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Edited by John Adam Hussey

SAN FRANCIS RANCH - INYO COUNTY

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by

Andrew Eggum

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## SAN FRANCIS RANCH

About three miles south and west of the town of Bishop, Inyo County, lies the site of San Francis Ranch, one of the first white settlements in Owens Valley.<sup>1</sup> The ranch was established in 1861 by Samuel A. Bishop and was a source of beef for the booming mining camps of Nevada and the Mono Lake region of California. It also was the scene of several stirring episodes in the troubles between the Indians and whites which disturbed Owens Valley in the sixties.

By 1861, the Owens Valley route between California and Nevada was both well-known and well-traveled. Its bordering mountains and gulches had been prospected in a cursory manner in the preceding years, and by the spring of '61 numerous miners were active south of Owens Lake and several on the east side of the White Mountains in the northern end of the valley. Thriving camps were located to the north near Mono Lake. Farther to the north and east, in Nevada, the first boom of the great Comstock Lode was in hectic progress. Steers had been

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1. Mr. A. A. Brierly, Assessor of Inyo County, describes the location of the ranch as follows: "Almost directly west of Bishop on the NW $\frac{1}{4}$  Sec. 10, Township 7 South, Range 32 East. M.D.M." Application for Registration of Historical Point of Interest, San Francis Ranch, MS.

driven north along Owens River to the Mono camps prior to this time. The pioneer drovers found excellent grazing in the meadows near the stream, along its tributaries, and in the foothills to the west.<sup>2</sup> However, none of the cowmen who drove the herds to the mining camp markets had ventured to locate there permanently.

Early in 1861, a party of stockmen from Tulare County, composed of the Mr. and Mrs. Alney T. McGee, their three sons, a cousin, Taylor McGee, J. N. Summers and his wife started from Owens Valley with an unstated number of cattle. They intended merely to graze there for the summer, sell what stock they could to the Mono County and Nevada miners, and then return to the San Joaquin Valley before the first winter storms closed the Sierra passes. Barton McGee reported that from Roberts' ranch on the south fork of the Kern River to Adobe Meadows in Mono County, considerably more than a hundred miles, not a white person or white settlement was seen.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the McGee cattle evidently were sold, but when fall came, grass was so abundant in the valley that the party decided to winter there with the remaining stock. Because of their early arrival in the spring,

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2. William H. Brewer, Up and Down California in 1860-1864, 535-536, 538-539.

3. Willie Arthur Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 88.

the McGees have been considered the first cowmen to settle in the valley. As a matter of fact, however, several others who had come a few months later had actually preceded the McGees in choosing permanent ranch headquarters.<sup>4</sup> Among these later arrivals was Samuel Addison Bishop, who came only a few days after Allen Van Fleet, the man who located the first permanent white residence in Owens Valley.<sup>5</sup>

S. A. Bishop, for many years a partner of General Edward F. Beale in the several ranches whose headquarters were at Fort Tejon in Kern County, had sent scouts to the Owens country, and they had returned to report excellent grazing conditions in the northern end of the valley. Determining to try raising stock in the region, Mr. Bishop, his wife, Sam Young, E. P. (Stock) Robinson, Pat Gallagher, and several Indian herders left Fort Tejon on July 3, 1861.<sup>6</sup> They drove five or six hundred cattle and fifty horses. On the twenty-second of the following August they established camp on Bishop Creek "at a point where the stream leaves the higher sandy bench lands and gravel foothill slopes and enters the lower level of the valley,<sup>7</sup> about three miles south of west of the present town of Bishop." Pines grew near by along Bishop Creek, and from these, crude

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4. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 88.

5. Ibid., 89.

6. Ibid., 90-91.

7. Ibid., 91; Hero Eugene Rensch and Ethel Grace Rensch, Historic Spots in California; the Southern Counties, 26.

slabs were hewed, out of which two rude cabins were erected. The new ranch was named San Francis, a corruption of the Spanish equivalent of St. Francis.

This location was made State Landmark Number 208 on June 20, 1935, in order to commemorate and permanently identify the spot where Inyo County's second ranch was established. The landmark recognizes the historic importance of the man who lent his name to the creek on which the cabins stood, the valley through which it flows, and to Bishop, the largest town in the county.

