



The DENVER WESTERNERS
ROUNDUP

September - October 2008



Author's Collection

Scotty's Castle
Death Valley's Fabulous Showplace
by Dorothy Charles
(presented January 23, 2008)



Our Author

Dorothy Charles was born and raised in central California, just east of San Francisco. She graduated from Humboldt State College in Northern California in 1966 with a B.S. in natural resources. Dorothy began her National Park Service career as a seasonal naturalist at Grand Canyon State Park in 1965. She worked mainly summer seasons until 1969. She began winter seasons in Death Valley and held various jobs including Park Ranger, Park Technician for the next 8 years. She worked at Scotty's Castle between 1971 and 1975.

After marriage to Kent, Dorothy worked at Furnace Creek Headquarters and the N.P.S. Seattle Region Office. She has resided in the Denver area for the last 28 years. Dorothy retired from government service in 1994.

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Scotty's Castle

Death Valley's Fabulous Showplace by Dorothy Charles (presented January 23, 2008)

In the 1920s, wealthy Chicago insurance man Albert Johnson built a desert vacation home for himself, his wife Bessie, and their colorful friend Walter Scott. Albert and Bessie named their home Death Valley Ranch. But Walter Scott, who loved publicity, told visitors and reporters that it was his "shack" or "Castle"—so soon it became known as Scotty's Castle.

To help you feel the ambiance of Scotty's Castle, I want to introduce you to the California desert that is about 150 miles northwest of Las Vegas, NV, and then introduce you to Walter Scott and his benefactor Albert Johnson.

Death Valley is formed by a graben. The valley floor is slipping downward along the Furnace Creek Fault system at the foot of the Black Mountains creating the lowest dry point in the Western Hemisphere. Badwater Basin is 282 feet below sea level.

The valley floor receives less than two inches of rain a year. The summer temperatures can stay in the 100s, both day and night. The high temperature of 134 degrees-F was recorded in 1913. In 1972, on a warm day of 128 degrees, I recorded the high ground temperature of 201 degrees.

To the west of Badwater is the Panamint Range with Telescope Peak at over 11,000 feet where it is cooler and has more moisture.

The valley was named by the 49ers taking a "short cut" to the Califor-

nia gold fields. By the time a small group of men, women, and children reached a spring on the side of the valley, they had little food or water and were very weak. William Manly and John Rogers volunteered to seek a way out and to find food. For the next several weeks the party stayed in camp, not knowing if they would ever make it out of the valley. Manly and Rogers finally returned with food, and soon the party was heading out of the valley. As they paused on a ridge and looked back into the valley, someone said "Good-bye Death Valley."

In the 1870s into the 1900s, prospectors returned to the Death Valley searching for gold, silver and other minerals. Towns like Tonopah, Goldfield, and Skidoo in the Panamint Range sprang up where there was sufficient ore.

In the 1880s Borax or "white gold" was discovered on the valley floor. Harmony Borax Works refined the ore (cottonball) that the Chinese workmen gathered. The processed borax was then transported 165 miles by 20 mule team to the railroad. Borax and Talc are still mined in the vicinity of Death Valley. Mining is one thing that Albert Johnson and Walter Scott, also known as Death Valley Scotty, had in common; another is that both of them were born in 1872.

Walter Scott was born in Kentucky and was the youngest of six children. He was raised on a farm where his father bred and trained trotting horses. At the age of 11, instead of go-

ing to school, Scott headed to Nevada to become a cowboy with his brothers. Scott held a variety of jobs over the next several years. Possibly his first visit to Death Valley was when he was a water boy on the survey party for the California-Nevada border.

He also worked at Harmony Borax Works, caring for the teams of the 20-mule team wagons that hauled borax from Death Valley to the rail line at Mojave. How many, if any, of the 165-mile trips he made with the 20-mule-team Borax Wagons is anyone's guess. He soon returned to the cowboy trade with his brothers.

In 1890, a talent scout for Bill Cody discovered Scott and hired him to work as a cowboy with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Scott spent the next 12 years as a sharp shooter and a trick rider touring the US and Europe. While in New York for a show, Scott met his wife Ella, a candy store clerk.

