



The Stone Store in Benton Hot Springs in 1949.

Mono County Historical Society Bridgeport, CA 2021 Newsletter Benton

Benton, once known as Benton Station, is 36 miles north of Bishop in southeast Mono County at the junction of Highways 6 & 120. It is on the west side of the White Mountains, 15 miles south of Montgomery Pass and the Nevada State Line. Old Benton, now Benton Hot Springs, is four miles west on Highway 120. It is one of the oldest existing towns in Mono County.

Benton Hot Springs was home to the Northern Paiute Indians for hundreds of years before the white man. They practiced agriculture on elaborately irrigated fields but this changed when settlers began homesteading Indian land in the 1850s, forcing Paiutes to become laborers on white-owned ranches.

Eastern Sierra mining activity in the 1860s created stagecoach and freight traffic between Wellington, Aurora, Bodie and the Owens Valley. They used a primitive trail known as the Aurora-Owens River Road that cut through Adobe Meadows to Hot Springs Valley, now called the Blind Spring Valley.

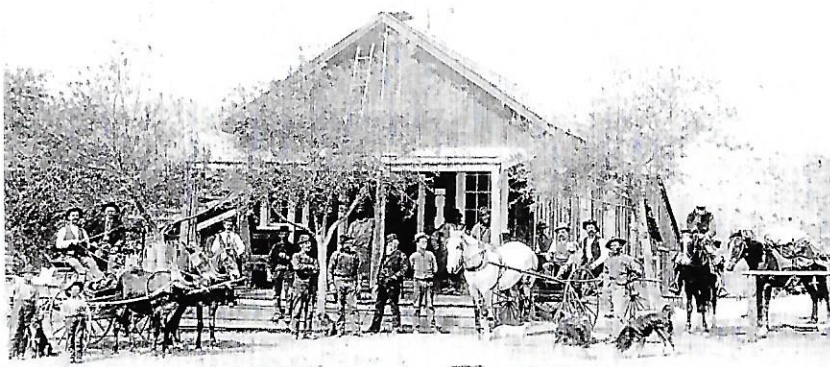
Silver strikes were made in late 1864 on Blind Spring Hill south of the hot springs. This led to the organization of the Blind Spring Mining District. Discoveries in 1863 near Montgomery Canyon to the east took precedence. The Montgomery Mining District experienced a major rush in late 1864, leading to the establishment of Montgomery City. It was home to two newspapers until 1866 when miners left for new strikes in the Blind Spring District. Later discoveries were made in the White Peak Mining District in Montgomery Canyon. The old Montgomery Mill had been left behind and was still in use during the 1890s. Mining continued in the Montgomery area well into the 1960s.

In 1865 two towns appeared on the Aurora-Owens Road. Partzwick was built a half mile north of the hot springs on land owned by Dr. August Partz, superintendent of the Sierra Blanca & Cornucopia Silver Mining Companies. The town had a hotel, lodging house, corral and saloon. Former Aurora merchants Albert Mack & Charles Keppler built a store that featured druggist Henry Piessnecker. In 1870 the Partzwick Hotel was a rest stop offering lodging and meals. Nevertheless, there was one huge drawback. Partzwick had no independent water supply.



Main Street Benton in 1886.

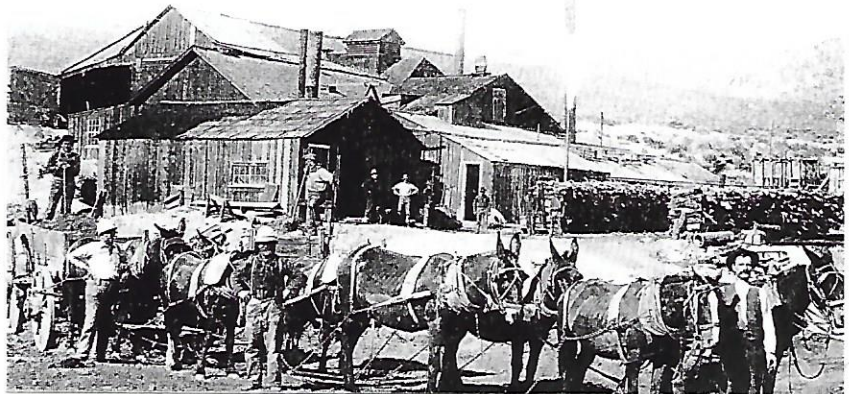
Benton was built near the springs which provided easy water access. It was first known as Hot Springs until it was named after Senator Thomas Hart Benton, a supporter of mining in the west. Robert Morrison installed the first building, a store and saloon he owned in Montgomery City that was disassembled and rebuilt in Benton. George Hightower then built a blacksmith shop. Morrison had the post office contract and was also the Wells Fargo Express Agent.