It is not certain that Bishop intended to establish himself and his family in permanent residence when he moved to upper Owens Valley. A man of large affairs, there is nothing to indicate that he was in such financial straits that he was compelled to subject his wife to pioneer hardships in a distant and isolated region. Nor does it seem reasonable that he would for long expose his family to the dangers of border warfare in a country where the yet uncowed Indians had been officially assured that their country was to be secure against white settlement. All that is known definitely of Bishop's purpose is given in the statement of one of his biographers, who says that following the discovery of the Comstock Lode, in Nevada, "Mr. Bishop

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8. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 120.

established a branch of his ranch and stock operation on a tributary of Owens River ... so as to be convenient to the market for his beef, in that new mining country."<sup>9</sup>

The venture was one of decided risk. Bishop had chosen to settle in one of the most important and densely populated centers of the fifteen hundred Paiutes who inhabited Owens Valley and the surrounding mountains.<sup>10</sup> Close to the San Francis Ranch lived Chief George, an Indian of great prestige among all the Owens Indians. It is possible that the village "tuhunitog",<sup>11</sup> just east of the Bishop cabins, may have been Chief George's home. In the same district these Indians had laboriously dug irrigation ditches which spread the waters of Bishop Creek in order to irrigate the native vegetation such as wild seed, grasses, clover, and tuberous plants.<sup>12</sup>

The Indians were definitely determined to retain possession of their lands. They insisted on the payment of tribute for the privilege of passing through their country and denied the white man's right to settle.<sup>13</sup> Bishop, who had had almost ten years of experience in Indian relations at

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9. J. P. Munro-Fraser, History of Santa Clara County, California, 691.  
 10. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 79, 99, 107.  
 11. Julian H. Steward, Ethnography of the Owens Valley Paiute, 327.  
 12. Ibid., 247.  
 13. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 89.

Fort Tejon, evidently convinced Chief George that his residence there was only temporary; and with perhaps the tribute of an occasional beef, he lived for a few months on amicable terms with his red neighbors. But other men of less diplomacy and understanding of Indian psychology settled near by. The Paiutes discovered that the cattle hunted out the grassiest fields and the irrigated meadows where they consumed the vegetation before it matured. The natives watched their harvest and main winter foods disappear into the stomachs of hungry cows. They were faced with a winter of starvation, and their resentment against the whites rose in consequence. To further complicate matters, the winter of 1861-1862 was the severest of a generation.<sup>14</sup> Snow and rain fell in such unheard-of quantities that even the settlers were unable to reach the nearest supply station at Aurora, Nevada, and were limited to a diet of beef. The Indians, in crude shelters, had much of their small store of seeds and nuts spoiled. Acute starvation was their lot that winter. Prodded by hunger, they began to take tribute from the white men in the form of the free-ranging cattle. The local Indians, as well as renegades from different parts of California and especially from just below Mono Lake, under the implacable enemy of the whites, Joaquin Jim, raided far outside their usual habitat

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14. Sam Davis, The History of Nevada, I, 76.

in quest of the settlers' beef. Quite naturally the cowmen violently resented the spoilation of their herds.

A group of Nevada men led by Allen Van Fleet had located some six miles to the northeast of Bishop's ranch and just east of the big bend of the Owens River where it turns to the northwest. Some of their cattle had crossed the river and were grazing not far south of Bishop's cabins. One day Al Thompson, a cowboy employed by a stockman named Vansickle, was riding herd in the Bishop Creek region when he saw an Indian driving off an animal and promptly shot him.<sup>15</sup> The Indians quickly retaliated by capturing and killing "Yank" Crossen. The Paiutes seldom scalped their victims, but some time later Crossen's hair was found at Big Pine.<sup>16</sup>

The hotheaded on both sides reacted violently. The Indian sorcerers or medicine men drummed up the war spirit and fortified the courage of the warriors by promising that magic would make the white men's guns impotent. A great powwow was held on Bishop Creek. The Bishops believed they were menaced and sent a call for help. Many stockmen congregated at the cabins. The warriors danced about the buildings shouting their defiance of the settlers,

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15. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 98.

16. Ibid.



who, to prove the medicine men's claims were false, fired their guns into the air. The action seemed to have the proper effect, for no assault was made.<sup>17</sup>

The calmer heads of both camps recognized the horror of a major war and arranged a conference between the Indians headed by Chief George, and the stockmen, and a treaty of peace was signed at the San Francis Ranch on January 31, 1862. Chief George illustrated the Indian viewpoint by drawing two lines on the ground, one white man killed and one Indian. The score was even, and accordingly neither side was under obligation to retaliate.

