

Bobette Perrone

Days of 'Swedes' recalled in lush Pipes Canyon of 1930

Editor's note: Bobette Perrone, whose mother is Dorothy Sall, is not only a very talented writer, but she writes with authority, having been a young child in 1930 in Pipes Canyon. Her "Goat Road" below recounts in loving detail memories of her childhood and the Swedes, who worked the mine.

"Goat Road"

By Bobette Perrone

There is a dry wash in a dry desert that cuts and spreads unnoticed over a still, barren land, and, once upon a time, only a crow's flight away, there lived John Olson, Swedish tender of goats.

The desert people I once knew grew their rut roads to one side of the wash, always trying to avoid the soft tire-clutching sand of the rabbit-tracked lifeline that climbed toward the distant mountains. Over the lava stream black earth the rut road crawls until, reaching the wash bed, it drops into the sand where carefully it works its way around the edge of the barren plateaus that huddle together as if by uniting them, could hold back the loneliness of their burned world. The rut road crawls just the lava lands, over the deceptive sand, and leaving the last hot shadow of the plateau people behind, it traces its way across the uninterrupted quiet. It becomes just one more track in the desert, winding and slithering its way among the yellowed yuccas.

The distant mountains lose their purple as the sand hardens. The rut follows the side of the wash and begins its gradual climb. Edges give way to deeper banks growing out of dried gullies. One filled with fierce, wet torrents fed from the canyon above. In my childhood I stood at the mouth of this canyon and traveled the rut road, and explored the world it created.

There are four life signs in the canyon. Two miles north of the desert, water flows above the earth, where it creates a tangled jungle of green willows. The moving water slides around and over the rock and then, with slow, even passion, it finds its depths and hides within the earth once more. And here, in my youth, lived John Olson.

"Glory of My Spirit"

Around the bend two miles farther up-canyon, the pines, oozing their vermilion path, take their places beside the yellowed yuccas on the mountainside. Here all sounds reverberate between the mountains and so the canyon's last cabin, and last homestead, is now called Echo Bend. But during my childhood it was Bahaha. Taken from the Indian, the meaning is "Glory of My Spirit." For me, it has remained Bahaha.

Another four miles of climbing, the road turns a sharp right angle, and a flat shelf of land stares up at the sky. It is an ancient shelf. It is now spotted with picnic tables and benches. Posted signs are scattered about like matchsticks stuck in the sand and forgotten. Leaving the government camp, the road scrambles upward toward the twin peaks. Two miles later it arrives, hesitates, and dies at the base of the mountains, which erupt with onyx. Alternate parallel green and amber white bands cut strange canyons.

When I was a child, the mouth of the canyon was freckled with sunlight and moonlight. The blue sky belonged to the country beneath it. On the hillside, watching the canyon spill itself over the desert, the Ranch House stood guard. Stretching out before the house is the broad land and, behind it, the winding canyon. The Ranch House marked the crossroad. It had, for over 100 years. The last cattle drives over the mountains from Big Bear and across the deserts from Morongo and Victorville met and died at its water hole.

At the very same water hole I learned to swim. I learned to swim in the parched, dry desert, slapping steep snouts when they interfered with my stroke. It was only a three-stroke pool, two feet deep, but it represented a four-mile hike and the terror of John Olson's goats. It represented the sky turning cool for my youth, for my courage. I had, after all, conquered the goats.

House of Goats

There will never be a place as green or as cool as the Ranch House. Aside from the several corrals scattered around, there were only two buildings—three, if one counted the tiny house referred to as "out." The outside of the main house was lined with corrugated tin, to deflect the sun. When it rained, everybody shouted to be heard above the noise, or else just gave up and kept still. There was a huge barn with a hayloft by the great corral. It was always dark inside the barn, much too dark, when one was used to brightness.

In the middle of all that hot, in the center of all that dry, baked earth, there was a fenced-in alfalfa field, and there were times when I couldn't even look at it because watching the tiny purple figures talk to the wind and smelling the crisp, sharp odor left me hurting inside, and I would look away. There were times, too, when I would run to meet it, rolling in the tall alfalfa alongside the newly pastured calves.

Standing in front of the main house were three giant cottonwood trees with marbled brown and white bark, and the cottonwood really did sing, and the sweet young leaves really did dance, where the water was icy cold, where it was green and cool and whispery. The only thing that separated me from my paradise was John Olson's goats.

John Olson was a Swede. He was a country man, and he looked and acted like a country man. He was robust and friendly and happy. He wore baggy, patched tan trousers and khaki-colored shirts with faded yellow stripes which passed for suspenders. I don't ever remember seeing John Olson, without a sweat-stained hat slouched over his handsome, square head. John and Pete climbed over the mountain, tantra long time ago. Pete and John, in some other age, found the onyx mine. Pete strung thick cables from peak to peak and moved the onyx across the mountain. Pete was the smaller of the two men. He seldom spoke, embarrassed because of his broken English. He was very shy and very kind.