Gercken's Benton Brewery in 1888.

Tri-weekly mail service from Bridgeport began the same year. Eugene Kely built a large hotel in 1868 and was elected the first County Supervisor for Benton in 1870. Partzwick and Benton co-existed as separate communities with hotels, stores, saloons and other businesses. Once Benton became the commercial center for mining, all the buildings in Partzwick were dismantled and moved to Benton.

In 1869 miners were drawn to new strikes in Nevada, leaving Benton & Partzwick nearly deserted. When Benton petitioned Mono County for a school they were denied because of lack of requisite number of heads of families. The rush in Nevada did not last and miners returned to work in the Blind Spring mines, causing new growth in Benton. In 1873 the town had 150-200 inhabitants.

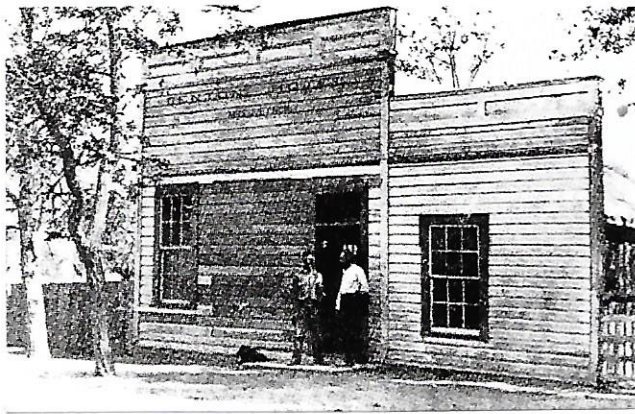


The 5-stamp Diana Mill was built in 1873 just south of Benton.

Twenty-nine convicts escaped from the Nevada State Prison at Carson City in September 1871. When an Aurora posse was unable to head off the men headed south, Benton Deputy Sheriff George Hightower organized another posse. Hightower and his men tracked the convicts to Mount Diablo Canyon and rode into an ambush. Merchant/Deputy Robert Morrison and Paiute Indian guide Mono Jim were killed. Convicts were tracked to a Long Valley lake later named Convict Lake and they were eventually captured or killed in the Bishop area and Fish Lake Valley.

In 1872 Deputy Hightower built a store made of stone from the local quarry that survives to this day. It also served as the post office and Hightower took over the Wells Fargo Express contract upon Robert Morrison's death. He sold the store to John Creaser in 1874 and Creaser sold it to John Millner in 1881.

In 1872 William Leete of Virginia City built a 10-stamp mill north of Partzwick to service the Comanche Mine. Albert Mack built a toll road up Blind Spring Hill so freight wagons could bring more ore to the mill. In 1873 Mack and James Powning bought the mill.



The Benton Hotel in the 1890s.

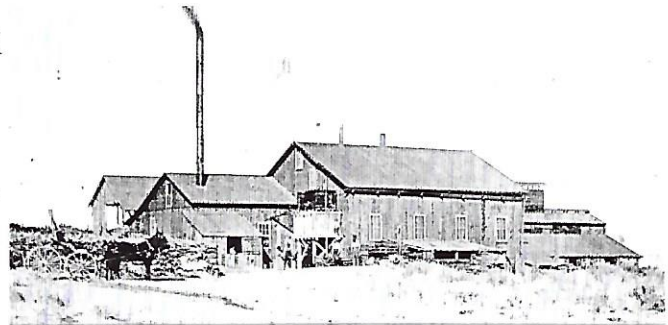
Benton's Main Street. Most of the Chinese worked as miners, cooks, gardeners and later as section hands for the Carson & Colorado Railroad.

