FROM THE EDITOR:

Some good news and some not so good news as a consequence: As I am sure you all know we are experiencing a global warming crisis caused by increased carbon-dioxide in the atmosphere brought by the burning of fossil fuel. A good remedy to this problem is to change nearly all of our power use to electricity generated by non-carbon producing means. Recent advances in manufacturing and efficiency of photovoltaic panels has brought the cost of solar-generated electrical energy to historically low prices. This summer the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power signed a power purchase agreement with 8minute Solar Energy for photovoltaic generated electricity with battery storage backup at a record low price of 2.32¢ per kilowatt hour. This is significantly cheaper than any fossil fuel generated power, and with battery capacity to provide electricity when the sun is not shining, it holds the promise of making natural gas and other carbon-producing power obsolete. Yay! I never imagined that in my lifetime I would see such a technical achievement. This all sounds great, right?

Well, maybe no. Considering the current utility business model—selling large amounts of energy created at a concentrated source—the economic and environmental miracle of the photovoltaic panel will most likely mean a future with vast tracts of land covered by solar cells. And we all know what sort of land the energy producers have in mind for this.

The new 8minute Solar Energy facility will sit on 2,653 acres of privately owned desert just north of California City. Over the summer, a coalition of environmentalists led by Basin and Range Watch have been fighting the proposed 7,100-acre Gemini photovoltaic solar facility on untouched public desert land outside of Las Vegas. No doubt many more projects like these are on the way.

The most cost-efficient way to build a solar farm is to first scrape the ground clean of all plant life on the sites. Some compromise plans involve mowing the tops off the plants. No matter which way, the desert plant and animal life will suffer, the land irrevocably ruined all of this in the cause of carbon-free power.

The battery aspect of this power plan has its problems too. The batteries require the element lithium. Lithium is an alkali metal that is most commonly obtained from brines. Currently the greatest sources for lithium are salt flats in the Andes-region of South America. Brine is pumped from beneath the flats to shallow ponds where the water evaporates leaving salts containing the element. In the past decade increased demand for lithium (primarily because of batteries) has exceeded projected availability and it appears we are in the beginning of a worldwide lithium rush.

We have salt flats in the United States too—of course, on desert lands. Recently the Australian company Battery Mineral Resources requested permission from the U.S Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to drill exploratory holes in Inyo County, to pump brine beneath Panamint Valley to see if it holds exploitable lithium. Environmentalists are worried this could be the first step for widespread lithium brine mining, with a future of vast evaporation ponds, covering the California deserts. There are currently close to 2,000 lithium mine claims on BLM-administered lands in the state. There is a huge worry that extracting large quantities of subterranean brine water will cause near-surface groundwater to drain into the void left behind, drying up springs depended upon by wildlife and killing desert flora. Again the brunt of environmental damage for carbon-free power will fall upon our deserts.

Utility-scale electrical generation has been the production and business model for the past 100 years, yet it does not have to be the way we move to a zero-carbon future. Breakthroughs with solar panels, batteries and soluble problems for power distribution make it feasible for electricity to be generated and stored by many small producers, on already developed sites such as rooftops in cities. In addition, a vibrant social, engineering and infrastructure campaign to increase efficiency at every point of use—every appliance, light bulb, motor, etc.—could easily do as much as much to stop climate change as thousands of square miles of desert-killing solar arrays.

The news that solar power with battery backup is now the cheapest way to produce electricity is indeed good news. But most certainly, it will come at the expense of our deserts unless outdated and damaging ways are not changed. —Nicholas Blake

Cover: On the Too Wierd and Wonderful Desert Art Tour Desert Survivors visited Salvation Mountain in the Coachella Valley. While there they happened upon a tour group of young Chinese women, all of whom were wearing stylish outfits. The young women had great fun in striking poses and snapping glamor pics of one another in front of the massive religious edifice. Photo by N. Blake
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Desert Survivors Annual General Meeting & Retreat
Sugarloaf Ridge State Park
Kenwood, CA · Sonoma County
October 11-13, 2019

This year we will host our Annual General Meeting (AGM) retreat at Sugarloaf Ridge State Park in Sonoma County. Adventure and exploration await us in the stunning Valley of the Moon, known not only for its wineries but also for a number of points of historic interest, including Jack London State Historic Park.

Activities over the weekend will include organized hikes on Friday and Saturday, a guest speaker on Jack London, a slide show of the past year’s Desert Survivors trips & events, a docent-led tour of the Jack London Historic State Park, happy hour on Friday and Saturday night’s potluck feast followed by music around the campfire.

The highlight of the weekend, our AGM, will take place on Sunday morning, where we will discuss organization issues and elect a new board of directors. You do not have to take part in the retreat to attend the meeting. All members are encouraged to join in. Information on paying for the retreat and a schedule of activities will be announced via email and posted on our website: desert-survivors.org.

Out on the Kumiva Playa, NV, on the “Seven Troughs for Seven Survivors” car camp, May 2019.
GALLOPING TO DISASTER

Article by
Marc Eldridge

The Spaniards first introduced modern horses to North America when they colonized the new world in the 16th century. Some of these horses escaped, others were turned loose. With few natural predators and plenty of forage they often became a dominant feature of the landscape spreading across both American continents. Over the centuries humans who captured and tamed them for transportation, draft animals and agricultural duties held the population of wild horses in the United States in check. They were also a significant food source. Until the advent of the automobile and the mechanization of agriculture wild horses were in great demand and their relative small numbers did not create a significant environmental problem. After mechanization and with the loss of most useful purposes for humans, the animals became looked upon more as pests as they competed with domestic livestock for forage.

In 1934 congress established the United States Grazing Service, to manage livestock grazing on public lands. One policy of Grazing Service was to remove free-roaming horse from these lands, and in 1939 began hiring crews to round up the wild horses for slaughter and shooting those they could not capture. Ranchers were also active, using methods considered inhumane such as poisoning water holes and using aircraft to stampede the animals to exhaustion. In 1950 it was estimated that the number of wild horse in all U.S. lands was 25,000.

This activity eventually caught the attention of Nevada dude-ranch owner Velma Bloom Johnston. Appalled by what she perceived as cruel removal methods, Ms. Johnston became an outspoken and tenacious animal welfare activist, leading a campaign to stop the eradication of wild horses and burros from public lands and earning her the nickname “Wild Horse Annie.” Ms. Johnston lobbied state legislators and congress members and initiated nation-wide letter writing drives on behalf of the horses that produced a number of pieces of legislation and culminating with congress in 1971 passing the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act.

This act prohibited capture, injury, or disturbance of “unbranded and unclaimed horses and burros on public lands in the United States”. One result of the law was an immediate and significant increase in the population of wild horses and burros on the range.

When you see them on the range, they are a magnificent sight. Wild horses are not only beautiful animals but to witness the herds, untamed and galloping over the land, it is easy to understand why they are not only an icon of the west, but a symbol of America’s sense of self.

This glorious scene seems to good to be true, and in fact it is. The number of wild horses far exceeds the ability of the range to support these animals. An ecological disaster is looming, and sometime in the near future, the mass starvation of horses and native wildlife is sure to be the upshot of this western image— the Editor.
Horses are large animals. They require tremendous amounts of forage for survival and the range has only a finite capacity to provide this—not just for horses and burros, but for livestock and native wild animals who live off the land too. Recognizing the stresses of the increasing horse and burro population on the environment in 1973 the United States Bureau of Land Management (BLM) started a program for rounding up and adopting these horses and donkeys to private owners. This has been the primary method for controlling the number of animals from managed lands, although in recent years the adoption rate has not kept up with the removal rate.

