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FIRST PERMANENT WHITE HABITATION IN OWENS VALLEY

INYO COUNTY

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by

Andrew Eggum

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FIRST PERMANENT WHITE HABITATION  
IN OWENS VALLEY

In 1861 Allen Van Fleet, a cowman, built a house of rock and sod on the northerly side of the big bend of Owens River, where it turns directly northwest. This structure was the first permanent white habitation erected in northern Inyo County. Its site is in the upper part of Owens Valley, south of where the little town of Laws now stands and about three and three-quarters miles northeast of the present town of Bishop.<sup>1</sup>

Van Fleet was by no means the first white man to visit the Owens River country. Explorers, perhaps trappers, overland emigrants, and many prospectors had preceded him. By 1861 a well-known road passed through the region, linking the San Joaquin Valley with the Mono Lake and Nevada mines. The travelers, freighters, and stockmen who passed over this route were mere transients, however, and as far as is known no white man had erected anything more substantial

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1. Here Eugene Rensch and Ethel Grace Rensch, Historic spots in California; the Southern Counties, 25; and Willie Arthur Chalfant, The story of Inyo, 39. The official location of the site, as given by A. A. Brierly, Assessor of Inyo County, is as follows: "Probably in NE $\frac{1}{4}$  Sec. 29, Township 6 South, Range 33 East, about 400 yards north of the site of Owensville." Application for Registration of Point of Historical Interest, The First Permanent White Habitation in Owens Valley, MS., in San Francisco Office of State Division of Parks.

than a temporary camp in the region before the summer of that year.<sup>2</sup>

Permanent settlement came to Owens Valley as a result of the great mining boom of Nevada and the nearby Mono region of California. In 1853 prospectors south and west of Walker Lake opened the rich gold and silver region of which Aurora became the center, and late in the same year the Comstock Lode was discovered. There had been considerable mining for gold in the Mono Lake region, just north of Owens Valley, as early as the mid-fifties, and new discoveries of 1859 sent miners flocking into the area.

By 1860, boom camps had sprung up all over the newly opened mining regions. By that date Aurora had a population of five thousand in a district which only twelve months before held scarce a score of white men.<sup>3</sup> With the increase in population there came a rising demand for supplies and provisions. Both the Nevada and the Mono mines were more or less isolated, cut off from supply centers by mountains, deserts, and great distances. Roads into the region were extremely poor, and there were almost none over which wagons could travel without laborious efforts.

As a result, prices of goods quickly skyrocketed.

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2. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 70-87.

3. Sam Davis, The History of Nevada, I, 316; II, 848-850.

"The ready and rich market . . . of Aurora" was for a time a bonanza to freighter, trader, and the producer of beef. A sack of flour brought \$20. As late as 1863 eggs cost \$1.50 per dozen; hay for a horse cost \$1.25 per day.<sup>4</sup> The price of beef was correspondingly high and brought large profits to stockmen who were near enough to drive in their cattle.

The stock which supplied the demands of the Aurora region for beef came chiefly from Carson Valley, Nevada, and from the San Joaquin Valley of California. From the latter place, especially, the drive to market was a long and expensive one, and it was only natural that the cattlemen should look about for ranges more conveniently located and that a number of them should decide to test the possibilities of Owens Valley.

The upper end of Owens Valley was closer to Aurora than Carson Valley, being only sixty miles to the southeast. In addition to its greater proximity, the land bordering Owens River enjoyed a much milder winter climate than that west of Walker Lake, Nevada. Grass was luxuriant, and the river with its tributary streams provided plenty of water for stock.<sup>5</sup> Cattlemen from both western California and western Nevada, in 1861, moved in on the rich pastures.

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4. William H. Brewer, Up and Down California in 1860-1864, 418-420.

5. Ibid., 535.

The first herd of cattle to tarry in the valley was owned by the party led by Alney T. McGee and his family from Tulare County. The McGees intended to stay only long enough to dispose of what beef they could to the mining camps, and then, before the snows of early winter closed the mountain passes of the Sierra, they expected to return to the San Joaquin Valley. When this family first drove in their herd that spring of 1861, one of the McGee sons reported that "between Robert's ranch on the south fork of the Kern River to Adobe Meadows in Mono County," over a hundred miles, not a white settler was found.<sup>6</sup> However, by fall of the same year, cowmen, traders, and more miners had made settlement. Consequently the McGee family, too,<sup>7</sup> decided to winter over. They put up a cabin at Lone Pine. But men and families had preceded them in choosing locations and building homes.

The first cowman to come to Inyo County to remain was Henry Vansickle from Eagle Valley (now Carson Valley), Nevada. With him came another stockman, Allen Van Fleet. Where Vansickle first grazed his herds is not recorded, but Van Fleet, accompanied by two men named Coverdale and Ethridge, moved south as far as Lone Pine Creek, "seeing

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6. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 88-89, 96.