In 1872 Fisher Smith was the first doctor in Benton and also Recorder of the Blind Spring Mining District. Another trained doctor, Mathew Griswold, preferred mining but in 1874 he and Owens Valley doctors treated an epidemic of severe colds and respiratory infections. In the mid-1870s he served two years in the State Legislature. Griswold continued to mine and remain in Benton until he died in 1896. Dr. Fetterman served the community in 1877 but only stayed one year. Dr. Middleton was a physician and druggist between 1879-1881.

Social activities relieved Benton's growing pains. The Lodge of Good Templars, a temperance organization for men and women met at Partzwick Hall. No liquor was served when they met, causing some to call the organization the "Water Tank Ball". The Poor Man's Club was active for a while, providing sick and disabled members with medical attention and weekly stipends. The organizations did not last that long, but dances were well attended along with variety and musical acts. In 1872 Benton built and maintained a racetrack for the sporting crowd.

On July 4, 1874 a lively celebration was held at the Kelty Hotel. One attendee reported, "Yes, we celebrated a little. Besides dancing and a bountiful supper we burnt some firecrackers to show our patriotism. No black eyes or fights show the whiskey was the right kind".

In April 1876 Albert Mack sold his property and mining claims to Bill Lent & General Dodge of San Francisco. They formed and incorporated the Comanche Mill & Mining Company which employed about 90 men working 24 hours a day to service the Kerrick & Comanche Mines. The Diana & Laura Mining Companies were good producers and ore was plentiful at the time.



The 10-stamp Comanche Mill about 1880.

Benton had about 600 residents in 1879 when the Mono Weekly Messenger newspaper was first published. The Benton Tri-Weekly Letter came out in June and was renamed the Semi-Weekly Bentonian. The Weekly Bentonian was published between 1879-1881 and the Mono Weekly Messenger was revived in 1881.

Children received educations but there was no schoolhouse until 1876 when one was built on the sand ridge between Benton & Partzwick with community funding. A levy tax was passed when donors failed to honor pledges. In 1879 there were 24 students. The school was open until 1947.



Benton students in the 1890s.

In 1881 Benton had four stores, three hotels, boarding houses, four saloons, a restaurant, two breweries, a butcher shop, feed yards, livery stable, blacksmith, lumber yard, boot/shoe shop, a tonsorial salon, but no churches. Ministers working in the mines often held services in the school. The Justice of the Peace performed weddings in homes and hotels.

In 1871 Eugene Kelty, Postmaster and a resident since 1866, filed a homestead claim on most of the Benton Township. He filed again in 1874 and paid a cash entry in 1876. A counter claim was filed by six old timers and in June 1877 a hearing was convened at the Independence Land Office. In July it moved to Benton. In May 1878 the recommendation to the Land Commissioner was to cancel Kelty's cash entry and refund his money. Until the final decision, property sales slowed and Eugene & Eliza Kelty had died. In November 1879 the Commissioner dismissed the claim.

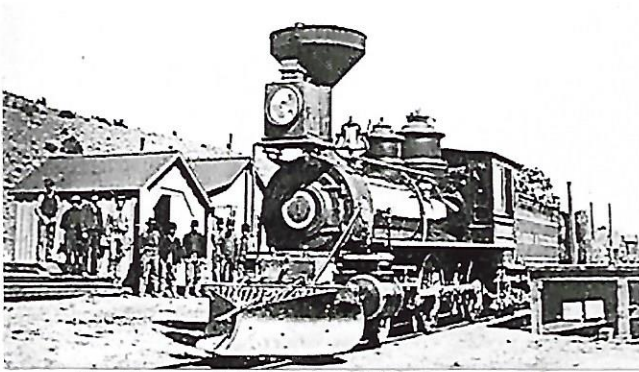
The community erupted again in December 1878 when the Comanche Mill & Mining Company declared bankruptcy. After a U.S. Marshall closed the mill and froze company assets the town was convinced the matter was a bank swindle. The Comanche had good production and the mill's last shipment amounted to \$9000 in bullion. Disagreements continued for years and often ended in gun fights. The Justice of the Peace and the Postmaster once pulled guns on each other.