Currently Nevada has about half of the nation’s wild horses which amount to about 44,000 animals, (not counting burros.) The foal drop for this year is thought to be about 16,000 animals. BLM now has about 50,000 animals in long-term holding pastures waiting for adoption. Last year only 4000 animals were given new homes. They also have about 7,000 animals in short-term gathering facilities. According to the BLM the "Appropriate Management Level" (AML) for horses on all its lands is about 27,000 animals. The total wild horse population for all BLM lands in the U.S. is now over three times that at 88,000!

Last year’s cost to the BLM to round up and maintain adoptable wild horses in corrals and pastures was about $81 million. With the current low demand of adoption most of the animals will live the remainder of their lives in these holding pastures at a cost over $50,000 per horse. In recent years congress has cut back on funding of the BLM, resulting in wild horse care taking an ever-increasing part of its budget. Non-lethal methods in controlling horse populations are virtually useless. Sterilization of mares requires difficult invasive surgery and fertility vaccines are effective for only one year.

With this exponential growth of the horse population it is clear that a rangeland catastrophe will most likely occur in the near future. The wet winter of 2018-19 in Nevada has alleviated the problem for this year; however, a major die off looms in the near future, especially in a drought year. Horses are the biggest and most aggressive animals on the range. In this crisis horses will be first to deplete the resources, leaving native wild animals—such as big horn sheep, antelope and deer—in even greater peril.

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Wild horse advocates are a loud, impassioned and powerful lobby in the U.S. congress and with the American public. Many of the groups contend the BLM’s policies are driving the wild horses to extinction. While demonstrably not true, this notion is believed by much of the public. The agency is caught between polarized public opinion and extreme controversy in its management of the range. The Humane Society and the SPCA have sighed on to a letter to congress warning there is a disaster coming. This is a political problem that can only be resolved with the help of the wild horse advocates. Let’s hope that the advocates will find concurrence and congress the courage to deal with this looming tragedy.
The quality of desert light is not strained, it droppeth from the heav-
ens . . . Mercy! I don’t mean to plagiarize the Bard but if he had
walked our Mojave, he might have felt “twice blessed”—at morning’s
rosy-fingered dawn and when sunset torches ridge tops before toss-
ing its star-spangled blanket over all.

This is the sort of fanciful feeling that washes over me when I wake
in the desert. But this particular morning was even more exalted. As
I emerged from my tent in Butte Valley, a remote corner of Death
Valley, I felt thrice blessed as if a revelation of biblical proportions
were at hand.

It was early April in base camp at 4,000 feet and the air was calm, the
temperature pleasantly warm, and the expansive view primal: main-
ly native forms, undulating cactus, yellow-flowering mesquite, and
the parfait cream-and-mocha pattern of Striped Butte, our beacon,
another 900-foot rise. A few dome tents—blue, green, orange—had
sprouted amid the thorns, belonging to Desert Survivors. What a
glorious sensation to be in this timeless landscape, ancient as creo-
sote, greener than usual this wet year. Perhaps my fellow desert afi-
cionados were having their own epiphanies.

All were desert-toughened enough to know how lucky we were to
have these temperate conditions. There would be just one subter-
reatean disturbance, a sad vibration, that would linger, in the knowl-
edge that we were walking the footsteps of four German tourists
who breathed their last here in July 1996: Egbert Rimkus, his eleven-
year-old son Georg, Cornelia Meyer and her four-year-old son Max.

This not-so-long-ago incident, haunting though it was, did not pre-
vent our fully embracing the adventure at hand. I had made many
visits to Death Valley over the years, mostly camping in the front
country. Penetrating the less-visited wilds was new and thrilling.
From the start conditions were auspicious. Thirteen sturdy Desert
Survivors had assembled Friday morning at Ashford Mine ruins in
view of the snow-mantled Panamints. The trip required durable,
high-clearance vehicles. So we piled into four muscular Jeeps and
our caravan proceeded along Warm Springs Canyon Road, a knobby
ganglion of ruts, washboard, and molar-loosening bumps that could
be hazardous in wet conditions. It would take nearly two hours to go
the 21 miles to Butte Valley.
pointed to the adults’ probable next mistake: They started hiking east—in July! I’m not sure the exact date the four were eventually presumed dead but it wasn’t until 2009 that some human bones were located by Tom Mahoud, a search and rescue man, and shown to belong to Egbert. The children’s remains have never been found.

Understandably, some of us found this story too unbearably tragic. We trained our focus on natural wonders at hand. It was after all a banner year for wildflowers. I spotted, to name a few: desert dandelion, gravel ghost, desert star, yerba santa, Bigelow’s tickseed, coreopsis, desert trumpet, brown-eyed primrose, and lots of deep purple phacelia. There were scudding lizards, morphing caterpillars and their mature kin, butterflies. And of course, there were burros to mar an otherwise perfect tableau.

As we stood around getting loose and acquainted, sunset ignited a ridge, like clockwork turning it to shimmering gold. We were hardly snug in our tents or Jeeps when coyotes commenced their yipping, and occasionally a burro hee-hawed. I fell asleep wondering if their dissonant songs were the last tunes the hapless Germans had heard.

Saturday, after early breakfast, we crowded into a few Jeeps and bounced along an uneven grid of dirt roads that drunkenly lace the area. We parked and found the “trailhead,” an unmarked unvegetated patch that we located through mobile topo maps.

It was a long full day of hiking down a sandy wash with little shade, the sun hammering persistently at times, but never unbearable. Aside from the broad open range, there were frequent splashes of wild flowers along the way. We had an endpoint in mind, Squaw Springs, and we would get there.

But before that turnaround, there was an unsettling milepost. A compact bushy area we recognized from photos was where the Germans had abandoned their green 1996 Plymouth Voyager van, a rental that had aroused alarm when it was not returned. As we stood in silence at this otherwise unremarkable scrap of land, I felt my ire bubble up. How could parents have done this to their small children? I tried to push that sentiment down. It was not easy.

It wasn’t until October of that same year, 1996, that the van was spotted from the air and located with three flat tires, but no trace of the four individuals. A dated German guidebook found in the van

Our plan was to camp around the cabin, but Bob and I noted a half-dozen steroid-plumped vehicles, which discouraged that. We agreed this was a blessing as the cabin on the hill was fair game for strong wind. Thus, pitching camp at the foot of Striped Butte, we were protected, less exposed. Those human interlopers vanished without a trace and we saw no other homo sapiens the rest of the weekend.

We had spirits—tequila, scotch, bourbon, wine—and fine nourishment each evening. In addition to standard vegan, gluten, or dairy-free fare, Kurt from Yuba City cooked up hearty beef tacos. He gifted our palates further with his ruby-rich home-pressed juice of pomegranate from his backyard trees. Nectar of the gods. I want Kurt and whoever contributed the chocolate cake on all my desert trips.
its green cage and the sound alone refreshed us. If only the Germans had passed here, I thought. Even that July when temperatures topped out at 125° plus, there might have been a life-saving trickle.