The treaty is reproduced here in full because it shows the intent and mutual respect of the makers. It was also a partial surrender on the part of the Indians, who therein agreed to permit settlement in the region by the whites.<sup>18</sup>

We the undersigned, citizens of Owens Valley, with Indian chiefs representing the different tribes and rancherias of said valley, having met together at San Francis ranch, and after talking over all past grievances, have agreed to let what is past be buried in oblivion; and as evidence of all things that have transpired having been amicably settled between both Indians and whites, each one of the

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17. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 99.  
18. Ibid., 99-100.

chiefs and whites present have voluntarily signed their names to this instrument of writing.

And it is further agreed that the Indians are not to be molested in their daily avocations by which they gain an honest living.

And it is further agreed upon the part of the Indians that they are not to molest the property of the whites, nor to drive off or kill cattle that are running in the valley, and for both parties to live in peace and strive to promote amicably the general interests of both whites and Indians.

Given under our hands at San Francis ranch this 31st day of January, 1862.

The treaty of peace was signed for the Indians (by making their marks) by Chief George, Chief Dick, and Little Chief Dick. The settlers who signed were S. A. Bishop, L. J. Cralley, A. Van Fleet, S. E. Graves, W. A. Greenly, T. Everlett, John Welch, J. S. Howell, Daniel Wyman, A. Thompson, and E. P. Robinson.<sup>19</sup>

Chief Joaquin Jim and some of the irresponsible whites were not parties to the agreement; outrages by individuals of both races occurred during the winter. The treaty was thus broken and soon lost its restraining influence. War was certain. The stockmen gathered their families and what stock they could and left the northern end of the Owens Valley. Some fled to Aurora, Nevada; the great majority went south

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19. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 100.

to Putnam's stone house (now Independence) where the refugees hastily built an improvised fortification. From Putnam's sallied forth in March of 1862 the organized troop which fought to a draw with Joaquin Jim in the Alabama Mountains just northwest of the present village of Lone Pine.<sup>20</sup> A few weeks later a battle of two separate engagements was fought by a force composed of volunteer settlers and of troops from Fort Churchill, Nevada, and Camp Drum, Los Angeles, under command of Lieutenant Colonel George S. Evans. The skirmish of April 6th took place just south of Bishop's ranch headquarters; the one on April 8th and 9th, now called the Mayfield Canyon Battle, occurred not far to the north. Both<sup>21</sup> ended in defeat for the whites.

In no record of these engagements is Bishop mentioned. It is quite possible that he rushed his wife to Fort Tejon, perhaps to Los Angeles, and so escaped the fighting. As far as can be learned, he did not return until the following year, 1863, after the settlers and the troops camped at Fort Independence, three miles north of Putnam's stone house, had sufficiently cowed the Indians to insure

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20. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 104-105; and Andrew Eggum, Site of Putnam's Stone House (California Historical Landmarks Series), MS.

21. Ibid., 106-120; Davis, The History of Nevada, I, 73-80; and Andrew Eggum, Mayfield Canyon Battle Ground (California Historical Landmarks Series), MS.

safety. In the meantime, his cabins and corrals had been  
burned.<sup>22</sup>

That he reestablished his stock venture, perhaps late in 1863, is certain. That he placed men in charge is known because his ranch became a stopping place for travelers and military detachments during the campaigns against the Indians following the establishment of an army post at Camp Independence on July 4, 1862. In April 1863, Company L, Second California Cavalry, commanded by Captain Albert Brown, en route to Independence from Fort Churchill, remained for a few weeks at Bishop Creek, presumably at or near the ranch.<sup>23</sup> This was necessary due to the fact that the northern end of the valley was in constant turmoil caused by the irrepressible Joaquin Jim and his Mono Indians who encouraged the Inyo Paiutes to continue their hostilities.

During the same year, Lieutenant George D. French of McLaughlin's company fought several skirmishes above Big Pine, then continued on to Bishop Creek seeking to engage Joaquin Jim. There the soldiers destroyed about three hundred bushels of pine nuts and taboose.<sup>24</sup> Later, Jim's camp was found and destroyed, but the store of nuts belonged to

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22. Munro-Fraser, History of Santa Clara County, California, 691.

23. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 146.