7. Ibid., 96.

no white men except a few scattered prospectors in the white Mountain foothills," on the eastern edge of the northern end of Owens Valley.<sup>8</sup> Van Fleet seems to have found that the northern end of the valley was best suited to his needs, because he turned back north and chose his site for a headquarters on the big bend of Owens River. There by August he had completed a shelter made from stone and sod. Its dimensions, the number of rooms it contained, or the composition of its roof are not known. Van Fleet's house was completed but a very short while before that of S. A. Bishop, seven or eight miles to the southwest, and the stone house which Putnam built some forty miles to the south where now stands Independence.<sup>9</sup>

It was a daring adventure that these early cowmen undertook. That part of the valley in which they settled was densely inhabited by Paiutes. The most powerful tribal chief lived just a few miles to the west on Bishop Creek, which flowed into Owens River. The "renegade" chief of a raiding group of Mono Indians, Joaquin Jim, often traveled into what is now northern Inyo County. Jim was an implacable enemy of the whites. Even the Owens Valley Paiutes expected tribute for the privilege of passing through their country.<sup>10</sup> The white man's right to settle was denied with

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8. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 89.  
 9. Andrew Eggum, San Francis Ranch, and Site of Putnam's Stone House (California Historical Landmarks Series), MSS.  
 10. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 89.

the full approval of government officials.<sup>11</sup> The miners in the streamless foothills to the east were less a challenge to the Indians, who knew the transient nature of the prospector. There in the White Mountains he spoiled no fishing by polluting nonexistent streams. Only when the unthinking miner cut down the Indians' pinon trees, whose nuts were a staple food, did he get into trouble. By giving a subsidy of a little food or cast-off garments the miner had avoided real violence with the natives.<sup>12</sup> Men who built houses, on the other hand, brought with them livestock and perhaps plows. This type of settlement challenged the Indians' ownership. The cattle, turned loose in a fenceless country, at once searched out the grass and clover meadows which the Indians had often gone to great pains to irrigate,<sup>13</sup> and consumed the growth which otherwise would have matured seed for the Indians' food. Not even the tule patches where the edible tubers grew were free from trampling cattle. The Indians' economic foundations were attacked. In sheer self-defense the natives felt compelled to take the offensive against the white man and his domestic beasts which ate the harvest; without such action the Paiutes faced a destitute winter.

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11. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 120; Herbert G. Comfort, Where Rolls the Kern, 27.  
 12. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 83, 92.  
 13. Julian H. Seward, Ethnography of the Owens Valley Paiute (University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnography, XXXIII:3), 247.

The fall passed and winter came on, and yet the little handful of whites, located in the midst of a region with a score or more of Indian villages, were unmolested. The period of immunity might have been long extended except for two factors. The first was the advent of a desperately severe winter in 1861-1862. Snow and rain fell almost continuously, causing hardships on the whites as well as the Indians. It was probably the hardest winter that Inyo ever saw.<sup>14</sup> The settlers were reduced to beef for food, since impassable roads made it impossible to reach Aurora for supplies. The Indians, unable to successfully hunt for game, their seeds and nuts destroyed by mold, and weakened by cold in their crude shelters, suffered the pangs of starvation. Secondly, Joaquin Jim, contrary to Indian custom, refused to stay within his own geographically determined domain, but foraged through the already pauperized upper Owens Valley as far south as the Alabama Hills and back north to Round Valley. Probably it was this band who first killed the white man's cattle without leave and without offer of payment. The friendly neighborhood Indians would have been spared undue suffering had the whites supplied them with a few beefs, but hunger compelled them also, to kill the settlers' cattle.<sup>15</sup>

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14. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 96-99.

15. Ibid., 100-101.



One day in early winter, Al Thompson, a cowboy employed by Vansickle, was riding herd not far south of Bishop's ranch and a mile or two west of Owens River. There he encountered a hungry Paiute in the act of driving off a cow and with more animosity than judgment "promptly shot him."<sup>16</sup> The Indians at once retaliated. "Yank" Crossen of Aurora, a visitor at Van Fleet's crossed to the west side of Owens River a few days later. There he was ambushed, captured, and killed. No details of his death were learned,<sup>17</sup> but some time later his scalp was regained at Big Pine. Such reprisals might have spread and become general if cool heads on both sides had not at once taken action. Indians as realistic as Chief George, who knew of the numerical strength of the whites if called in from the coast and central Nevada, understood that temporary victory would merely be the prelude to ultimate disaster. The cowmen being few in numbers, faced loss of all their cattle and perhaps physical extermination before military help could come. Both sides, therefore, were anxious to parley.

A conference was arranged at Bishop's San Francis Ranch. Chiefs George and Little Dick, amongst other Indians, met with S. A. Bishop, A. Van Fleet, and nine other settlers

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16. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 98.

