



# Wrightwood Roots

A Wrightwood Historical Society Voice



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## Thank God I'm a Country Boy!

By John Lovett

Permission to publish this story was granted by the author

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Edited *by george*

### The Lovetts

The Lovett family, John, Doris and son Jim arrived in this area in May 1924. A primary homestead of 320 acres in Sheep Creek was filed on and a second homestead of 320 acres in Wild Horse Canyon was also claimed. both were finalized in 1928 and the deed was signed by President Calvin Coolidge. Since Wild Horse was somewhat more accessible, the family settled on that homestead after 1928.

### Here's Johnny!

I was due in February 1929. All things considered, my father felt that the chances of a doctor-assisted birth was better in a more populated area. My mother's stepfather lived in Long Beach, so I was born in his home on February 20, 1929.



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John Lovett Sr. & son, Jim with their Red Bird Overland in 1924. This picture was taken at the Sheep Creek Water Company tunnel site. (Insert) Doris Lovett & son, John, in 1931.



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### Wildhorse Canyon in 1926.

## Snowfall

My mother always told the story of a three-foot snowfall that came in March of 1930. My father was working at Crystal Lake on a water tunnel (he had completed the Sheep Creek tunnel in 1928). Our old homestead cabin wasn't built to withstand three feet of wet snow, so my mother climbed up and shoveled it off. Totally isolated for more than a week with two small children, she managed to keep everything under control. Pioneer women were tough ladies.

## Power?

A couple of summers ago the electrical power was out virtually overnight. Come nightfall, it was quite dark. "This is what the area looked like every night when I was young," I said to my wife, Jody. "No lights period!"

No power, no telephone and until 1933, no paved highways. Isolated? Sure was. Our first homesite was about a third of a mile northwest of the present ranch house. We had a good view of Wildhorse Canyon to the southwest. In winter, when the heavy snows came to the high country, large herds of deer would come down the canyons, moving at a leisurely pace. They were an impressive sight to my young eyes.

## Predators

Predators were never a problem to our livelihood. We had a cow, at least one and sometimes as many as a dozen, rabbits and chickens that provided meat, milk and eggs. To this day, I can see a coyote coming out of the fenced yard with a Rhode Island Red hen in his jaws. The hen would be screeching in total terror and the coyote was headed for the hills. Dad grabbed the revolver, stepped out the door and drew down on that ole coyote. The bullet hit the ground under the coyote causing gravel to fly upwards against his belly. Stung, he jumped and let the hen go. Let me tell you, that was exciting!

## Wrightwood Boys Need Help

About 1931, two city boys from Wrightwood were hunting over by the reservoir in Horse Canyon. The younger one shot at a rabbit with his .22 rifle. The round misfired but as he turned and lowered the gun, it fired, striking his brother in the spine and dropped him in his tracks. Unfamiliar with the area, the young boy headed back to Wrightwood for help. As chance would have it, about the time he reached the road to Wrightwood, Mr. Melvin Nilsen came along. He and the boy returned to the scene of the accident and, leaving the boy there, Mr. Nilsen came to our place looking for help.

He and Dad rigged a litter and, with my brother Jim cutting willows with a corn knife, they packed the young fellow out. Surprisingly, he survived not only that journey, but the



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**Phelan School, 1938, Teacher: Mrs. Stark (of Baldy Village). (Back row, from left-to-right) Helen Lona, Charlotte Amons, Melvin Amons, Mrs. Stark, Bud Stark, ?? ??, Mildred Amons. (Front row, from Left-to-right) Billy Gains, John Lovett, Maretta Lona, Bruce Stark & Don Amons.**

30 miles of corduroy road to the nearest doctor. Unfortunately, he never walked again.

to purchase the right-of-way. Of course, the centerline ran right through our original cabin, so that meant we had to move.

### Here Comes the Highway!

This was also the year that state highway survey crews showed up. The party chief was Kent Stone. Big, tall, handsome fella, he had me pegged quickly — made me a sword out of lath, tied some red flagging on it and made me promise not to mess with his centerline stationing. I packed that sword around for months. Once the centerline was established a right-of-way agent, Charles Flack, showed up

### We Had to Move

Dad cleared a new road and building site up in a cove towards West Cajon (where the ranch house sits today). A small building belonging to a homesteader named Boggess was purchased and transported to the new site, and the old cabin and barn were dismantled and moved, making our move complete.