Chris, who was familiar with in-depth reports on the Germans’ disappearance, theorized that Egbert may have stowed Cornelia and the two children, Max and Georg, at Willow Springs as he plodded on for help. This vicinity still attracts searchers for bones. The fragments presumed to be Cornelia’s, were never definitively identified.

On an upbeat note, my favorite wild flower, the persimmon-hued globe mallow, proliferated in this area. What a little paradise of an oasis. We lingered long. On our way back, I picked up some bones, bleached and ashen. They belonged to an animal, perhaps a burro. It occurred to me that corpses in the desert can vanish as thoroughly as those at sea. Chewed, gnawed, nibbled, feasted upon by native beasts; desiccated, churned in hostile elements, blown to oblivion; blood to rust, bones to dust, flesh to flakes. Fast tracked to exactly where we are all headed.

Morbid thoughts aside, it was a fabulous hiking day and we were all content as we dragged our spent bones to camp looking forward to our commissary and happy hour. A kangaroo rat reared his head at dusk as a contingent discussed driving out the next day by way of Mengel Pass. The road is a trove of ruts, rocks, slippery gravel, and famous for its proximity to where the Manson family had holed up. No thanks, I thought, seeing the topo’s steepness. I’d be happy to return the rattling way we entered. (I later heard about their adventure—that they had to get out of vehicles to lift boulders out of their way. But they said the spectacular views were worth it.)

On Sunday morning, tireless ones set out after breakfast to scale Striped Butte. A few of us preferred to stay in camp, do yoga, watch the climbers zigzag up, and listen raptly to Bob Lyons tell of his first foray into desert—a juvenile playing hooky down El Paso way. His was a truancy that, apparently, led to his rough-hewn success in these challenging wilds.

In the end, I let go of my anger toward the deceased parents. I applauded their good intentions to expose children to a legendary wilderness they had read about and had traveled thousands of miles to see and didn’t want to miss. Their mistakes were forgivable, had to be.

Hadn’t the desert long ago drawn me near, a sort of personal Gethsemane. In the words of ancient Zen monk, Wuzhun Shifan, the desert aided in my transformation to “an uncontrived free wayfarer . . . [who] can enjoy the great cessation, great rest, and great bliss.” A thorny relationship in the early nineties had led me to this contemplative landscape. An unvarnished scape where everything is exposed and where I could respect how things are able survive harsh conditions. In Anza Borrego I learned with awe about a tiny mouse that lives many moons on one sip of water. Desert has been the perfect stage for a lesson in impermanence and cessation of grasping. How fleeting and sudden the moment when light, heat, and moisture synchronize their clocks just right and a Persian carpet bleeds across the desert floor. It withers and passes into air just as suddenly.

After Nick dropped me at my car on Sunday evening, I headed to Furnace Creek to revisit some past memories. In 1999, while the Germans were still mysteriously missing, I watched the 50th annual Fortyniner Encampment roll into Death Valley’s Furnace Creek. With Belgian draft horses and Conestoga wagons, a retro celebration was under way with hootenanny, fiddle music, and salutes to veterans and prayers to God. By any measure, it was a hoot, cavemannish, and further proof that the desert supports a diversity of cultures vegetable, mineral, and animal.

I camped under tamarisk at Texas Springs away from the overly “gentrified” central oasis. About 4 a.m. that morning, I was staring though my tent’s skylight, wishing retrospectively that the Germans’ suffering had been short, their demise swift, when a huge meteor, phosphorescent blue and blinding, floodlit camp and fell to earth with a soundless flash. I jumped up and yelled, “Did you see that?!” No one answered, they were sound asleep. It was the revelation—that not just mercy, rain, and light dropeth to the earth below, but great balls of fire too.

The long story and the tragic details of how the German tourists perished can be found on the Internet, including in this YouTube video — https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-KUF-xxV5o — and at — http://www.otherhand.org/home-page/search-and-rescue/the-hunt-for-the-death-valley-germans/introduction/
The first Desert Survivors trip I led to Utah’s Upper Paria River Canyon in 2018 was all sunshine and stunning surprises, so my partner Carol and I decided it was worth the effort to return—but armed this time with more detailed information about the history and geography of the area.

Unlike the (Lower) Paria River, you don’t need a permit for the Upper Paria. Our plan was to leave some cars at the Paria Box Trailhead, drive north on Cottonwood Canyon Road and enter Paria Canyon upstream west of Shepherd Point (sheep ranching used to be common here). We would then work our way downriver while exploring the side canyons, hiking for roughly seven miles per day plus side trips.

As the trip date approached, the weather forecast remained inconclusive. We informed the trip participants of the weather predictions—as well as the possible negative consequences should it rain. Cottonwood Canyon Road is impassable to ALL vehicles if it rains and we cannot explore slot canyons if there is rain in the vicinity. The trip goers had the option to cancel. None did.

Carol and I arrived a day early to scout out some new areas. After eating an amazing breakfast at Kanab Creek Bakery, we went by the Paria Bureau of Land Management office to get the latest information. The old-timer manning the reception desk said we’d “be fine” parking our street vehicles on Cottonwood Canyon Road and hiking the slots. Indeed the National Weather Service predicted just a few hundredths of an inch of precipitation per day.

We drove up Cottonwood Canyon Road—dirt, but recently graded—12 miles to the trailhead. Along the way, the scenery gives way from rolling hills covered with scrub to different colored layers of sandstone and damp bottomland. At the Paria Box Trailhead we meet a couple, with matching his-and-her campers, who told us about a mysterious “hidden cache” they were searching for. The story goes that during WW2 a German spy lived in some steel storage containers located somewhere in the hills. According to legend, a local man discovered a folded German Army uniform and firearms in one of them.

Our goals for the day were to visit Sam Pollock Cabin, Death Valley Draw and the yellow sandstone Grosvenor Arch. We would also check out the place where we would leave vehicles for the planned car shuttle. We continued on, driving north on Cottonwood Canyon Road with the beautiful multi-colored Cockscomb Formation on our right, until we arrived at a mud hole that spanned the road that brought us to a halt. If we could not get through this impasse we would have to abandon our car shuttle plan. We plunged ahead.

The trip began on a sunny day, with a weather forecast for just a trace of rain.

Right photo: The ruins of the 19th-century farming town of Pahreah, Utah.

TRIP REPORT:
Upper Paria River Backpack
May 2019
If you love adventure and challenge, this trip delivered.

by Paul Harris

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After pushing the car out of some of the slickest mud I have ever had the pleasure of wading into, we turned around and headed back to Paria Box Trailhead. Our new goal for the day was to find the “hidden cache”.

Carol and I reconfigured the trip to avoid the impassable road. Instead of hiking seven miles per day (plus optional exploration in side canyons), we would hike 14 miles the first day to a base camp at Deer Creek, where we would make day hikes from. We knew this first day distance would be a stretch for some trip participants. That evening 12 trip-goers arrived. We circled the cars to protect us from the wind and introduced everyone to a “Harris & Clark Happy Hour”. We discussed the updated trip plan, and all agreed to give it a go.

Saturday morning we set off, under clear skies, trekking north along the banks of the Paria River. Hiking in this sort of terrain requires frequent wading across the stream. Some participants had concerns about walking in wet shoes—we counted 75 crossings one day. There was no time to take shoes off, but there were only minor issues. Most of us hiked in trail runners.