The Indian Mining District eight miles southwest of Benton showed promise in the 1870s and the town of Chidago was established. The rush was short-lived and many of the miners moved on to the Lake Mining District in Mammoth City. In 1880 people began leaving Benton and forced the town into a steady decline for the next 25 years. The Inyo Independent wrote on October 4, 1884 that "Even though there is not much excitement around Benton, yet a good deal of work is being done in the mines". The Wai Wera Consolidated Mill & Mining Company was formed in 1881.

In January 1883 the Carson & Colorado Railroad crossed the White Mountains to a point four miles east of Benton. A train station and agent's residence were built at the location which was named Benton Station. The trains traveled from Mound House, Nevada and made stops at Candelaria before crossing the the White Mountains. The Carson & Colorado was good for mining interests but its takeover of freight and passenger contracts, as well as those for the mail and Wells Fargo, put the independent haulers and handlers out of business because they could not compete. The railroad prospered and extended their rail line to Keeler south of Lone Pine.



Benton Station in the early 1900s.

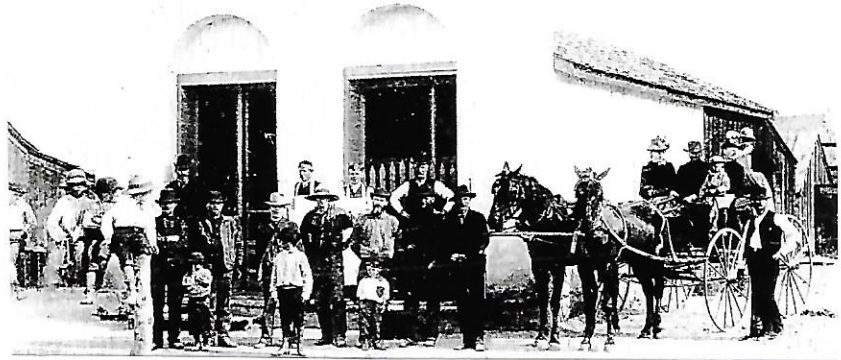


The Carson & Colorado at Montgomery Pass.

The Bodie Railway & Lumber Company began transporting cordwood and lumber from Mono Mills to Bodie in 1881. The railroad wanted to expand and build an extension to haul lumber from Mono Lake to Benton and connect to the Carson & Colorado Railroad at Benton Station. When work began in 1882 the Bodie Railway was renamed the Bodie & Benton Railway.

Nine miles were graded from Warm Springs when work stopped at Black Lake, 15 miles away from Benton. Work never resumed and no reason was given, but most believed it was due to the competition the Bodie & Benton Railway would create. The Carson & Colorado was owned by the Virginia & Truckee, which transported lumber from all of the Tahoe mills. Mono Mills was larger than all of the Tahoe mills combined and would control the southern market if the line to Benton was completed. Bodie & Benton reverted to Bodie Railway & Lumber Company in 1893.

Fire was a constant threat. In 1885 a blaze destroyed the north side of Benton's Main Street that included Watterson's Store and Post Office, John Lynch's Saloon and Kelty's Boarding House-Saloon. Another fire a few nights later in Chinatown was confined to one building. The Diana Mill destruction in 1888 was a big loss. The Benton Slaughterhouse burned on July 4, 1892 and a fire destroyed the California Hotel in April 1893.



The Benton Meat Market in 1875. It doubled as a morgue.

Most Benton mining activity occurred between 1862 and 1888 with a total output of \$4,216,000. During the 1890s low silver prices hastened a decline. Old buildings were being torn down for the lumber. Old timers died, some became ranchers and others just moved away, but speculator and tourist visits became a common occurrence in the early 1900s.

During this period Benton had only one hotel, the Wai Wera, a two-story structure John Millner attached to his store in 1904. It was known to have first class accommodations and great food. The buildings are still in intact. The store was known as the Stone Store, Wells Fargo Building and the Benton Trading Post. After Millner died in 1905, George Hewitt and Company bought the hotel, store, and mines that Millner owned on Blind Spring Hill. The company also acquired other properties that allowed them to control Benton commerce and create an era of prosperity.

George Hewitt and Company soon became known as the Benton Company. They owned the Indian Queen Mine and in 1908 started a tunnel on the east side of Blind Spring Hill in order to build a new road to Benton. The Tri-Metal Company built a cyanide plant and processed the old tailings with a capacity of 100 tons per day. The Benton Company leased many of their mines to local miners and outside investors.