17. Ibid.

to discuss means of preventing hostilities. A treaty was signed in which it was agreed to let bygones be bygones; the whites were not to molest the Indians in their "daily avocations"; the Indians in turn were not to molest the property of the whites. This treaty of amity was signed on January 31, 1862.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately there were men on both sides who did not sign the treaty and who, furthermore, had no intention of living up to its terms. Chief Joaquin Jim did not sign or respect the peace protocol. Whether from choice or because they were not given an opportunity, the McGees and many settlers at or near Putnam's were not parties to the agreement. A few weeks later, as the McGee boys were trailing a herd to Aurora for market, they had an altercation with Joaquin Jim which narrowly missed ending in bloodshed. Alarm on both sides became general. The settlers gathered as many of their cattle as could be quickly rounded up and drove to Putnam's (now Independence) and there fortified themselves as best they could. Messengers rode in desperate haste to Aurora and Fort Churchill, Nevada, and also to Fort Drum at Los Angeles begging for immediate military assistance.

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18. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 99-100; Andrew Eggum, San Francis Ranch (California Historical Landmarks Series), MS.

The combined herds of cattle were grazed about the valley near Putnam's. One day while Allen Van Fleet; John, Taylor, and Bart McGee; James Harness; Tom Hubbard; Tom Passmore; Pete Wilson; and "Nigger Charley" Tyler were herding the cattle, four Indians approached the outskirts of the herd. Van Fleet, Bart and Taylor McGee, Harness, and "Nigger Charley," went out to challenge the Indian trespassers. When interrogated the Paiutes disclaimed all evil intentions and said that they were searching for some of their strayed horses. The white men were suspicious and would not let the Indians go on unless they left all their arms. This the natives refused to do. One account says that Van Fleet first leveled a gun at one of the warriors; another says an Indian first drew his bow and pointed an arrow at Van Fleet.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the truth of the matter, a fight resulted in which the Indians, including Chief Shadow, were slain, and both Harness and Van Fleet received arrow wounds; the latter carried an obsidian arrowhead in his side until his death. Later there was much disagreement over this fight among the refugee whites at Putnam's. Many insisted that the five whites were to blame and that the incident would further incense the Indians.<sup>20</sup>

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19. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 102.

20. Ibid., 102-103.

Yet Van Fleet on two previous occasions had shown he wished to act with moderation towards the natives. The first time was when he signed the peace negotiations at San Francis Ranch and the second, when a small band came to his cabin and arrogantly demanded admission. Van Fleet gave them food and avoided trouble. This same band then continued on to Hot Springs (now Benton), a few miles south on the Owens River, and there murdered a homesteader, E. S. Taylor.<sup>21</sup> Danger, fear, and racial animosity are a poor mixture out of which to distill the essence of deliberate action and calm justice. Van Fleet's responsibility, if any, in the killing of Shondow and his companions was at least partially recompensed by the fine courage he showed in the Indian campaign which followed.

Practically all the settlers who had not been able to flee to the safety of Nevada or find refuge west of the sierras, were now congregated with their herds and personal belongings in and about Putnam's stone house. Wagons were drawn up in a circle about the cabin. Rawhides were hung from wagon to wagon as a partial protection against arrows, but of course against bullets, the hides offered only concealment. Sheriff Scott of Mono, who was at the "fort" and who was later killed in battle near Bishop Creek, described

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21. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 103-104.

the situation in a letter:<sup>22</sup>

The Indians appear warlike here, and we expected a battle before many days - possibly tonight. There are forty-two of us, armed with rifles, shotguns and sixshooters. We have fortified ourselves the best we could with wagons, oxbows, yokes, rawhides, etc. I can escape easily, but to do so would be to weaken the force in the fort, and so enable the redskins to wipe out those who would be obliged to remain.

The whites decided to attack rather than stand a seige in which their lives were comparatively safe, but during which they stood the chance of losing most, if not all, of their livestock. It was difficult to protect the cattle, because, to get sufficient grass, they were compelled to range far from the security of the stockade. The Indians were reported to be encamped in force somewhere in the Alabama Hills just northwest of Lone Pine. One night during late winter or the early spring of 1862, twenty-three men under Charley Anderson determined to drive them out. Dividing into two parties, the attack was made on the warriors' camp at dawn. The battle was undecisive and the whites withdrew.<sup>23</sup>

Although the Indians were not defeated nor dislodged in the first battle of the campaign, the aggressiveness

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22. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 103.

23. Ibid., 104-105; Andrew Eggum, Site of Putnam's Stone House, and Mayfield Canyon Battle Ground (California Historical Landmarks series), MSS.

of the well-armed settlers discouraged them from attacking the stockade and made them wary of stealing cows in close proximity to the fort. The next hostilities were to take place far to the north, just a few miles westerly from Van Fleet's ranch, in the vicinity of Bishop Creek and the San Francis ranch. Meanwhile, both Indians and whites had sent out calls for reinforcements for a campaign in earnest.