The “Paria Box” would be better named the “Paria Narrows” because it is the narrow spot responsible for backing up the river in 1884—flooding the canyon and converting the narrow stream channel with crops growing on its banks into a wall-to-wall wash unsuitable for farming. The settlement here—known as “Pahreah” or muddy water in Piute—soon became a ghost town. The site today consists of remnants of rock-wall buildings, an old cemetery and an abandoned Western movie set. The area harbors a petrified forest, and the fossil trees were used as a building material in the cemetery.

Hiking north from Pahreah through wildflowers and blooming cacti, we entered the red sandstone Navajo Formation. The first side canyon was the Kitchen Canyon confluence where we found a wall of petroglyphs and cowboy glyphs and we stopped for lunch. While petroglyphs appeared to be made by striking the sandstone with harder rocks, to make pointillist-like images, the cowboy glyphs appeared to be made by scraping with a knife or other metal tool.

Unlike most areas, the Upper Paria has no G.P.S. tags to follow so we had to find everything on our own. We arrived to a beautiful camp that night with petroglyphs on the wall behind us—more than Carol or I had ever seen in one place. Due to recent rains, the springs in the canyons were gritty. We filled a bucket for the camp and let the grit settle before filtering. After a hot dinner, wine and good camaraderie, we went to sleep. It rained all night.

We woke to spitting rain and cold. Regular weather updates via Carol’s satellite-phone said it was not raining as much as we were experiencing. We had three questions of concern: 1. Would we be safe hiking out if the river level rose? 2. Was it safe to hike the slot canyons? 3. Would Cottonwood Canyon Road be passable for our vehicles? The weather forecast for the following two days looked fair so we decided to continue the trip despite the light but steady precipitation. On this day, half the group headed out to explore the upland areas around Asay Slot, while the other half elected to stay in their tents to read or enjoy the solitude.
By now the water was swift in places, thigh-deep, muddy and cold. We took extra precautions when crossing the river. We moved more slowly and cautiously. Taller people were paired with shorter. We unbuckled our packs so they could be quickly abandoned if one fell in. We arrived safely to Paria Box Trailhead at 4:00 pm, only to discover that the pasture we were parked in had turned to sticky mud.

Our options: 1. Stay put and wait for better weather, 2. Risk driving out and possibly slide off the road or be forced to camp in a less desirable location, 3. Call a tow truck or walk 12 miles to the nearest paved road. We noticed truck tracks heading north on Cottonwood Canyon Road and only footprints heading south—an ominous sign. We called a towing company in Kanab and they said there was already a vehicle stuck on Cottonwood that the tow truck could not get to, and we were on our own for a few days. One member of our group was familiar with the area and thought it was unlikely we could drive out. We made the very unpopular decision to sleep in our cars (everything else was mud) and walk out the next day.

Then at that moment, along the road came a little pickup truck. We waved it down, and quizzed the driver on conditions. He didn’t think the Priuses, some of our group members drove, could be driven out; but if we wanted to go for it our best bet was to stay left around the mud holes. We decided to head out, with a plan that we would leave the Priuses if they got stuck and their passengers would transfer to the bigger vehicles. With some momentum, skillful steering, and to the relief of all, we made it out—Priuses and all.

After the meal and further up the trail, near the ruins of a small homestead, we found fossilized dinosaur footprints from the Jurassic period in a piece of Navajo sandstone. Touching those prints and imagining the scale of life and history—be it hundreds of years or millions—our individual concerns temporarily retreated to their rightful size and we sensed our connection in the arc of time and form.

Hiking into Asay Slot, we found some knee-deep quicksand and a small bird’s nest on a ledge (with chicks). The slot continued to narrow, forcing us up and over. Our intent was to drop back into Asay Slot further upstream, but as the rain became more steady, we decided that it wasn’t safe to do. Even so, the views through the precipitation were surreal and uplifting, and there were wildflowers everywhere. On our way back to camp we hiked in the rain up to Hogback Ridge through thick red dirt and were able to see the curious conical rock formations called “The Teepees.”

We returned to camp and had dinner and wine in our tents, which made for some playful tent visiting and socializing. It rained all night and in the pre-dawn hours some snow accumulated around our tent. I had a headache and fever. Carol and I decided that, due to more rain than predicted in the forecast, our margin of error for a safe return had narrowed beyond our comfort zone. We told the group to, “Pack up, we’re heading home!” Our intent was to take a high route via Hogeye Canyon, but our path was blocked by a dry fall. We had to stick to the river.

Our options: 1. Stay put and wait for better weather, 2. Risk driving out and possibly slide off the road or be forced to camp in a less desirable location, 3. Call a tow truck or walk 12 miles to the nearest paved road. We noticed truck tracks heading north on Cottonwood Canyon Road and only footprints heading south—an ominous sign. We called a towing company in Kanab and they said there was already a vehicle stuck on Cottonwood that the tow truck could not get to, and we were on our own for a few days. One member of our group was familiar with the area and thought it was unlikely we could drive out. We made the very unpopular decision to sleep in our cars (everything else was mud) and walk out the next day.

Then at that moment, along the road came a little pickup truck. We waved it down, and quizzed the driver on conditions. He didn’t think the Priuses, some of our group members drove, could be driven out; but if we wanted to go for it our best bet was to stay left around the mud holes. We decided to head out, with a plan that we would leave the Priuses if they got stuck and their passengers would transfer to the bigger vehicles. With some momentum, skillful steering, and to the relief of all, we made it out—Priuses and all.
The six-day Desert Survivors “On the Trail of the Ancients” car camp to Bluff, UT in May 2019 was everything I had hoped it would be. We saw rock art, Puebloan ruins, red rock galore, the weather was grand, and it was a great group of Survivors on this trip. You can go anywhere in the Four Corners region and see similar carved panels, adobe ruins, and vistas. But what made this trip different were the rabbit and the cat. And that’s what this story’s about.

First, the rabbit: Neal and Lena were driving in Utah, to the trip meeting site, when a jackrabbit, as jackrabbits are known to do, bounded in front of their fast-moving vehicle. Bunny suicide. But Neal, ever the resourceful guy, didn’t want to leave the rabbit to the vultures, as I would have done. Neal stopped his truck, retrieved the dead animal, skinned and gutted it on the roadside, and put its carcass in his ice chest. He and Lena then continued on their way. Throughout the week of the car camp, Neal made culinary creations with the rabbit parts. The first couple of days it was grilled rabbit—which was apparently very tender. Then on the third day, for our potluck feast, it was stewed rabbit—with Moroccan spice and red wine. I’m not that adventurous of a meat eater and refrained from tasting, however other ’Survivors tried the options Neal put out on the table each night; yet by the end of the week there was still a supply rabbit meat in the ice chest. That was one large bunny. Hundreds of jackrabbits get hit on the two-lane roads of Utah each day. Not many of them end up anywhere other than the place they died—on the side of the road to be scavenged as carrion or to decompose in the Southwest’s brutal sun, while vehicles go zipping by on their way to someplace else.

Then there was the cat: While I mentioned that the weather was grand, it really wasn’t so great on the evening my husband Gerry and I arrived at the trip campsite. It was raining, thundering and lightning. As the evening wore on, the storm waned, and the rain became waning, and the red sand of the terrain of this part of this region began to appear. Being true Survivors, we had plenty of food to offer. ’Kitty, how about some fresh salmon?’ Its jaw was a bit out of kilter, which made its tongue and a bottom tooth peek out of its mouth and caused it to slobber while he ate, but it did not appear to be in any pain.

