

JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK



DESERT QUEEN RANCH

A National Register of Historic Places Site



A small stream meandering through a rock-enclosed canyon within Joshua Tree National Park has attracted both animals and humans to its isolated location for many centuries. The canyon has served as a seasonal living site for early peoples, as a cattle ranch, and as a gold ore-milling site. It sustained a family of homesteaders for over 50 years and today attracts visitors from all over the world. In 1975, the ranch was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Seasonal Residents

The Cahuilla and Serrano people and their ancestors are known to have inhabited the canyon from about 500 years ago until the turn of the century. Small family groups arrived in spring and remained until cold weather or inadequate food supplies prompted their departure. Considered family property, various sites, even certain trees, were inherited through the matriarchal line.

The stream watered a variety of trees and shrubs and attracted the animals the people hunted: bighorn sheep, rabbits, lizards, small rodents, even insects. The people wove sandals and cooking baskets from Mojave yucca and nolina leaves and made hunting bows from juniper and willow. Mesquite beans, pinyon nuts, grass seeds, acorns, and cactus fruit were gathered, dried, and ground to a fine consistency in bedrock mortars, using a long stone tool called a pestle. The resulting meal could be stored in pots fashioned from clay found in the canyon.

The last of these early inhabitants departed when the trees they relied on for their livelihood were used for fuel by miners, cattlemen, and homesteaders. They left behind enigmatic rock carvings (petroglyphs) and paintings (pictographs) whose interpretation continues to baffle archaeologists. Their beautiful baskets, graceful pottery, and stone tools are reminders of how bountiful the desert can be to those who understand its riches.



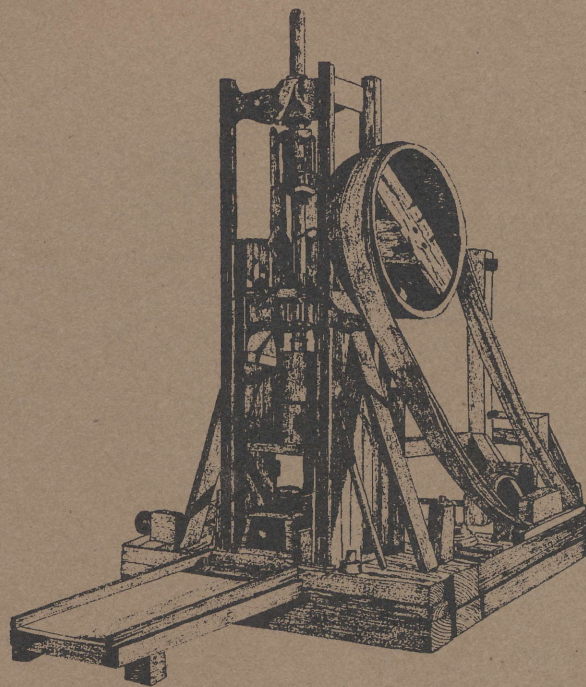


Cattlemen or Rustlers?

In the 1870s, when grazing lands in the San Bernardino Mountains became scarce, cattlemen began to look to the higher elevations of the Mojave Desert as an alternative pasture for their cattle. At that time, the area probably received ten inches of rain and snowfall annually. Grass was knee-high, and springs provided water most of the year.

Two brothers, Jim and Bill McHaney, and a group of companions collectively known as the "McHaney gang" were among the first to move to the desert with an eye on its pasturage. They were reputedly cattle rustlers, who were at times accused of carrying on a two-way trade of stolen cattle between California and Arizona. They are reported to have used the box canyon in Hidden Valley to change the brands on their stolen cattle.

In 1887 they were chased out of the mountains by a posse of ranchers because of their cattle rustling activities. The following year they established a cow camp in the canyon where the Desert Queen Ranch is located today. At their camp, the gang dug wells and built two adobe cabins and a barn. There was money to be made in cattle, but it was a slow business; the McHaney brothers began to look around for faster ways to accumulate the wealth they desired.



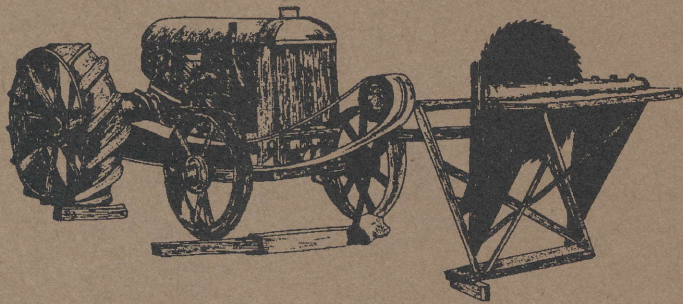
The Desert Queen Mine

In 1893 John Lang struck gold. The Lost Horse Mine turned into the richest claim in the area. In April, 1894, an employee of the Lost Horse Mine, Frank James, found a rich strike of his own. James was killed under suspicious circumstances when he supposedly drew a knife and threatened Charlie Martin, a cowboy working for the McHaney brothers.

The McHaney brothers filed on James' claim, which they named the Desert Queen Mine and paid \$2,000 for a five-stamp mill, which they installed in the canyon. The brothers made a lot of money from their mining activities, but they spent even more. When the Desert Queen Mine ran out of rich ore, they lost the mine to creditors.

After a succession of owners continued to lose money, the mine was closed. Mine custodian and assayer William F. Keys claimed the mine and the five-acre mill site for his unpaid wages. In 1917 Bill Keys homesteaded additional acreage adjoining the mill site; this 160 acres became the Desert Queen Ranch.