Albert Johnson was born in Ohio to a very wealthy and religious family. After graduating from Cornell University with an engineering degree in 1895, he worked in the family enterprises. In 1896, he married Bessilyn Penniman of Walnut Creek, Calif., who had been a classmate at Cornell. She was a genteel woman and very religious. Both Johnson and Scott had a connection to Colorado. In 1899, Albert and his father made a trip to Colorado to look over mining prospects. They were passengers on a Denver and Rio Grande narrow-gauge train when it was hit by another train. Albert's father was killed instantly and Albert, then 27 years old, suffered a broken back.

He spent over a year in the hospital at Salida. He finally regained his

ability to walk before returning to Ohio. He walked with a limp, and suffered partial paralysis and other related ailments the rest of his life. Because of his injuries, Albert Johnson was unable to continue a career as a practicing mining engineer; so Bessie and he moved to Chicago. He became a one-third partner in the financial firm of E.A. Shedd and Co. Mr. Shedd had been a friend of Albert's father. In 1902, they purchased the National Life Insurance Company, and Albert quickly worked his way up from treasurer to President to Chairman of the Board, and he eventually gained 90 percent of the corporate stock.

Walter Scott was drawn to Colorado during the off season of the Wild West Show to "learn" gold mining. It was the winter of 1900, just nine days after his marriage to Ella that she was put on a train to return to New York and Scott headed to Cripple Creek. The following winter Scott and Ella returned to Cripple Creek. While on a tour of the mine, Ella begged the superintendent for an ore sample to show the girls back in the New York candy store. She received two samples, but didn't show Walter until they were packing to return to NY. Ella reported that his eyes nearly popped out! After leaving the Wild West show in 1902, Scott borrowed the ore samples and started a new career that brought him even more fame and riches— gold prospecting!

Over the next few years, he convinced several wealthy businessmen that he had a gold mine claim worth a fortune in Death Valley and agreed to split the profits, provided they first offer money to extract the ore.

After receiving money, Scott often returned to one of his Death Valley



Gaylord, financed the trip. All the press that Scott was getting about the Coyote Special sparked Johnson's interest in Scotty again.

In 1906 Johnson made his first attempt to visit the Scott's gold mine in Death Valley. Scotty and his brother Warner took Johnson and other investors to a wash in the south end of Death Valley where some of Scotty's friends had hidden themselves, disguised as bandits to scare off the investors. During the mock gunfight (known as "The Battle of Wingate Pass"), Warner was shot and badly injured and Scotty had to call the whole thing off. Most of Scotty's investors realized they'd been fooled and pulled out of Scotty's

scheme. Johnson, however, felt that there might still be a chance that Scotty had found gold and decided to pursue the matter further.

In 1907, Scotty and Johnson became partners. To start with, Johnson gave Scotty over \$22,000 in cash plus equipment and supplies. Finally in 1909, Johnson made his first of many trips to Death Valley with Scotty.

From their camp at the north end of Death Valley near Grapevine Canyon, Scotty took Mr. Johnson on a grueling trek by horseback through Death Valley. Scotty figured a few days in the desert would be too much for the city slicker who was not in the best of health. Surprisingly, Johnson enjoyed Death Valley so much that he stayed nearly a month,

camp, with his mules. And after a week or more, he would then turn up at the finest hotels and saloons in California and Nevada and go on one of his legendary spending sprees—with money, of course, from his Death Valley mine—thus he soon became known as Death Valley Scotty. In 1904 Scotty met with Mr. Shedd and his partner Albert Johnson and they grubstaked him \$2,500.

The next year, Death Valley Scotty went to the Santa Fe Railroad office in Los Angeles and said that he would pay anything to get to Chicago in 46 hours. The Coyote Special made it in 44 hours and 54 minutes. Of course, Scotty said the money for the trip was from his Death Valley mine! Later it was revealed that a real-estate speculator, E. Burdon



and his health improved dramatically in the dry, sunny climate. But, still there was no evidence of the mine he had been financing. However he did find Death Valley Scotty was an outstanding cook, a fascinating yarn-spinner, and a first-rate horseman, not to mention the finest guide in the area.