24. Ibid., 148.

the more friendly Chief George Indians. Distinctions between friendly and hostile natives were often overlooked by both civilians and the military, a fact which helped prolong the war.

On May 22, 1863 Sergeant McLaughlin (not the captain) went to Bishop Creek and there persuaded Chief George and his sub-chief, Dick, to accompany him to Fort Independence for a peace talk. "Clad in native costume, a head of hair," these two chiefs expressed their willingness to cease hostilities.<sup>25</sup> The creek and perhaps Bishop's ranch were used as a central camp headquarters for the citizens' volunteer punitive expedition against the Indians after the massacre of the "Church Party" in the fall of 1863, in the mountains northwest of the ranch.<sup>26</sup>

During that same year new settlers arrived, not stockmen, but farmers intent on tilling the soil. Close by the ranch, a little to the east, W. P. George, Andrew Thompson,<sup>27</sup> G. W. Norton, and Tom Evans squatted on agricultural land. Title to the land settled upon by the earliest of the Bishop Creek pioneers, including the Samuel Addison Bishop ranch, was acquired, "perhaps in most instances" by the claimants

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25. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 146.  
 26. Ibid., 154-158.  
 27. Ibid., 169.

who "exercised a squatter right on the tracts to which they sought to establish title."<sup>28</sup>

By 1864, Bishop seems to have turned his energies to the region which was later Kern County, and no further reference is made to any of his activities or interests in Owens Valley. Whether he sold out his claim or just abandoned it has not been mentioned in the sources at hand.

Samuel Addison Bishop, for whom so many places in Inyo County have been named, had a colorful career on the frontiers of the West. He was born in Albemarle County, Virginia, on September 2, 1825. Before the boy grew up, his parents moved to Montgomery and a little later to Calloway County, Missouri. As a youth in Missouri he worked as wagonmaker, steam engine mechanic, and on mill construction. When a young man of twenty-four he was seized with the "gold fever" and in April 1849, started for the California placer mines. Traveling through southern Arizona and the Mojave Desert he reached Los Angeles in October of the same year. Having lost his horses and wagon on the journey, he started afoot for the Southern mines. All the summer of 1850, he prospected along the Stanislaus and Merced rivers but failed to make a rich strike. Thence he went to the Mariposa mines, where he seems to have fared no better.

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28. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 193.

In 1851 war broke out with the Indians of the Mariposa country. The miners and other settlers of the region were compelled to organize into defense groups and to call on the military for help. Young Bishop enlisted in Company C, commanded by Major James D. Savage. As orderly sergeant, he experienced active campaigning and some fighting from February until July 1, 1851, when he was mustered out of service. Bishop did not return to the "diggings" as a miner. For a short time he went into business with his former commanding officer, Major Savage, and L. D. Vincent Hailer. Shortly afterwards he was a partner in Leach and Company, a firm which had a trading post on an Indian reservation on the Fresno River. There, until the arrival of General Edward F. Beale, Bishop was in complete charge of the Indians.

President Fillmore, in 1853, appointed General Edward F. Beale superintendent of Indian affairs for California. From Beale's first arrival, the aggressive enterpriser, S. A. Bishop, appears to have been an employee and perhaps a junior partner of the famous soldier. He assisted in gathering the Indians at Fort Tejon in 1853. The same year he was interested and busily occupied in the construction of the proposed wagon road from Fort Smith, Arkansas, across New Mexico and Arizona to Fort Tejon, California. It is said that some of the camels which General Beale had persuaded the War Department to import were used to transport

supplies for the surveying and construction camps.

Bishop also became owner, or part owner, of the several ranches presided over by Beale, with headquarters at Fort Tejon. While still engaged at Tejon, he married Frances E. Young of Los Angeles in September, 1856. Their only child, a daughter, was born in 1859.

Two years later he is reported to have dissolved the partnership with General Beale and moved to Bishop Creek in northwest Inyo County. In 1864 he became active in promoting the new county of Kern and appears again as owner of at least a large portion of the land in the great Tejon properties.<sup>29</sup> After the county was organized he became one of its first supervisors.<sup>30</sup> In 1866 he took his family back east to visit the land of his birth. On his return he made his home in San Jose. There he promoted a traction company and lived until his death on June 3, 1893.

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29. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 91-92; Munro-Fraser, History of Santa Clara County, California, 687-692.

30. Herbert Comfort, Where Rolls the Kern, 83.



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