Bill Keys—Homesteader

In 1918 Bill married Frances Mae Lawton. Using ingenuity, patience, and hard work, Bill and Frances built a life for themselves, raised a family, and met the challenges of their remote desert home in an environment that would defeat many others.

A trip to town from the ranch required two days by horse drawn wagon, so except for staples such as sugar, flour, and coffee, the family's food was grown at the ranch. Well-tended grape arbors and fruit trees shaded a garden full of produce. Bees pollinated the fruit trees and provided honey. The children gathered grasses to feed the chickens and rabbits. Butchered beef was canned or dried along with fruits and vegetables. Several hundred jars would be put away each year to see the family through the winter.

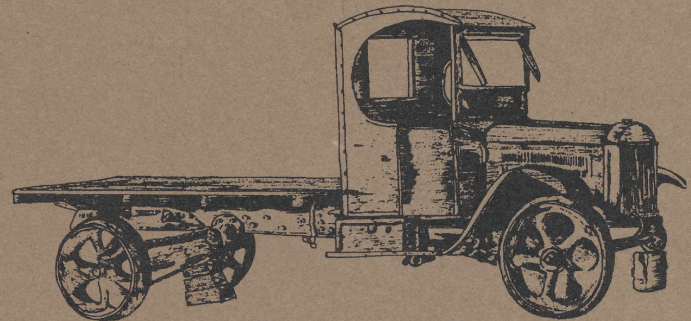
Through the years additional wells were dug, and windmills, pumps, and an irrigation system were installed. The wash was dammed behind the house to create a lake and stocked with black bass, bluegill, and catfish. This rain-filled lake provided ice skating during winter, a welcome swim after hot, summer chores, and irrigation for the garden and orchard below. Lake sediment and cow manure were dug into the garden soil, helping to ensure a bountiful harvest.

Mining the Desert

While the children took care of the animals and carried water to the house, Frances Keys looked after the garden and orchard. She sold excess canned goods, fruit, and produce to visitors and neighbors. Bill Keys looked after his mining claims and maintained the ranch. Miners brought him their gold ore to be milled and assayed; neighbors brought harnesses to be mended, horses to be shod, and spare parts to be traded in the congenial atmosphere of the ranch. They also sought Bill's skill at the forge and anvil, as he made and repaired needed equipment.

Lumber, tools, and equipment from abandoned homesteads and mines lay strewn across the desert for the taking; many items found a home at the Desert Queen Ranch. Milled lumber, a rare commodity, gradually found its way from mine cabins and shafts into ranch buildings, water towers, and corrals. Boards were reused many times. Metal pipes, rails, wire, mining timbers, even pots and pans, were brought to the ranch for future use.

If a vital piece of machinery or a vehicle broke down, a trip to town for parts was often out of the question. For this reason, a small junkyard was kept at the ranch to provide a supply of parts for Keys and his neighbors.



The Desert Queen School

At first Frances Keys home-schooled her five children. Then in 1932 Oran Booth, a former teacher working as a ranch hand, started the first formal classes for the Keys children. In time, neighboring homesteaders began to send their children to school at the ranch, a schoolhouse was built, and the county agreed to pay the teacher's salary.

The Dudleys, retired missionaries from Burma, taught at the school from 1937 until it closed in 1942. Their students studied the same curriculum that was being taught in city schools, published a school newspaper, and took field trips to Los Angeles.



The Gun Fight

In 1943 when Bill Keys was sixty-two, ill feelings arose between him and a new neighbor, Worth Bagley. Bill claimed that Worth had shot some of his livestock; Bagley accused Bill of trespassing. One day when Bill was using a road that crossed Worth's property, there was a gun fight, and Worth Bagley was killed. Keys turned himself in to the sheriff. He was tried and convicted despite his claim that he shot in self defense. He served five years at San Quentin before receiving a full pardon through the intervention of Erle Stanley Gardner and a group of lawyers who made up the Court of Last Resort.

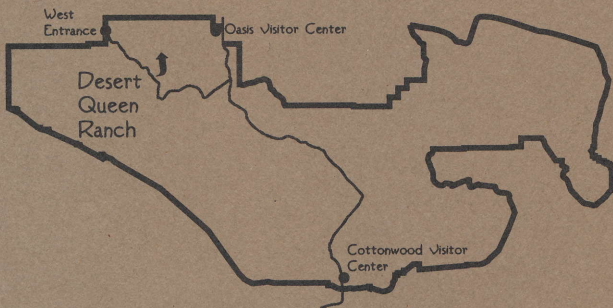


Last Days at the Desert Queen Ranch

The last ten years at the ranch were quiet ones for Bill and Frances Keys: The children had married and left to establish their own lives. Most of the neighboring homesteaders had moved away. The cattle were sold, the mines had shut down, and gold ore no longer poured through the Keys' stamp mills.

After Frances died in 1963, Bill sold the ranch and mine to the government to become part of Joshua Tree National Park. He continued to live at the ranch, caring for it until his death in June, 1969 at the age of 89. He was buried beside his wife and three of their children in the family cemetery. His tombstone, like the rest there, had been cut by his own hands from native stone in the area.





Joshua Tree National Park

To protect its historic character, the Desert Queen Ranch is closed to public access. You may visit the ranch on a National Park Service sponsored guided walking tour. Call 760-367-5555 for information.



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Dedicated to former ranch caretakers
Harmon & Nelda King

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