Death Valley Ranch had its real beginning about 1915 when Albert Johnson began buying up old homesteads and mining claims along Death Valley's northern edge. An abundance of water, ideal climate at 3,000 feet elevation, and a nearby railroad helped make this area ideal. Over the next dozen years, he bought some 1500 acres, consisting of two separate tracts known later as Upper and Lower Grapevine.

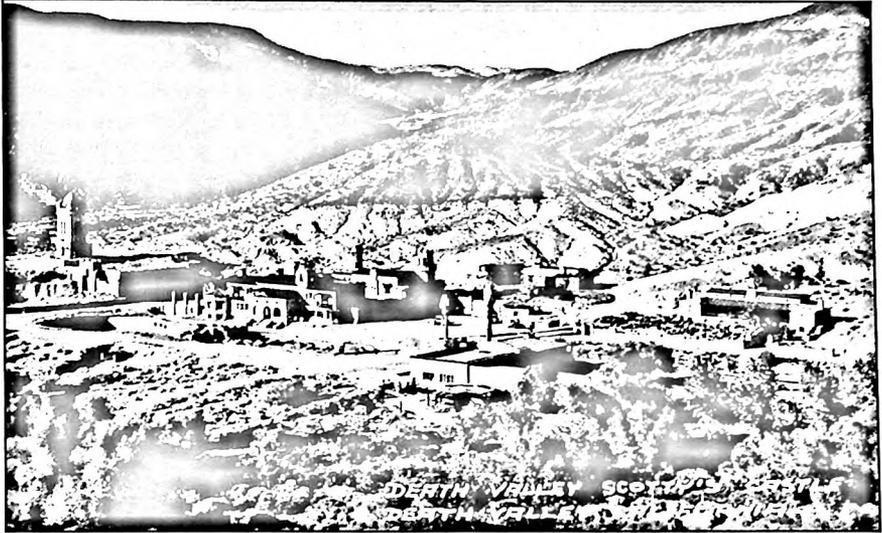
The most important purchase was the former Staininger Ranch where Johnson put up three wooden-sided tents; and these along with existing ranch shacks, became his Death Valley headquarters. By 1922 prodded by his wife's desire for more civilized accommodations, Albert Johnson decided to

construct permanent quarters.

A small work crew built three structures. The house was two-stories with the Johnson apartments on the upper floor, and the kitchen, store rooms and a bedroom for Scotty on the lower floor. A large garage and workshops were built to the east and a cook house on the hill. Now they had a comfortable place to stay, but the buildings were very plain. So, Johnson had several architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright, present designs to improve the appearance of the ranch.

The Johnsons choose the Spanish-style designs by Charles McNeilledge for their Death Valley Ranch. Renovation began in 1925. The Death Valley Ranch would be made up of nine buildings. Roughly the order of construction was: the main house, annex, guesthouse, stables, cookhouse, garage, gas station, chimes tower, powerhouse, and gatehouse. They also had planned a 260-foot swimming pool and a courtyard.

Building materials, food, work-ers, everything but water and gravel,



had to be hauled in. The Bullfrog and Goldfield Railroad had a station at Bonnie Clare about 20 miles east of the ranch. Once unloaded at Bonnie Clare, everything had to be hauled by truck to the site. Johnson, with his engineering background, found it a challenge to harness the power from the nearby spring and bring modern conveniences to his ranch. The spring just east of the Castle maintains a continuous flow of about 200 gallons per minute. A reservoir of 44,000 gallons was built in the early 1920s with a water main laid from the reservoir to the ranch.

The basement underneath the main house is the center of about a quarter mile of tunnel system that runs between the Hacienda, the gas-tank house, and the powerhouse. It carries piping for the water, plumbing and electricity for each area, and was a storage area for tile for the swimming pool and the other unfinished tile areas.

Matt Roy Thompson was the gen-

eral superintendent and lived at the site. Bessie and Thompson had known each other during her one year at Stanford University in California. On page six you see the Main House under construction. The Johnson apartment is closest to us, on the second floor. The lower floor is the dining room and kitchen. On the far section, the second story was to be a guest apartment and on the ground floor the lower music room, solarium and a room for Scotty.