Mountaineer-Progress m09533gt.jpg  
**Victor Valley High School Buses, 1934. Busses are parked in the loading area of victor Valley High First bus on the right is the Wrightwood bus, driver, Jophn Lovett, Sr..**

## Big Machines

The highway contract was successfully bid by Sharp & Fellows, Inc. of Long Beach. The project was some 15 miles from Cajon to the Los Angeles County line. The major earthwork was done with a power shovel and Mack dump trucks. A combination that totally fascinated and entertained me for days (months) on end. To surmount the cliffs at the top of the grade with a power shovel seems difficult now, but there was actually a wagon road from Phelan to West Cajon built by a rancher named Sharpless. Of poor quality, it was sufficient to walk the shovel to the top of the "big cut" where it started casting earth over the cliffs until such time as the trucks could be loaded.

Most of the excavation had to be drilled and blasted. Black powder was used with dynamite detonators. The black powder came in corrugated cans of about three gallon size (50 pounds.) Every ranch in 20 miles had dozens of these cans.

## Highway Complete!

The road was all complete in 1934. Dad was driving the high school bus and yours truly started school. The first week was great, but then I found out that I couldn't walk out the door and head for the hills like I could in the past. From that point on, school was not high on my priorities.

## Phelan School

Phelan School, that magnificent brick building. Large, strong, the community center, the church, the place for an education. It was all of these things and more.

Built in 1922 by Louis Wiese of Victorville, it has graduated some 12 classes by the time I started first grade in 1934. Classes were held in the east room, where the day-dreaming student could see the San Bernardino Mountains looming in the distance. The building was divided in the middle by a hall that led to a washroom/storeroom on the southeast corner and to a kitchen/dining area on the south side of the auditorium.

## The Auditorium

The auditorium, though not massive, was sufficient for community needs. Dances were held regularly, Sunday school, women's club quilting bees, card parties and grange meetings kept the agenda quite full. The most remarkable thing was that it was plumbed for gas lights that worked!



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**John & Jim Lovett enjoying their fresh, country life in September of 1935.**

## More School Facilities

Facilities outside included a flag pole, a chinning bar, swings, a basketball backboard and hoop, a volleyball court and a baseball diamond with backstop. Sanitary facilities were crude. Outhouses for the necessary body functions were the three hole variety that were never moved in my memory. At best, they were intimidating, especially when older boys threatened to deposit us little guys down one of the holes. The washroom had a hand pump that pumped water from a cistern, bitterly cold in the winter and refreshingly cool in the fall and late spring. The foot valve on the pump did not work too well, so a bucket was always full to prime it each day.

## All Purpose Man

Mr. Melvin Nilsen was janitor, bus driver, maintenance man, shop teacher and all around good fellow. He patiently taught us boys how to saw a board straight, how to use a square, sharpen a chisel, clean a brush, and all with unflagging good humor. He even taught me to tie my shoes.

## The Student Body

During my eight years as a student, the student body was very small! Seems there was a need for 12 students to open the doors in the fall. The alternative was to close the school



**Mountaineer-Progress** m09006gt.jpg  
**John Lovett, 1938, "Some Cowboy."**

and bus the children to Victorville. To me, that was like being threatened with reform school. Somehow we always opened each fall and the student population would vary from as low as eight to as many as 18.

In 1934, the elementary students were brought to school by Mr. Nilsen in his private car (Bernice Nilsen's father-in-law). The teacher was Velora Weaver of Yucaipa and the school was quite full. The school board was composed of Henry Johnson, I.M. McAllister and Doris Lovett, clerk of the board and also substitute teacher.

1936 saw a new teacher, Mrs. Stark from Mount Baldy Village. She had two sons, Bud and Bruce. This helped our attendance problem. It was during her four years that the Amons came (five students) and the Pattersons (four students).

1941 brought Miss Doris Colgan, fresh out of U.C.L.A.

## **Play Day**

Each year we would travel to Hesperia for a "Play Day". Their school population was about the same as ours. Wrightwood School came down each spring for "Kite Day" and also in the fall for a no holds barred "touch" football game. Wrightwood School had a terrible reputation; they had seventh and eighth grade boys who "shaved!" They didn't graduate, they retired!

## **Highway 2 to Wrightwood**

1935 saw the construction of Highway 2 to Wrightwood. This in turn started our project of earthmoving for the service station at Mountain Top. Dad and brother Jim worked every available daylight hour for a year moving dirt. The summer of '37 saw long hours casting concrete blocks, two at a time, until some 1,500 were cast and cured. The station was complete and operating in December of 1937.