The Willows and the Water

John and Pete moved down the canyon, leaving their mine with its onyx in the deep snow. They found the willows and water: there they built the Swede's Place. It was

the Swede's place, although they were never able to claim legal ownership because of the water. They were only squatters with squatters' rights. During all those years it was necessary for someone to stay on the place at all times, otherwise his rights could be jumped by some other squatter. Walter carries a precious price in the desert.

From a distant land, a distant cousin sent Big Kate Harvey to John and Pete. Kate weighed at least three hundred pounds in her blue and white striped overalls, and she cooked and worked for the men in a desert range and new to her. Big Kate cooked and Big Kate sang. She fed the chickens and pulled the passery off the road to give him cups of thick coffee.

The two Swedes built four prospector shacks, one for each of them to sleep in, one for Kate Harvey to sleep in, and one for Kate to cook in. The front quarter of the cook shack was partitioned off with ends of orange crates, reinforced by flattened tin from used kerosene cans. The dirt floor was cold and hard. In the corner, hanging on a nail above the crockery water vessel, was a chipped metal dipper. Neat stacks of corded wood lined the walls next to the old iron stove, which remained, hot day and night, winter and summer. A rock step separated the partitioned area from the rear of the shack, which boasted a cement floor, also cold and hard. Against each boarded wall there was a flat sofa. Between the sofas a long wooden table stretched, over which was tacked a faded blue gingham oilcloth. The old tackless benches, neatly placed under the table, creaked whenever anyone sat on them. Hidden by multiple shelves of jars and bottles, the oilcloth disappeared at one end of the table under catsup bottles and hot mustard and jars of chili peppers and chow-chows. There were round, stubby jars filled with things I'd never heard of, and blended colors and fragrances I'd never seen or smelled before.

Tin Cups Rang Importantly

Overlooking the jars was a big tin with sugar and a tin scoop inside, to the side of it stood large, white porcelain shakers of salt and coarse-grained pepper. Turned upside down in the very center of the gingham oilcloth were large handled tin coffee cups that rang importantly when stirred with big spoons taken from the massive open jar next to the sugar can. At night the thick liquid in the tin cups made pictures of light coming from the tall coal oil lamps placed at each end of the wooden table, and it was the liquid which seemed to seep when the benches moved.

John built his goat pens 50 feet from the cook shack. He built them with willows and willow hanging from every soil were clean, two-gallon Trisco lard cans, which John used for milking. Towering behind the hut was a craggy mountain, old and barren. From its rugged paths ruled John Olson's goats. Their attitude was as lofty as their elevation. Toward strangers, it was one of rigid hostility, visitors they barely tolerated, and then with a leery suspicion which they made no attempt to disguise. I was on one of the latter, only more so, because I dared to climb their old mountain, the bottom half anyway, and more intolerable. I used their road.

I used their road because I had to, not because I wanted to. On my way to the Ranch House I had to pass the Swede's Place. It simply could not be avoided. A time or two I tried to bypass the Swede's by cutting off the road and wading the willow creek, but it was always an unsuccessful attempt.

Skippy, that old desert Airedale, would rout any goat straggler, mipping hind legs and goat behinds while running back and forth for approval. I loved that old dog because he hated goats, too. It became such great sport for Skip that soon, in his wild glee, he would forget about me altogether, and I was left to face the irritation of his horned victims. It was best to follow the road.

Goat Hooves Sharp as an Ax

Unlike John, his goats were tricky—and organized. My trips to the ranch meant a full day's outing, and consequently, I always traveled well supplied with groceries. I carried sandwiches and cereal, carrots and cookies, and sometimes even a large slice of watermelon—all of this in a paper sack which swung from my belt, leaving my hands free for picking blue-bonnets or Indian paintbrush, or for throwing oddily shaped rocks.

These goats were sneaky, as well as tricky. Goat hooves are sharp as ax blades carving into soft wood, and quicker than the stroke. A decoy goat would attract my attention to the right, balancing on his hind legs while slicing the air surrounding me with his front hooves. In the meantime, his comrades picked off sandwich sections and bits of my juicy watermelon in a sort of organized goat relay.

The guerrilla goat tactics soon taught me the folly of a paper bag warfare. After several such experiences, I wrapped sheet metal around my sandwiches and pounded twelve-penny nails from the inside so the points stuck outward. Furthermore, I swung the weapon. Goat raiding ceased with the second trip.

Having achieved my first coup, I began to study the goats more closely. I discovered their insatiable appetite. I watched as they devoured later after label from tin can after tin can. I had dragging behind me, on the following week's journey down-canyon, two gunny sacks full of sardine-scanted rubbish. I had intended a sort of goat gorge, hoping perhaps to eliminate one or two, but unfortunately my plan did not work. I could not get the goats off their mountain. Neither could I climb up in a with a loaded gunny sack in each hand.