As building continued and more visitors came to the Death Valley area, many of them also traveled to see the desert castle—even though the roads were poor to nonexistent in the north end of the valley. Scotty was often there to entertain them by telling them that he was building the two-million-dollar home with profits from his gold mine. When Johnson was questioned by the reporters, Johnson would agree that Scotty owned the place, and simply said that he was “Scotty’s banker.” Scotty told visitors

and reporters that it was his "shack" or "castle"—and thus it became Scotty's Castle.

The cookhouse has the largest kitchen on the ranch. It also had a dining area for workers and guests and sleeping quarters for the cook. Below the cookhouse are the gas-tank house and the service station. Later the service station was moved down closer to the garage. The gas tank house was later converted to a snack bar and curio shop and later for displays. The garage building contained an office and sleeping quarters for Matt Roy Thompson. The Hacienda or guest house has two guest apartments and a joining kitchen. The annex houses the pipes for the organ. To the left is the cook house. A little beyond is the Hacienda. And then in the distance are the stable and the open shed.

Gates connect the stables and an open shed. Precise detailed blueprints were drawn up for the main structures, and also for each piece of wood and iron furnishing. Johnson hired English and Austrian woodworkers and German ironsmiths to work in his shop in Los Angeles as well as at the castle. Skilled craftsmen received \$11 a day. The fortress houses the Pelton water wheels and Diesel engines that were used for electricity on the castle grounds.

The clock or chimes tower was originally going to house water tanks, but was converted to a clock with deacon chimes. Keyboards are located in the tower and in the lower music room so that tunes can be played on the chimes.

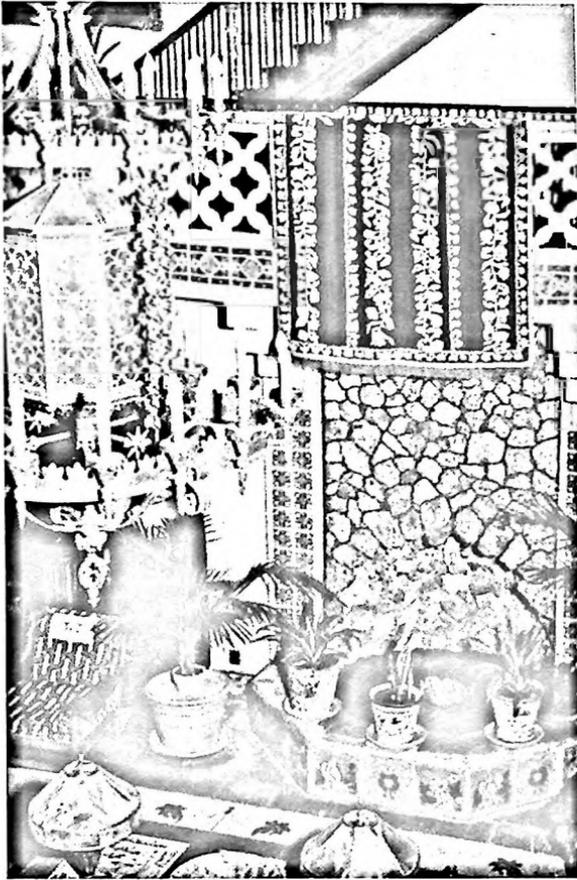
Rail service north of Beatty, Nev., was discontinued in January 1928. Anticipating the closing of the rail service, Johnson stockpiled great quantities of

heavy items such as cement, tile and plaster during the final months of operation. Included in the last shipment was the Welte organ for the upper music room. Rail service continued to Beatty, Nev., but that was 50 miles away from the castle. And it's said that burros even brought supplies from Barstow, which was 180 miles away!

Albert Johnson bought the railroad ties and bridge timbers from the abandoned Bullfrog and Goldfield RR to supply the numerous fireplaces in the castle. He paid \$1500 for more than 100,000 ties and then spent another \$25,000 to haul and stack them in Tie Canyon, just west of the castle. It turned out the ties were too dry and burned too fast.