On April 29, 1907 a young woman was harassed by three drunk men near Benton. Deputy Sheriff William Edwards and his companion Byron Alden contacted her and then chased after the men. Edwards approached two of them, identified as Tow Abe, a Paiute from Big Pine and his brother Allie Johns.

When Edwards tried to arrest them for public intoxication Abe grabbed the Deputy's rifle and shot and killed him with it. Alden struggled for possession of the weapon but without success. The remainder of the bullets were shot into the air allowing Alden to escape with the aid of another man.

Mono County Sheriff James Dolan arrested Abe and Johns and took them to the Bridgeport Jail. Abe was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to three years in San Quentin State Prison. Johns pled guilty to felony assault and spent eight months in San Quentin. Abe died while serving his sentence.



William Edwards & family, early 1900s.

The Benton Company was very active in the community. They used a company car to carry mail from Benton Station to Benton and in 1911 transported passengers from Benton to Mono Lake, Bodie and Aurora. In 1909 Benton Company Manager Fowler Remington was promoted to the "management of the commercial and municipal department of the town of Benton". There was a general clean up and fencing of town lots, tree plantings and construction of a new municipal swimming pool. Remington was Postmaster and host of the Wai Wera Hotel until his apparent suicide in 1914. His wife Gail acted as a doctor and a nurse, a Sunday School teacher, a god-mother to both white and Paiute children and was an active promoter of local social affairs.

In 1913 Indian Queen Extension Mine partner Warren Hastings Davis secured a five year lease on the Benton townsite, store, Wai Wera Hotel and Post Office. Davis promoted Benton as a resort. He cleaned up the hotel grounds, installed bathing dressing rooms and created a park. The hotel was normally used by tourists passing through to Mono Lake and Yosemite. In 1915 a highway between Los Angeles and Reno was being planned. A Chalfant Valley-Benton route was considered, but instead the Board of Supervisors chose the route through Long Valley.

Indian reservations did not exist in Mono and Inyo Counties until after 1900. Paiutes living in Bishop, Big Pine and Lone Pine were provided housing with sewer and irrigation systems, but this was not the case in Benton. The Benton Paiute Reservation was established for the Utu Utu Gwaitu Tribe on July 22, 1915 by an executive order signed by President Woodrow Wilson that set aside 160 acres for a cemetery and a camping ground. Tribal members received Individual Indian Trust Allotments and were educated at the Bishop Indian School, the Sherman Institute Boarding School in Riverside and the Stewart Indian School in Carson City.

In 1920 the Montgomery Pass Road over the White Mountains was in the planning stages. It was designed to connect Bishop with Tonopah and took several years to finish. The California portion was open to the Nevada State Line in 1924. The remainder took longer to finish and it was not dedicated until 1935. The road created new interest in the Benton area.



This is believed to be Warren Davis in 1928 unlocking the Benton Store.

In 1924 Warren Davis filed a case in the Superior Court to gain clear title to the Benton land. He established the ownership and charged Paiute Indians living on the land one dollar a year rent. In 1915 Davis was a notary public and served as Justice of the Peace in the 1920s. Between 1919-1928 he was also the Benton Postmaster.

In February 1928 he introduced the Benton Dude Ranch, advertising it as the Yosemite Trail between Montgomery Pass and Mono Lake. Attractions were horseback riding, mountain climbing, hunting, fishing, tours and new bathing facilities. Davis built a rodeo arena and promoted lakes in the Sierra. It lost momentum when he died in late 1928.

Warren Hastings Davis was not the man he portrayed. In 2016 lawyer Lawrence Woods published a book, *The Lives of Otto Chenoweth: Wyoming's Gentleman Horse Thief*.

Chenoweth moved to Wyoming in 1884-1885 and became a homesteader, gambler and cattle thief. In 1901 he stole 160 valuable horses in North Dakota and was captured. Chenoweth escaped in 1902 and later reappeared in San Francisco as Warren Hastings Davis. In 1903 he married Nellie Jones in Arizona. He returned to Wyoming in 1905, was arrested and tried in North Dakota as Arthur Chenoweth. He was found not guilty by reason of insanity and spent some time in a state facility. In 1907 Chenoweth was released to his mother Caroline, disappeared and became Warren Hastings Davis the rest of his life. He and Nellie lived in San Francisco, Tonopah and Mina between 1907-1912 and moved to Benton in 1913.