When one feels inferior, it is usually sensed by the bully. I could not run fast enough, nor could I climb far enough, hence, I issued the coward's way out. I went to the head man for protection, but even that backfired.

"John, oh, John, I'm Here"

John loved his goats, and I loved John. The triangle was hopeless. I would not hurt John by telling him what I really thought of his goats. Also, there was involved the humiliation of admitting fear, and worse, defeat. It would never work out. I realized, devising a new scheme. Putting the plan into action, thereafter, wherever approaching the hill leading to Swede's Place, I would yell with unserved conviction and energy, "John, oh, John, I'm here! Pete, or Pete, here I am! John, where are you? John Olson—can you hear me?"

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By this time everyone else was awake and standing around the washed-out hole where the cook tent used to be, amazed at the miracle which had saved Kate's tent and the bunk houses where everyone was sleeping. John Olson packed a wad of Copenhagen under his lower lip, shrugged, adjusted his suspenders, and spat, "Sta Bueno. It was time to build a new cook house anyway. Don't you worry none, Kate. It are going to be a rock house—built to last, yah, by yee."

He looked up canyon to a bend in the road where the road ought to be and scratched his head. "Aye ban tak somebody better check on Dave and his family—yah."

Dave and Ruth Duarte were living on their homestead which was five miles further up canyon toward the onyx mine. Their son David Jr. was barely a year old. Dave was one of the mine crew.

Nyberg picked up a shovel: "Aye vill yust hike up dare and see how much hell has been heppening to da road, yah."

Everyone knew the old sea dog was capable of rescuing the young family, so they turned to the task of building a camp fire and rustling up some breakfast.

As for Dave and Ruth in their homestead cabin, it had been built in a secluded pinon grove and the flood waters cut deep gullies on either side of their clearing. There was only the problem of building a new driveway out to the road.

They had no idea of the devastation below or that it was going to be three months before they could drive their car out of the canyon.

They were just sitting down to lunch when they heard Carl yelling, "Hellooo the house!"

After Dave went out and yelled back, Nyberg came stalking into the clearing, shovel in hand. He saw that everything was OK, snuffed the air, and grinned, "By Yumping Yimminy I are hungry as a bear."

It was hard for them to believe Carl's account of the devastation lower in the canyon and beyond their reason to think of leaving their established home and livestock in order to be rescued from a disaster they had not witnessed—yet.

Nyberg did not insist. He just sat back and enjoyed his coffee. "It don't make no difference vat I say, you are going to live the way you want, yah. Aye can help Dave get his car down as far as the Kitrick home-stead today. It are going to yon hell of a job to make any kind of road from there to da Willows, you'll see."

And so it was that Duarte would drive down to the Kitrick cabin. Dorothy and Kit were living in the City for the winter and work all by himself to get a passable road through to the Willows.

It took him the better part of six weeks. During this time he would take time to walk into the Swedes' for supplies, ordered by the Swedes and brought as far as the Willows by any means available.

Some of the crew had decided to stay instead of hiking out to freedom and the rest of the world. It was the faithful ones who remained with the onyx quarry partners who eventually became John Olson's labor on the Morongo Basin WPA road project—straightening out and widening the Victorville Road, now "Old Woman Springs Road" and State Highway 10.

This was a time of road building all across the high desert area where improvement was sorely needed from the Warren's Well corrals (now the Yucca Valley Airport) down the Morongo—grade and across the Devil's Garden to where the narrow, sandy road dropped steeply downhill to the Whiteswater River. The rock and cement retaining wall which protected the steep and narrow dirt road from slipping over the bank was built as a Public Works project and may still be seen from Interstate Highway 10, as it rounds the curve of a hill just below Whitewater.

That was a long time ago and who's to say an ill wind doesn't blow someone some good.




THE SWEDES. At the Willows in Pipes Canyon in a 1942 photo are (from left) Carl Nyberg, Pete Lager, John Olson, and Kate Harvey. Shown in the background is the four-room rock dwelling that John promised to build for Kate at the time of the 1928 flood. All of the yard from the door to where they are standing was a fill after the washout. John worked on it after hours with wheelbarrow and shovel. The sign in the picture indicates that John was not only fire warden but officer in charge of the established bird refuge at the Willows. Kate wore the police whistle around her neck for the purpose of calling in her herd of milk goats at night.

(Photo from R. Duarte collection.)

Ruth Duarte writes of Y.V.

Ruth Duarte first settled in upper Pipes Canyon in 1933 on 160 acres. The site is above Pionertown near the onyx quarry, and 17 miles from Big Bear City. She has lived in the Yucca Valley area on a regular basis since 1948. She is an author of note, having written

many articles about the people and places of the hi-desert. Her book, *Colorful Characters of Yucca Valley*, was published in 1970. She expects her second book, *All Around the Mountain*, to be published toward the end of this year.



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