## **1938 - The Year of the Flood**

1938 was the year of the flood!! Boy, did it rain and rain and rain. Our house was wall-to-wall high school girls who could not get home because the roads were totally washed out. No telephone, no way to call parents to assure them their children were alright. It was all a matter of trust and confidence that they would be taken care of. The damage was so great that we actually contracted to maintain and light red lanterns each night at damaged areas from Mountain Top to the Los Angeles County line. This went on for several months.

## **The Start of Mountain Top Cafe**

1939 saw the start of Mountain Top Cafe. It was pretty well walled and roofed by the end of the year. Brother Jim joined the Navy, and I suddenly became number 1 helper. In the late fall, a drifter by the name of Mr. Reed showed up. He told Dad he was a finish carpenter and was looking for a place to stay for the winter. He was about as clever a fella as you could find; made quite attractive furniture, back bar, counter, pantry, etc. out of scrap lumber, old glass, broken mirrors, etc. He worked for a dollar a day and room and board, finished the inside of the cafe in one year and had it ready to open December 1, 1940. Mountain Top Cafe and Service has never been closed except for a few holidays since opening.



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Mountain Top Station, 1938, built by the Lovett family. (Insert) Lovett homestead, 1935..



1941

Mountaineer-Progress



1987

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Mountain Top Cafe, built by the Lovett family in 1938.

## The McAllister Family

## Sporty

Our nearest permanent neighbor was the McAllister family. The family consisted of four boys and three girls, of which Harold and Pearl were my brother's age and Martin was about four years older than me. The McAllisters always had some sort of vehicle. A Ford in most cases, generally a Model "T" with a homemade flatbed on the back and "Oklahoma Retreads" for tires. One hot summer day, Dad sent brother Jim and I out to mend the cow pasture fence. We happened to be working near the county road when the "Macs" happened by. "Come on and go swimming with us," came the invitation. Well, we were easily tempted.

We had a Dalmatian dog by the name of "Sporty" with us. Admonishing old "Sport" to "watch the tools" we climbed onto the Model "T" and off to Twin Lakes we rode.

## Dad, Not Too Happy!

Now, Dad wasn't one to leave two boys alone for too long, so he took a walk to see how the fence crew was doing. What he found was Sporty and the tools. To compound the problem, when he tried to pick up the tools, ole Sporty wouldn't let him. Well, we returned in a couple of hours, went back to work and came in at supper time tired, hot and dusty, fully prepared to claim a full day's work. thankfully,

Dad had cooled off and could see the humor in the situation, so we got a good lesson in being truthful without the tanning with a razor strap we deserved.

Old Sporty was quite a dog. Jim was always “stalking him.” Sporty would crouch down and jump at Jim when he got close enough. He and Jim thought this was great fun.

## **Jim & Sport**

By this time, Jim was a sophomore in high school. The school periodically had dances at night and the school buses were used for the rural kids so they could attend. Since the bus went clear to Big Pines, Dad let Jim out where our road connected with the county road so he could walk home. As my mother told the story, it was the dark of the moon. Dad had spotted a mountain lion up by the water tunnel not too long before and unsettling thoughts were on Jim’s young mind. The capper of course was “old Sport”. He heard Jim coming and was ready to play “stalk”. About 100 yards from the house was a small Manzanita bush that hid Sporty very well, and as Jim passed by, Sport lunged at him. Needless to say, when those two hit the front porch, Mom and I thought the house had collapsed. Poor Jim, it was months before he totally got over that night!

## **My Friend, Issac**

Issac Martin McAllister, called “Junior” by most and “Raisin” by his brothers and sisters, was sort of my other brother. He was a “health nut,” always running, riding his bike, etc. In general, he worked hard and was good at most anything. he taught me to use a slingshot, like David used on Goliath. I was pretty good, but Martin was deadly with that thing. He was dangerously accurate at 100 yards.

We used to head for the reservoir to hunt in the fall and winter and swim in the summer, and search for the perfect forked limb for the other kind of rock shooter they call a slingshot nowadays. The growth was heavy around the lake area and along the open ditch that the water followed coming from the tunnel. That water was deliciously cold and refreshing in the summertime.