Lawrence Woods found papers dated 1915 to establish guardianship of Caroline Chenoweth. Her son Arthur was required to sign the papers before a notary public who could swear to his identity. Davis was the notary public. It was 88 years after his death before this information came to light.

In December 1928 the townsite, hotel, store and property were sold to William Bramlette, an automobile racer who owned the Little Lake Hotel. He never lived in Benton but made weekly visits to take care of business. His three sisters, Fern Bramlette, Dorren McConnell and Neva Evans operated the hotel and store, which became the center of activity. Dorren served as the Postmistress between 1929-1941. In 1935 Bramlette removed some old buildings and in 1937 made repairs to the store & hotel.

Major growth of the two Bentons began in the late 1920s. In 1929 homesteader Walter Messick and his wife Violet built the Benton Station Richfield service station, garage and café at the junction of the Montgomery & Benton Roads.



The Benton Station service station with a customer in 1944.

In 1930 Kathleen Hager was the Benton schoolteacher. She taught through 1943, the first to stay for more than a year or so. The State Highway Department built a maintenance station in Benton that boosted population growth and school attendance. The highway department built a direct road between Benton and Benton Station to replace the more dangerous canyon route.

In 1934 Walter Messick and his brother-in-law built and operated a Seventh Day Adventist school in Benton Station. Messick's sister Bertha Moore taught until 1940. The community then petitioned the Board of Supervisors to establish a school district and the Benton District was approved after the start of the new school year. Both the schools in Benton and Benton Station operated until 1947, when the district closed the Benton School. The area children then attended the Benton Station School.

Growth and expansion in Old Benton was problematic because it was privately owned. When land became available in Benton Station new housing and businesses were built. The Mineral Reduction Company Mill near the Comanche Mine produced 100 tons of ore daily. Pumice mines near the Mathieu Ranch and the Black Rock Tungsten Mine were doing well. In 1940 the State Quarantine Station north of town worked three shifts. Benton Station was growing and serving community needs. It was no longer necessary to shop in Benton.

Bill Bramlette died in his sleep in December 1940. The Benton townsite was bought from the estate by his son Wales (Buster) and his wife MaBelle. They owned a cattle and alfalfa ranch north of town and had been operating the Benton store, Wai Wera Hotel, Post Office and gas station at the same time. Buster earned his nickname because of his skill for breaking horses.

In May 1946 the Bramlettes granted a five year lease for the hotel, store, Post Office and other property to Mr & Mrs Alfred Morgan of Lone Pine. Buster & MaBelle built a modern motel and café down the street. In December 1947 the Morgans sued the Bramlettes. They alleged the new motel and café were on land they thought was included in their lease, causing unfair competition. The Morgans lost the lawsuit. The Bramlettes closed the Wai Wera Hotel but kept the store open and maintained the motel into the late 1960s, when they started renting out rooms on a monthly basis.

The Messicks operated the Benton Station service station and café until 1945 when they leased it to John & Nellie Williamson and moved away. In 1950 they sold it to Floyd & Clara Habecker.

The Carson & Colorado Railroad shut down in 1943 and the State Highway Maintenance Yard was moved to Benton Station in 1947. In 1951 the post office was relocated to Benton Station but kept the Benton name. As a result, Benton Station was now called Benton and Old Benton was officially known as Benton Hot Springs.

Though the Benton Paiute Reservation was established in 1915 it was never officially recognized. In 1970 past Tribal Chairman Joseph Saulque wrote the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Sacramento asking if there was a Benton Reservation. If so, where was it? If not, what happened to it? The tribal elders insisted there was one. The Bureau of Indian Affairs replied there was no reservation in Benton.