The car camp consisted of day excursions to many of the wondrous sights of southeast Utah. We explored and hiked beneath arches in Monument Valley, floated in rafts down the San Juan River to visit remote Puebloan ruins and delight in rich petroglyph tableaus. Each evening we would return to our group camp.

Over the week while we were in camp, the cat appeared daily, always looking for food, but also accepting petting and affection from us. Eventually we bought a box of dry cat food and when we returned to camp in the afternoons, we would shake the box and the cat would come running. The cat was starting to endear himself to us. How did he end up here? Was it dumped? Did it get lost? It was clearly not a feral cat, so it must have been someone’s pet at some point in its life. Did someone hit or kick him and break his jaw? Whatever abuse it might have suffered previously, it didn’t hold this against humanity; it was particularly friendly, even jumping into our camper one day.

Toward the end of the week, Emily and I went to the campground BLM office and told the ranger about the kitty. He said that a lot of animals get by Stacy Goss

Wooden ladders provided by the Park Service allow access to the canyon bottom.

A Rabbit And A Cat: Each finds new life (of a sort) on a Desert Survivors trip.

by Stacy Goss

excepting parts of the ill-fated hare.

Right photo: The sodden feline who wandered into the Desert Survivors’ camp.

Left photo: The unwanted parts of the ill-fated hare.
had soon after, a scrawny, bedraggled cat p"
Has the Cadiz Water Project Finally Been KO’d?

by Nicholas Blake

This past summer a long-proposed plan to pump groundwater from the Mojave Desert and transport it via pipeline and canal for sale to water districts in Southern California received a one-two punch that might finally put this environmentally destructive scheme down for the count.

For nearly 30 years the environmental community has been fighting a plan by the corporation Cadiz Inc. to “mine” 50,000 acre-feet of water per year from a large desert aquifer, that spreads far beyond the company’s land holdings—imperiling springs depended upon by threatened wildlife as well as thousand of acres of desert vegetation. A key element for the plan would be a pipeline to convey the water from Cadiz’s wells near Historic Route 66 over 40 miles to the Colorado River Aqueduct. In the early-2000’s the Southern California Metropolitan Water District in conjunction with Cadiz, proposed such a pipeline that was to run across federal lands. An Environmental Impact Statement and Impact Report was prepared and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) granted the right of way for the pipeline. However, hydrologists from the U.S. Geological Survey determined that the Cadiz project was unsustainable for the aquifer, and the Metropolitan Water District, realizing environmental harm, withdrew the proposal.

In 2008 Cadiz came back with a new plan. This time the buyer would be an Orange County Water District and they would go around environmental review by building the pipeline along a privately owned railroad right-of-way. In 2011 the U.S. Department of the Interior released an opinion about the 1875 Railroad Right-Of-Way Act, deciding such an easement should be “for railroad purposes” only. Soon after, Cadiz amended its plan coming up with truly laughable railroad applications for the pipeline; such as it was needed for a train washing facility, for fire hydrants near trestles, and even to provide water for a future steam locomotive excursion train for tourists.

Seeing through this obvious ploy to avoid environmental scrutiny, in 2015 the Obama administration’s U.S. Department of the Interior determined that the proposed Cadiz pipeline was outside the scope of the railroad purposes and it would require a federal permit. In 2017 the Trump administration took over the Interior Department and appointed a lawyer for a firm that lobbied for Cadiz, David Bernhardt, as Deputy Interior Secretary. In short order there was a reversal of the Obama administration ruling, and the pipeline was again a go project. The Center for Biological Diversity and Center for Food Safety and, in a separate filing, the National Parks Conservation Association sued the U.S. Bureau of Land Management over the reversal.

The first blow to Cadiz (and a triumph for conservationists) came on June 20, 2019 in the United States District Court in Los Angeles, when Judge George Wu ruled the Trump administration violated the law when it green-lighted plans to construct a pipeline along the railroad line. According to Greg Loarie, an attorney for those suing, “The court saw right through the Trump administration’s attempt to shoehorn the massive Cadiz pipeline into a railroad easement… The Cadiz pipeline is designed to facilitate an ill-conceived corporate plan to profit from a public necessity.”

Undaunted, in post-hearing comments to the press, lawyers for Cadiz announced that they expect the Interior Department would soon write a new opinion that reflected the demands of the court ruling and allowed the project to go forward. Given the high degree of regulatory capture under the Trump administration—where regulatory agencies become dominated by groups or industries they are supposed to be regulating—it is quite probable that the Cadiz attorneys who were speaking, will be writing the new opinion for the agency.
A few weeks later Cadiz was hit with a second punch. The California State Assembly passed S.B. 307—a law that requires the State Lands Commission to study and approve any conveyance of water from “desert lands”, (i.e. Cadiz holdings) so that the transfer of the water will not adversely affect the natural or cultural resources of those lands. In short, it requires a State of California environmental review and approval before of the Cadiz can pipe water from its wells. Governor Gavin Newsome signed the bill on July 31, 2019. It goes in effect on January 1, 2020. Unless this law is overturned in courts or reversed by future legislation, it is pretty much a knock out blow on the Cadiz plan.

Cadiz Inc. has always asserted the project does not harm the desert environment. They have repeatedly, produced studies that so grossly over estimates the water recharge rate of the aquifer that do not stand up to scientific review. In recent years they have put forth the absurd notion that they will pump only water that would otherwise be lost through evaporation and their plan is a water saving operation. These made-up facts have often worked for some public relations applications and can confuse the issues for public officials; however, virtually every hydrologist and scientist, not on the Cadiz payroll, who has looked at the evidence has concluded the project will surely draw down the aquifer, dry up desert springs depended upon by wildlife and kill desert flora. Cadiz does not want a true environmental review of its plan, because it knows the evidence will show that it will irreparably ruin the land.

So what is next for Cadiz and its project? They are currently funding a study of the environmental impact of the proposal for a potential customer, the Three Valleys Water District (eastern Los Angeles County). Although a Cadiz-partisan hydrologist is heading the study, it has been portrayed as more even-handed than earlier inquiries and has even invited the conservation community to take part. The conservation community is staying away. The result will most likely be a study submitted to the State of California that uphold Cadiz’s positions, that they will say is peer-reviewed, but in reality will not stand up to real scientific scrutiny and will not be taken seriously by the State Lands Commission.

So is Cadiz knocked out? Can the environmental community raise its arm as the winner? Well, not so fast. Cadiz seems to be getting up from our metaphorical canvas with renewed vigor and a new ugly and evil business plan. On August 1, 2019 Cadiz Inc. announced a joint venture with a division of California Cannabis Enterprises to “…sustainably cultivate organic, sun-grown, industrial hemp on up to 9,600 acres at the Cadiz Ranch in San Bernardino County.” Cadiz will now use its water to grow cannabis. The venture will operate under the name SoCalHemp.

In Indiana they estimate it takes 24 to 36 inches of precipitation to produce a cannabis crop. That is two to three acre-feet of water per acre of cultivation. Given that the climate of the Mojave is much dryer, with much higher evaporation and evapotranspiration rates than Indiana, it is more likely that five feet of water per acre will be necessary, requiring 45,300 acre-feet of water for its crop. This is virtually the same volume of annual groundwater of pumping for the proposed water project! Aw crap!

