that would seem to be many years in the future. I also question the attractiveness of twelve 287,000 volt power lines cutting through the middle of the tract.

I again visited the property in November, 2003 with my step-sons Mike and Larry Kuester. Everything was pretty much as it was in 1981. Off-roaders still use the clearing and various dirt roads for recreation. Dad's rock-filled well and the foundations for the garage and water tank from the power line construction camp still remain, as well as several concrete watering troughs for cattle.



Garage foundation – 2003





Remains of LABPL water tank - 2003



Well head - 2003



1913 engine mount - 2003

We also visited the old Turtle Mine in November 2003. My step-sons, who had been in the mine several times in the past, climbed down and investigated the only remaining open shaft. It is now blocked not many feet below the surface and there is no access to the several tunnels that formed the original mine. I am still looking for information on the original operators. The remains of the tank that received water through a pipeline from Dad's well are still dug into the hillside above the mine adits.





Turtle Mine – November 2003



Remains of water tank – Turtle Mine – November 2003

It would seem that, for better or for worse, the Desert Land Act served its original purpose of putting some excess government land to use in private hands. It also created an interesting chapter in my family history.

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