By 1931, Johnson's fortune had declined, although he was never a poor man. The Castle closed in 1931, and work was stopped with about 80% completed. Still left to be completed was the garden between the main house and the fortress or powerhouse, most of the landscaping, the final touches on the gate-house, walls prepared for stucco and never finished; a half-tiled bathroom, and the 260-foot swimming pool. The main buildings were far enough along to be used.

Cement fence posts surround the castle property—each one with the initials "S" and "J." During the preliminary survey for Death Valley to become a National Monument, it was found that the land that the Castle sat on did not belong to Johnson. Death Valley became a National Monument in 1933, but it took several more years before legislation in the US Congress was passed to allow Johnson to purchase the 1500 acres in question for \$1.25 an acre.



The gates to the castle were once again opened and this time to regular guided tours at \$1 a person. The tours began in the patio area between the main house and the annex and ended in the vaulted-ceiling music room with a selection played on the pipe organ.

The entrance to the main house has a sign "Death Valley Ranch" carved above the main door and also the elaborate iron work.

The two-story great hall or living hall is filled with furnishings from Europe as well as those made especially for the Castle. The water fountain was on one side of the great hall and the fireplace on the other.

The lower music room has one of the many Majorcan rugs that was made for the Castle. Also notice the intricate woodwork in the ceiling and the pictures of Scotty and Johnson over the fireplace. The solarium with another water fountain is at the far

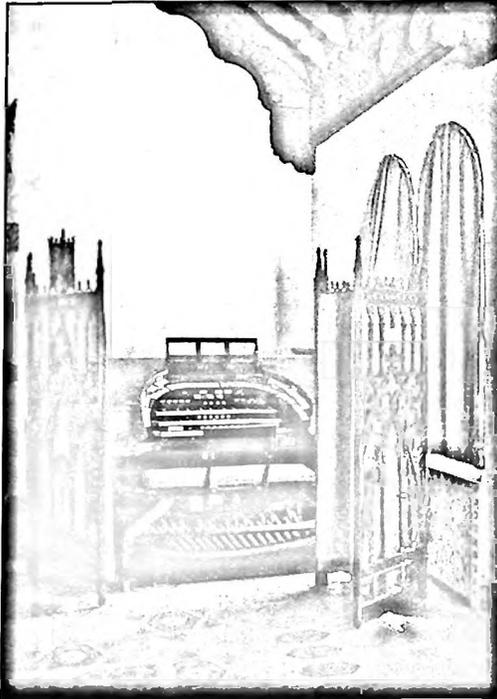
There was also a provision that stated that the government had the first right of purchase should Johnson ever sell the Castle.

By this time the Johnson's vacation spot had become a popular hotel and tourist attraction due to the fame of Death Valley Scotty. Thousands of tourists, along with Hollywood movie stars and reporters from around the country, flocked to the Death Valley each year to see "Scotty's Castle" and hopefully visit with one of the world's richest gold miners, Death Valley Scotty.

end.

Scotty spent little time in his bedroom, preferring to stay at Lower Grapevine. The dining room was the scene of many happy occasions. Some of the best-known people in America were house guests, and they were entertained in this room. During banquets Scotty would sit at one end of the table and Johnson at the other.

The unique dishes were made in Italy for the Castle. On each dish is the inscription J. and S. for Johnson and



Scott, DVR for Death Valley Ranch, and the Latin phrase which means "By our perseverance we will succeed."

The main-house kitchen also had a breakfast nook. A Spanish inscription was carved into the backs of the benches around the table. It reads "Serve yourself to all that you desire. Be seated. You are welcome." Most of the meals were prepared in the cookhouse and then brought down here to be kept warm before serving.

In the main house annex on the ground floor was the patio apartment, a commissary, and on the far end an office for Albert Johnson. The second floor had several guest rooms and the upper music room.