The people of Cadiz Inc. have consistently shown they have no concern for the welfare the desert. They have a tap into a natural resource that extends far beyond the boundaries of their land holdings, and they are only interested in exploiting this finite and precious resource for wealth and greed.

A lot of people these days are getting into the cannabis cultivation and the price of the crop, either for cannabinoids or fiber, is most likely to drop. Hopefully for Cadiz such a venture will prove unprofitable and maybe the company will remain small-scale citrus growers. Then again this may be the beginning of a whole new bout of litigation, lobbying, paid off politicians, phony studies and mitigating legislation.

Let’s hope that our precious desert wilderness will not be sacrificed for clothing fabric favored by ‘rebels’, oils with dubious qualities, better cat litter and bio-fuels.* Since the day, as a teenager, when I first decided to try smoking pot, I have advocated the decriminalization of the plant. It has pleased me in recent years that cannabis is becoming legal. Now I am not so glad. What a bummer.

* http://cannabisreports.org/hemp-uses-top-uses-for-hemp/
MY DESERT

by Marisa Seaman

For those of you who don’t know me, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in Southern California is my favorite desert area. I’ve been going to this park since 1978 and have yet to tire of it. I consider it my home away from home. I consider this “my desert”.

I have explored both on foot and 4WD-vehicle the hidden jewels of Anza-Borrego. There are palm oases, waterfalls, slot canyons, wind and mud caves, and also breathtaking views of barren terrain at Font’s Point and the Carrizo Badlands overlook. I keep returning to Borrego Palm Canyon, for its oasis and waterfalls shaded by native California fan palms, and where a herd of Peninsular big horn sheep might be seen. Another favorite is Coyote Canyon, where a creek, fed by natural springs, flows much of the year, making for good wildflowers and a haven for wildlife along its willows. Blair Valley is a cultural preserve of the Native Kumeyaay People, where their seasonal camps with bedrock mortars and rock art are found. Although I have seen much of Anza-Borrego, there remains so much more to explore in its primitive backcountry—places unknown and intriguing where I would not venture without being accompanied by someone with excellent navigational skills.

Enter Paul Harris, a new Desert Survivors trip-leader, with years of backcountry experience. I suggested exploring the remote areas of the Anza-Borrego I longed to check out, and to my delight, Paul took an immediate interest. This Spring I signed on for Paul’s Desert Survivors Anza-Borrego trip.

Carol Clark was the trip co-leader. She thoroughly researched the excursion beforehand—learning locations and routes, studying the topography, comparing various blogs offered by hikers online, and superimposing their G.P.S. tracks onto navigational apps such as Gaia. The paths Paul and Carol decided were based on a preference for more scenic and interesting routes—often more challenging than the customary trails.

Our plan was to car camp three nights at the Bow Willow campground and hike during the day. The hikes would be from six to nine miles with an elevation gain of some 1,500-2,000 ft., “moderately strenuous” by Paul and Carol’s standards. We would often be on rough, off-trail conditions, including scrambling over rocks. Some of our routes would be exploratory in nature. The timing of Paul and Carol’s trip in late-March 2019 couldn’t have been more perfect. Temperatures were in the low 80’s, the winds were calm, and it was in the height of a rare super bloom—a treat for the eyes and spirit. All of this would serve to buffer the strenuous hikes ahead.

The trip participants were David Marcus, Ron Cohen, Julie Donohue, Steve Linton, Kate Hansen, Margaret Zukas, and Glenda Marsh. Over the next few days, I would gain a respect for my fellow hikers’ abilities and the adventurous spirit of our leaders. The charm and camaraderie of the group made for a great trip.

Our first day was spent in the Coyote Mountains exploring the Domelands—an area of rounded rock formations and caves sculpted by desert winds. We ventured into a narrow side canyon, where the sandstone walls exposed fossilized sand dollars. In other rocks we found fossil seashells, giving evidence that this hot, dry environment was once an inland sea. A slot canyon proved to be more challenging than the typical narrows. There was one stretch where the ground dropped away six feet, requiring us to make our way ‘crab-walking’ along the ragged walls over the collapsed floor.
For me, the highlight of this hike was when we gathered together at the bottom of a ravine. While standing near a leafless smoke tree, I noticed a hummingbird oddly hovering about us. I saw neither flowering plants nor colorful clothing that might explain why the hummingbird was persistently flying near us. I realized it must have been trying to disperse us when, seeming to have given up, it darted towards the tree and settled itself into a tiny, fibrous nest, camouflaged amidst the branches several feet above us. The nest looked almost like a cupped acorn shell, built just large enough for the female to nestle over her brood of eggs.

On the second day, a six-mile, 1800 foot-ascent hike was planned to reach an overlook of the Goat Canyon Trestle—the world's largest all-wooden railroad trestle and considered an engineering marvel when it was constructed in 1932. This hike would turn out to be much more strenuous given the rugged country and steep slopes, but was nonetheless beautiful and worthwhile.

In lieu of following the footpath to the trestle, Carol led us off-trail up the Mortero wash, where the route became increasingly more challenging as we had to climb our way up a boulder-strewn slope to reach (to my surprise) the Mortero Palms, a lush and shady grove of native California fan palms. Later we detoured back onto the trestle trail and continued ascending the steep slopes until we reached a rolling desert meadow of cholla, agave and barrel cacti. From this vantage point we could look down at the industrial farm of wind turbines stretched out across the desert floor just west of Ocotillo, CA.

By this time we had hiked two miles and climbed 1,300 feet, only averaging a mile an hour. To reach the trestle, we still had to exit Mortero Canyon and descend 500 feet into Goat Canyon before returning. As we stood overlooking the drop, several of us voiced the same view; we would wait there and let others go on without us. We were lacking the energy and time to continue this daunting descent. With this, our trip leaders made the decision to not go further, much to their disappointment I am sure, as it would have indeed been fascinating to see the trestle. Carol and Paul most likely will lead another hike to the trestle in the future. After lunch on our return, I was astounded to see the uppermost hillsides as well as the trail side carpeted with desert wildflowers, and devoid of crowds encountered in the basin areas. I certainly would return here, despite the difficulty to reach this place, to experience the super bloom in such glory.

The final day entailed a hike to Whale Peak. We packed up camp and caravanned to Pinyon Mountain Road, taking this 4WD route several miles to the trailhead. Unlike the prior two hikes, where there was little change in the flora, here we noted the transition in the vegetation as we ascended the mountain. We hiked above the usual desert scrub and cactus in the Lower Desert to a woodland of pinyon pines and California juniper, interspersed with a mixture of chaparral plants, cholla cactus, and giant Mojave yucca at the top. We went from climbing rocky washes to walking across grassy fields with wildflowers. It had a beauty and a landscape that set it apart from much of the park.

We reached the summit of Whale Peak where we found the USGS benchmark at 5,349 feet. Standing atop a large boulder, we were treated to a phenomenal 360-degree view of Anza-Borrego. Here before me was a perspective I had not encountered in all my time in the park. I could see the places I have experienced and loved during my many visits. I gazed upon Font's Point and the Borrego Badlands to the northeast, and Palm Canyon to the west. I identified one of its roads leading to the mountain town of Julian, known for its apple pies. The Carrizo Badlands were to the south; and the expanse of Blair Valley was below us. From this view I gained an appreciation of the benefits of adventuring into the backcountry, for the possibilities of discovering new hidden jewels. With renewed excitement and anticipation, I will soon be pursuing new experiences in Anza-Borrego, in my home away from home, in this special place that gives me great joy. In this place I call “my desert”. 