## **Buzztail**

Well, this one summer day we spotted that “perfect” forked limb. We were up the canyon from the lake and had to cross the stream to reach the tree. Normally we were pretty sensitive to the danger of rattlers, but this day I got careless and jumped across the stream. When I hit the ground, I looked back and there lay four feet of the meanest, blackest timber rattler I ever saw and Martin was just about to step over it. Now like all kids, we would spook each other by

jumping sideways and shouting “buzztail” 10 times a day. But this was the real thing. All I could get out was a choked, whispered, “Martin! Don’t!,” and he stopped. Martin said later he wasn’t sure he heard me, but the look on my face was of pure terror. Far as I know, that “perfect” forked limb is still there. We suddenly lost interest in it that day long ago.

## **Air Warning!**

The coming of World War II brought immediate changes to everyone’s way of life. Like the city folk, we had our civilian group to provide air warning service. Twenty-four hours a day, someone was stationed at Clyde Ranch in Lone Pine Canyon. Why there? The only ranch with a telephone. Dad and I spent one night a week watching the skies. We used the service station as our shelter; it had a couple of chairs, a table and a kerosene stove. After the first excitement wore off it was a long and boring night each week. Thankfully, it was discontinued by the spring of 1942.

## **The Spring of ‘42**

My favorite pastime was to grab my rifle, my canteen and Bowie knife, and head for the hills. For some reason, I headed up the ridge behind the cafe this particular evening in the spring of ’42. When I reached the top, I observed what appeared to be a military bunker with several soldiers out on the ridge north of my location. The growth was pretty heavy then so I “Injuned” up on this group to see what was going on. Closer inspection revealed four soldiers and a radio station surrounded by sand. Several shelter halves were arranged to give them relief from the sun. No vehicles. After watching them for a while, I decided it was time to let them know they weren’t alone. “What the hell are you guys doing on my property?,” I questioned. Four pairs of startled eyes and one rifle barrel appeared over the sand bags. I stood up quickly when I saw that Springfield. “Where the hell did you come from?,” followed by, “Jesus Christ, kid, you could have gotten your butt shot off.” Well, it didn’t take long to get on better terms. Upon returning home, I told the folks about this group. My mother had two pies and a cake ready for me to haul up that hill the next night. Those fellas ate like kings for the rest of their tour there. Their purpose was air warning, but after a couple of months they moved out. By that time, air attack didn’t seem so important as it had at first.

## **Our Way of Life**

I suppose our way of life was pretty boring, but it never seemed that way to me. We had social activities at the

school, people shared their hunt or when they butchered. They were careful of your privacy, but ill health or injury saw a crew of men ready to lay up a winter's supply of firewood, mend fences, fix roofs or whatever needed to be done to help the unfortunate one through the bad times.

### Squaw Tea

No one was over supplied with money, but we got by, probably much better than our city cousins. Injury and illness was treated at home, you just did not run to a doctor for every little problem. Poultice, oil of Eucalyptus and squaw tea cured most everything. Believe me, the taste of Squaw tea lingers on for a life time.

### Shopping

We shopped once a month. potatoes came in 100 pound bags, sugar in 25 pound, beer was made at home, root beer too! Fruit and vegetables and meat was canned. Meat was also jerked and fruit was also dried. Eggs and milk you had on the ranch.



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A recent Mountaineer-Progress photograph of the author, John Lovett.

Trips to town were fun, especially when we reached the paved road (Highway 66). Every dip held a mirage of water; never could figure where it went. Phelan Road joined Highway 66 at Millers Corner (where Phelan Road joins I-15 now); service station, garage, cafe and air field. If it was foggy down below, biplanes carrying air mail and vehicles would finish the trip. I always prayed for foggy weather so I could see an airplane at Millers Corner.

### Political Visits

Occasionally, we would receive a visit from a congressman, one Harry Sheppard by name. I doubt he ever had much problem getting elected, but he would show up to sip a little sour mash whiskey, eat some fried chicken and tell big stories. Dad would unlimber the .45 so Harry could shoot a few rounds at a white rock across the canyon. 'Twas fun!


### Jim in Australia

When brother Jim was lying in an Australian hospital during the War, Harry got him home six weeks from the day Dad wrote for help. No fun and games then.

### Growth

Snow, rain, wind, fire, the depression and the War, we survived them all. Now growth has finally come and my happy hunting ground is full of people. It was better when it was empty.

*"George"*



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George F. Tillitson  
Technical Director

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Phone (760) 249-6622 P.O. Box 174  
 Cel Phone (760) 835-7702 965 Sheward Road  
 Wignwood, CA 92397-0974  
 tiltronix@scsnet.net