The volunteers at Putnam's elected a new leader, a "Captain" or "Colonel" Mayfield. He, with some thirty men, started north and near Big Pine joined another force of eighteen volunteers from Aurora, Nevada, commanded by Captain John J. Kellogg, a former army officer. The joint commands continued north and a little west. On April 6, 1862, just south of Bishop Creek, and a few miles west of the present city of Bishop, they met the Paiutes. The little command was divided into two units. Kellogg's men, acting as right wing, moved up along Bishop Creek; Mayfield's men from Putnam's, acting as the left wing, marched west, on a line a little farther south.<sup>24</sup>

Mayfield, Morrison and Van Fleet were at the head of the line when the Indians opened fire. Van Fleet dismounted and handed his bridle to Mayfield. A bullet penetrated Morrison's body, and Mayfield, not seeing his men coming up, became panic-stricken and

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24. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 109.

would have fled leaving Van Fleet afoot if he had not been threatened with summary vengeance.

The white forces withdrew to an Indian irrigation ditch, from which, under cover of darkness, they again retreated. Once during the defense of the "ditch," an Indian sniper crawled within a short distance of the white men's line and, concealed behind a pile of grass, threatened havoc to the settlers. Again Van Fleet showed skill and courage. Keeping a close watch, he killed the brave as he rose to shoot.<sup>25</sup> The next day reinforcements arrived from Fort Churchill, Nevada, and Fort Drum, near Los Angeles.

Most of the settler volunteers joined the army command under Lieutenant Colonel George S. Evans, who led both contingents. The combined forces encountered the Indians in a canyon a short distance north of Bishop Creek on April 8th and 9th. Bold attack by the whites soon ended in quick retreat to Putnam's. Van Fleet's name is unmentioned in this battle.

From Putnam's the Fort Churchill company returned to Nevada, and the Evans company hurried back to Fort Drum. The cowmen gathered what livestock they had been able to

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25. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 110; Davis, The History of Nevada, I, 76; also Eggum, Mayfield Canyon Battle Ground (California Historical Landmarks Series), MS., for more complete details of this and the following fight.

round up and drove them to places more secure. Again Owens Valley was practically in complete possession of the Indians. Where Van Fleet took his herds is not stated. He probably returned to his ranch later in the year, after the establishment of a military post near Independence had reduced the Indian danger. His place was used as a voting precinct in 1863.<sup>26</sup> Whether or not he lived there until his death is not recorded. Available information merely says that Van Fleet carried the arrowhead which he received in the fight with Chief Shondow in his side "until his death fifty years later."<sup>27</sup> That one sentence is all there is by which to approximate 1912 as the year in which the first white settler of northern Inyo County died.

After federal soldiers had dispersed the Indians to the barren hills to the east and to the canyons in the east wall of the Sierras, settlers again began to flow into Owens Valley. By 1863 many homesteaders squatted on land near Van Fleet's ranch, and not far away grew up the short-lived town of Owensville, near where Laws now stands.<sup>28</sup> Van Fleet had cut and put up some wild hay in the fall of 1861, but he expected to raise and sell beef not agricultural

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26. Chalfant, The Story of Inyo, 163.

27. Ibid., 102.

28. Rensch, Historic Spots in California; the Southern Counties, 27.



products. But others, who followed his trail and squatted on nearby land, cultivated the rich earth, tempted by the same high-priced market to which cowmen catered.

These early farmers demanded and got, "in gold" not greenbacks, 75 cents per pound for butter, 13 cents the dozen for radishes, 10 cents per pound for green peas, 8 cents per pound for turnips, and corresponding prices for any other products they could raise.<sup>29</sup>

Good mineral prospects were opened up in the White Mountains to the northeast, which necessitated a mill town and supply point. In response to this need Owensville was laid out some three miles north of the present town of Bishop. For a few short years the little settlement boomed. Lots were sold for a thousand dollars, mills to reduce the ore were erected, and merchants established stores. In 1863 Owensville was the largest settlement in northern Owens Valley, but the next year the mines failed, and the boom was punctured. Some of the buildings were moved to the new town of Bishop. By 1871 the town had "vanished."<sup>30</sup>

Today the nearest settlement to the old Van Fleet ranch is the little village of Laws with a population of less than a hundred. Not until June 20, 1935, when the

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29. Brewer, Up and Down California in 1860-1864, 418, 539.

30. Rensch, Historic Spots in California; the Southern Counties, 27.

ranch site became State Historical Landmark Number 230, was Allen Van Fleet, Inyo's pioneer home builder, cowman, and Indian fighter, commemorated in any fashion. There is no river, valley, mountain, or town named for him in the county which he helped to wrest from the Indians.

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