The author, Marisa Seaman.
Gazing upon Theodore Frank Pilger in his open casket was my only encounter with my maternal grandfather. He died from an acute illness while staying in a trailer near Palm Springs. He had represented himself to the hospital as a penniless unemployed carpenter; so they gave him a shot of penicillin and sent him home. He died that night. He had $100,000 in his bank account. To say that he was estranged from all his family members is an understatement. He was a violent, virulently racist bully who abused his wife and children physically and emotionally. He died when I was twelve years old, while he was living in the desert only 200 miles from our home in Los Angeles. An unseen ghost. My mother never mentioned her father’s existence. Nevertheless his legacy brought me a wondrous childhood full of adventure on his desert property at the foot of the Chocolate Mountains, and a lifelong love of the desert.

Three years prior to my grandfather’s death in 1963 my family was living in a working class suburb of Paris, France. My father, a professor of modern European history at UCLA, was doing research for a book on Pierre Laval, Prime Minister in the Vichy government who was executed for treason two weeks after Germany surrendered in 1945. I attended fifth grade at a boys-only French public elementary school, which involved fighting on a daily basis during recess in the schoolyard, as there were no sports nor games and no teachers supervised the yard. When I later attended Calipatria High School in the Imperial Valley during the ninth grade, I was known as “Frenchie”. I was thus considered a foreigner in both settings, which otherwise could not have been more different. Calipatria’s Eiffel Tower is the municipal flagpole, which the Chamber of Commerce touts as the tallest flagpole in the world, topping out at sea level.

The 285 acre desert property that my grandfather purchased (sometime between 1938-48) was located at the most remote southeast corner of Riverside County. According to Marian Seddon (author of a 71 page pamphlet entitled What Ever Happened to the Chocolate Mountain Gang? for sale at Bashfords’ Spa): In 1949 Pilger leased an adjacent square mile of property from Imperial County featuring a hot artesian well producing 350 gallons per minute of 175 degree water. The land is smack on top of the San Andreas Fault. In 1957 he acquired a 40-year lease to the hot water soaking pools and surrounding acres from the Bureau of Land Management. This spot was where he developed the original Hot Mineral Spa, also known to some as “Pilger’s Puddles”. The hot well was drilled by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1938 during construction of the Coachella branch of the All American Canal. Seddon speculates, “How Pilger found the pools seems unknown. Possibly he’d helped discover them in ’38”.

Seddon continues: “Pilger’s dream to build a desert health resort sprang from his love of the desert. This dream was hampered from the beginning by his personality. He had complex, contrasting characteristics and an irritable disposition, which probably accounted in part for his estrangement from his wife and three daughters.”
He built various spa facilities but it was no fancy operation, more like an expanded Slab City. Elderly people on Social Security benefits lived in trailers, danced the polka at night, shopped at the weekly Flea Market and soaked in the bathing pools and mud baths. According to Seddon’s pamphlet, Pilger lost control of the leased property in 1958. Concerned that the men’s changing room was built on top of the stream flowing into the children’s pool, the County Health Department ordered sanitary improvements. My grandfather refused cooperation, asserting that men would never pee into the water. “Roaringly angry”, he pointed a rifle at the Health Department inspector, was arrested and jailed by the Sheriff in El Centro, and the County took away his lease. “No Trespassing” signs and fencing were erected but the County nonetheless turned a blind eye on the residents who continued to live there. They organized informally with elected officers as the Hot Wells Association and collected fees and mobilized volunteer labor to further improve and maintain the property. They built 35 lavatories to county specifications, and even constructed concrete roads including two named “Texas Circle” and “N. Hollywood Avenue”. Seddon reports: “The population reached 5,000 during peak months in January and February.” Ultimately, concerned about the growing population and potential health hazards in this vast squatters encampment, the County evicted the residents six years later in 1964. Today Pilger’s original old spa has been renovated and is operating as an RV park under new management as the Glamis Hot Springs.

For many years after my grandfather died my family regularly spent long weekends and vacationed on his Riverside County property, and we lived there continuously for a year and a half in 1965-66. Forty acres of the half-square-mile property were beautifully landscaped with palm, citrus, ironwood, palo verde and smoke trees, and oleander and bougainvillea bushes, and featured 11 cabins in all—built from military surplus officers’ quarters. One occupied by Pilger, five cabins available for rent, the remaining five housed the caretakers. Shortly after his death, my parents sent me to stay with one of the caretakers named Marshall for several weeks. Marshall taught me, at 12 years of age, how to drive one of my grandfather’s five Model A Ford pickup trucks. To start the engine, you depressed the clutch and put the gear in neutral, set the spark advance, idle speed, choke, turned the key, then depressed the ignition button on the floor. Through Marshall’s tutelage I learned how to operate the scoop and grader blade on the Ford industrial tractor, how to fertilize and water the citrus and palm trees, how to use an acetylene torch, shoot a .303 Savage lever action rifle, cut and thread pipe using a die set, and make cement using an ancient single cylinder cement mixer. My initials “CCK 1963” are still visible in the slab we poured outside the plumbing shop.

A desert survivor or perhaps more accurately a survivalist, grandfather Pilger accumulated lots of stuff. Four rooms in his cabin were filled with file cabinets crammed with documents. Vast supplies and equipment of all kinds were stored in several warehouses, including 175 new shirts in unopened bags. He would throw away his soiled shirts and put on new ones. I was mystified why he had dozens of picks and shovels, until learning years later that he would stand atop the ca-
nal levee adjacent to our property calling out to illegal immigrants traveling north from the Mexican border, enticing them with promises of “comida” and “trabajo” (food and employment). He put large gangs to work grooming the property. When the workers grumbled about their wages, he would go to town and call the Border Patrol.

His father was a German immigrant and homesteader in Nebraska living in a sod-roofed house. Born June 8, 1889 in Loup City Nebraska, my grandfather grew up in Loup City, and then graduated from the Colorado School of Mines. He went to work as a mining engineer in Butte, Montana where he met my grandmother Adelaide Rowe who was the teacher in a one room schoolhouse. The misogynistic cultural climate surrounding their early marriage was recounted by Mae Shick in *Homesteading Women of Montana*. She tells how Theodore and Adelaide hid their marriage for three years, as teachers could not be married. (See: http://maeschick.com/teacher-hide-husband/)

Shortly after my mother was born in Wisconsin in 1920, the family moved to Berlin, Germany where she lived the first seven years of her life. Her father worked in Europe as an investment consultant for American mining firms. Upon their return to the U.S. in 1927 he abandoned the family, returned to Europe, and my mother, her mother and two sisters lived in New Jersey on welfare. My grandmother finally divorced him 20 years after their separation. An avid Nazi sympathizer, he lived in Berlin until 1942. My mother inherited his German War Bonds.

According to a psychic who read my aura at a party, I am a “walk-in”, a wandering soul who took over someone else’s body at birth, and who is compelled to redress the evil-doings of my ancestors. Pilger karma thus perhaps accounts for my altruistic career in social work. Seddon quotes one of my grandfather’s contemporaries as saying that “Pilger could talk on and on about any subject. But, honey, he was an atheist and that wasn’t good for him.” As an atheist myself, I find that concern amusing. It was certainly the least of his sins.