Saulque advised them that while at the Brigham Young University Library he saw the executive order signed by President Wilson in 1915 establishing the reservation. On December 30, 1971 Sacramento acknowledged the executive order, stating that the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Land Management had overlooked it and were not aware of it until it was brought to their attention. The land was listed in BLM records as "vacant public domain". The Bureau of Indian Affairs sent BLM a copy of the executive order and advised them the reserved land was to be known as the Benton Paiute Indian Reservation. The Utu Utu Gwaitu Tribe established an Administrative Center just south of the Benton Hot Springs townsite. The tribe owns and operates the Benton Station Café, store, gas station and the Post Office, which they operate under contract with the United States Postal Service.

MaBelle worked the counter in the store from the 1950s until her death in 1997. Buster died in 1998. Grandson Bill Bramlette inherited the Benton Hot Springs townsite. He has cared for and revived it as a tourist destination with his wife, Diane Henderson. The motel was renovated and renamed The Inn at Benton Hot Springs. Area history is provided by The Historic Benton Hot Springs Nonprofit Organization, registered under Section 501c3 of the Internal Revenue Code.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND PHOTOS

- Bill Bramlette, The Historic Benton Hot Springs, a 501c3 Nonprofit Organization - Tom Dillwith, Hutchinson, KS
Joy Fatooh, The Historic Benton Hot Springs, a 501c Nonprofit Organization - Kurt Davis, Placerville, CA
Shane Saulque, Chairman, Utu Utu Gwaitu Paiute Tribe, Benton - Mono County Museum, Bridgeport
-*The Album, A Tale of Two Bentons*, Marguerite Sowaal, Chalfant Press, Bishop, 1988.
-*History of Benton California*, Tom Dillwith, The Historic Benton Hot Springs, a 501c3 Nonprofit Organization.
-*Inyo-Mono SUV Trails*, Roger Mitchell, Track & Trail Publications.
-*Mines of the Eastern Sierra*, Mary DeDecker, La Siesta Press.
-*Railroad in the Sky 1881-1917*, Wanda & Richard Canton, Walsworth Publications.
-*Viola Martinez, California Paiute*, Diana Meyers Bahr, University of Oklahoma Press.
-*The Wai Wera Era*, Joy Fatooh, The Historic Benton Hot Springs, a 501c3 Nonprofit Organization.

IN MEMORIUM

KEN GARDNER

October 3, 1929 - November 16, 2020, age 91.

Ken Gardner was born and raised in San Francisco, but spent his early summers riding with Stan Hunewill on the Circle H Ranch. Later on in life he pursued his love of cowboy poetry. His dry sense of humor and sharp wit made him a natural and his humor caught people by surprise.

Ken graduated from Stanford University in 1951 and the Stanford School of Medicine in 1955. His residence and fellowship training at the University of Pennsylvania was interrupted by the U.S. Army for 2 years. After 2 more years of fellowship in renal physiology and kidney disease, he became Assistant Professor in Medicine at Stanford. In 1969-1973 Ken was a professor at the University of Hawaii School of Medicine. He became the Chief of Nephrology and Assistant Dean of Graduate Medical Education at the University of New Mexico in 1974, retiring in 1995. Ken and his wife Dorothy were married 66 years and they had four daughters. He will always be remembered for his poem 'Minden Round-a-bout', which he performed many times for locals.

THE MONO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Mono County Historical Society and the Mono County Museum are funded by memberships, donations, admissions and sales. The Mono County Tourism & Film Commission has supported MCHS the past six years by reimbursing the costs for calendar production. The Museum Curator & the Board of Trustees are volunteers. The Museum Docent is the only paid employee.

During 2021, depending on Covid-19 restrictions, the museum will be open May 27 through September 30, Tuesday-Saturday, 9am-4pm. Admissions: Adults/\$2.00, Seniors 55+/\$1.50, Children 6-17/\$1.00. Children under six are free. The Docent is Pam Haas-Duhart. Visit the MCHS website at www.monocomuseum.org. Telephone 760-932-5281.

The Board of Trustees for the Mono County Historical Society consists of President/Curator Kent Stoddard, Vice President Lynda Bryant Pemberton, Secretary Sharon Stoddard, Treasurer Nancy Alaniz and Nonofficer Voting Trustees Mary Lent and Jeff Simensen.

Patron & Life Memberships are valid for life. Other memberships are renewable each year effective January 1. MCHS is a registered nonprofit organization per Section 501c3 of the Internal Revenue Code and a public charity under Section 509a2, Federal Tax ID Number 77-0191728.

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