The patio apartment had a kitchen and dining area, a bedroom,

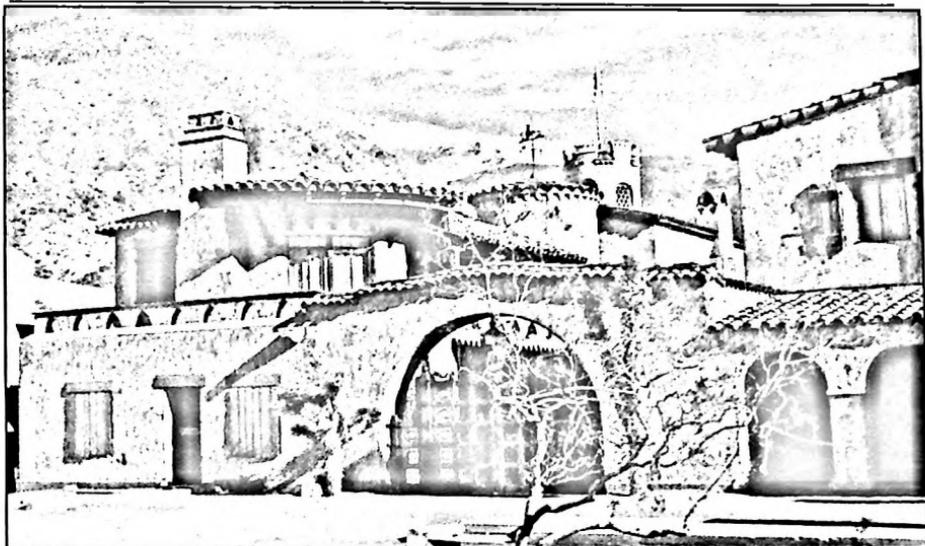
and an unfinished bathroom with shower.

The music room is perhaps the finest room in the castle. And it's the best example of the wood craftsmanship that was used specifically for the castle.

The Welte organ console is in the corner behind the iron grille. The player piano on the left is quite unusual. You can play it like any other piano, but if you press the piano stops on the organ, the piano keys will respond to the organ keyboard. Neither Johnsons nor Scotty could play, but they enjoyed music and had an automatic roll player put in so they could enjoy music anytime. The organ pipes range in size from a pencil to 11 inches diameter and 16 feet tall. The tours end by descending a spiral staircase in the tower.

After the Johnsons moved to Hollywood in 1933, they spent more time at the Castle. Johnson always enjoyed relaxing and sharing a good laugh with Scott.

Bessie Johnson died in a car accident just west of Death Valley in 1943. Bessie and Albert had no heirs, so in 1946, Albert formed the Gospel Foundation of California to oversee their property and continue in his charitable work. Albert died in 1948. Both of them are buried in Oberlin, Ohio. Scotty was able to remain at the Castle telling his stories to visitors and then retreating to Lower Grapevine Ranch that Johnson had built for him, about five miles away. Scotty lived in the Castle the last two years of his life. He died in 1954, and was laid to rest on the hill overlooking the famous home that now bears his name.



The Gospel Foundation of California managed Scotty's Castle until July 1970 when the National Park Service purchased the 1500 acres for \$850,000. The Land and Conservation Fund Act of 1965, which provided the funds for the purchase, made an exception to buy the buildings, however, they were not able to buy the furnishings and these were donated to the National Park Service by the Gospel Foundation of California.

I spent several years in the 1970s working in the Death Valley's north district that included Scotty's Castle. Part of that time I lived in the patio apartment in the castle. I supervised the castle guides when the National Park Service took over the guide service. And with the Castle manager, maintenance staff, and other professionals, we researched the history and preservation of the European and handmade furnishings. We also explored the land, hiking or driving to Lower Grapevine, which is where Scotty stayed most of his time.

In 1973, Bill Bolton, the Castle maintenance leadman, and I collaborated on a book that documents the construction and history of Scotty's Castle.

Today, living history programs are given in the Castle. Ranger tours are given through the tunnels and several times a year to Lower Grapevine.

There is a hand-carved Spanish saying in the beams around the ceiling in the lower music room. To me, it sums up the story of Scotty's Castle. Translated, it says: "In the far desert there is peace and tranquility. One feels the force of the sun and the mysterious silence of the night. Much treasure will be found hidden beneath these high mountains and great will be the recompense for those who look for this treasure by their hard labor."

I hope that if you have not had the opportunity to see and feel the wonders of Death Valley and Scotty's Castle, that you will soon have the good fortune to do so.