Determined to better her life, and never having driven before, at age 17 my mother bought a used car and drove her mother and two sisters across the country to finish high school in Oxnard, California while staying with cousins. The three Pilger girls all gained admittance and graduated from Stanford University, working their way through college. When my mother was an undergraduate student, my parents met at Stanford where dad worked as an Instructor in Western Civilization while finishing his doctorate in history at UC Berkeley. According to my mother, she “majored in boys” at Stanford among innumerable other co-eds who populated the campus during WWII, and who populated dad’s office hours. Nonetheless she won him over and they married in the Stanford Chapel (where coincidentally I met my wife, Linda, upon invitation to a Mozart concert and house party hosted by Debbie Shreiber, a fellow Desert Survivor.) My parents had four children—two boys and two girls. I am the only college graduate, and the only surviving atheist in the family (since my mother passed in 2001 and my older sister who passed in 2015.) My younger brother and sister went another direction and became religious. They may have thusly escaped the curse of Pilger’s atheist karma.

At Hot Mineral Spa we lived isolated but far from lonely. The nearest town was Niland, 18 miles distant (not counting Bombay Beach, a failed resort development on the Salton Sea, which one wouldn’t describe as a town). In our early days at the property there was no Internet nor cell phones. Nor did we have electricity or telephone. Mom and the four King children played poker at night lit by kerosene lamps. Eventually we did get electricity, and a room air conditioner in one of the cabins, but still no phone. Daytime was a mix of work and play. Work meant helping my father maintain the property, grading the roads with our tractor, sawing ironwood tree limbs by pulling and pushing on a cross cut saw, and hauling a waterbarrel and horse manure on a trailer to hand-water and fertilize 40 acres of tree-lined landscape. My father quipped that he was born to retire, and his colleagues said he was born retired. To build a sand buggy we...
cut my grandfather’s 1951 Plymouth in half, removed the body and shortened it three feet and put on big tires. No seat belts. Dad painted it with house paint, including the seats. We called it the Green Monster.

Every day was an adventure. A guy pulled up to our cabin in an old car and told me the trunk was full of rattlesnakes. He popped open the trunk, which was loaded with bowling bags, and zipped one open. It was indeed full of writhing rattlesnakes. He was bringing them to a lab in Los Angeles where they made anti-venom serum. We were at the end of the school bus line. Our school bus driver, Mrs. Entrekin, was a frail elderly woman with emphysema. She required help at times to shift the gears as we drove slowly two hours each way to school, fishtailing in the mud on rainy days, stopping outside one room shacks where perfectly groomed children of Hispanic farmworkers emerged to board the bus. Danny, my older sister’s boyfriend, drove 18 miles from Niland on his Honda 90 which he let me drive in exchange for the Green Monster so he and my sister could go off and neck. My younger sister and I rode the little Honda through an encampment of Harley bikers who chased us back to our cabin. The next morning a dead plucked chicken was on our doorstep.

Tall skinny bodies dissipate heat better, so I didn’t mind that the temperature exceeded 115 degrees for much of the summer. The ground was so hot the bottom of your feet burned through your shoes. There were the most amazing bugs like horse flies that we called “bombers” because they were loud, like a B52 when diving in to bite very hard. Tarantulas swarmed once a year. Wasps killed and laid their eggs in the tarantulas. Translucent scorpions hid in the shadows of plants. Snakes lurked about. The scary ones weren’t rattlers. They were the big, fast, aggressive snakes like one in a tree that I was fertilizing that struck my shovel ringing it like a bell. It was a green Baja California rat snake, a fearsome but rarely observed species reputed to “strike viciously when threatened.” True that.

Group outings with high school friends in the Green Monster and my dad’s 1949 Willys Jeep took us deep into glorious Chocolate Mountain slot canyons to cook breakfast over a campfire. At night you could see every star in the sky. What more could a desert rat ask for?

Twenty-three years after my grandfather’s death the Riverside County property was sold by the Pilger heirs to our nearest neighbors, the Bashford family. I have known the Bashfords for fifty-five years. The Bashfords’ permit application for primitive camping, the County responded with a demand that we build a sewage treatment plant. In response to the Bashfords’ permit application for primitive camping, the County demanded an astounding $200,000 in fees. So, Craig Bashford instead raised food fish (tilapia and catfish) for a time using water from the artesian hot well, but eventually gave up when the well casing collapsed. All the planted and native trees are now dying since the old agricultural Coachella canal, which leaked vast amounts of seepage water, was replaced by a concrete-lined canal in 2009. Our once-beautiful desert property have been defeated by Riverside County across the road from the Pilger property.

Akin to my family’s experience, all the Bashfords’ attempts to develop the Pilger property have been defeated by Riverside County’s Planning Commission. My family drilled a hot artesian well and applied for permits to build a spa. The County responded with a demand that we build a sewage treatment plant. In response to the Bashford’s permit application for primitive camping, the County demanded an astounding $200,000 in fees. So, Craig Bashford instead raised food fish (tilapia and catfish) for a time using water from the artesian hot well, but eventually gave up when the well casing collapsed. All the planted and native trees are now dying since the old agricultural Coachella canal, which leaked vast amounts of seepage water, was replaced by a concrete-lined canal in 2009. Our once-beautiful desert property have been defeated by Riverside County across the road from the Pilger property.

Bashfords’ Hot Mineral Spa and RV park in Imperial County across the road from the Pilger property.

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Prepping for desert sand dunes at Dillon Beach, Marin County.


Happy couple.


Splitting wood to keep warm at 7000 ft. on Fox Mtn., June 2019.

Above photo: She has it made in the shade on the Seven Troughs for Seven Survivors Car Camp, May 2019.


The Survivor    Fall 2019

A beautiful view on the Yampa River Raft Trip, June 2019.


Picnic lunch at Dillon Beach.

Happy couple.

Prepping for desert sand dunes at Dillon Beach, Marin County.
Photos From Our Trips & Events


It was pretty darn cold outside, so these Survivors enjoy Happy Hour in the campground library, February 2019.

Gathering fallen fruit at China Date Ranch, Amargosa River Car Camp, February 2019.

All smiles, Marc Eldridge & Esperanza Hernandez.

The Trail of the Ancients Car Camp, Utah, May 2019.
Desert Survivors Membership Form

Membership dues are just $30/year, although additional donations are welcome. You can renew your membership by filling out this form and mailing it in with a check to the address shown below.

Name (req'd) ____________________________________________________________

Street Address (req'd) ____________________________________________________

City, State, Zip Code (req'd) ________________________________________________

Phone number: ___________________________________________________________

E-mail address: _____________________________________________________________

(Desert Survivors strives to prevent unsolicited use of members’ e-mail addresses, and contact details, and will not knowingly allow misuse. Our email-list servers guard email confidentiality.)

I want to renew at the following rate (make check payable to “Desert Survivors”):

_____ $30 - Tortoise (basic rate) _____ $50 - Roadrunner _____ $100 - Coyote

_____ $500 - Bristlecone _____ $1000 - Bighorn

Desert Survivors • P O Box 20991, Oakland, CA 94620-0991

How many Desert Survivors does it take to change a tire?
Answer: Three to screw in the lug nuts, a fourth to shoot a video of their backs and butts. Still frame from a video by Alexis Chen.