

**STAR CREEK**  
An Excerpt From the  
*Autobiography of a Yankee-Nevadan*  
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**CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO**  
**A QUIET LAND**

Star Peak, the most significant peak in the Humboldt Range, northeast of Lovelock in Pershing County, Nevada, rises abruptly to an elevation of 9,835' above-sea-level. A dozen small creeks, including Star, flow easterly out of the range into the Buena Vista valley. Across the valley, the mountain range rises gradually to a paltry 8,461' above-sea-level. Another dozen creeks drain this line of mountains, but none to match Star Creek. The valley, whose width varies from ten- to twenty-miles, extends from I-80 in the north some 45-miles to the south.

Symmetrical, sagebrush covered slopes of alluvium fan out from the canyons on either side of the valley. In the bottom, dusty sagebrush, alkali dry lakes and irrigated green fields are shared by indigenous jackrabbits and coyotes, livestock, and no more than a dozen farm and ranch families.

It was into this environment that I drove on October 30, 1977, towing the Timberline behind my Travelall to the mouth of Star Creek Canyon. It was here that I would spend five of the most enjoyable days of my life; alone with the mountains, creeks, canyons and valleys, alone with the autumn flora and the timid fauna, alone with my thoughts.

While watching the sun rise the following morning, I mused, "It would be nice to share this with someone; but how does one share 'alone' with another?"

And then I thought, "Maybe I could write to my family and friends, letters long overdue anyway, and describe my impressions and activities. Or I could keep a journal...yes...and make copies of it to send to them. It would be a lot easier than writing to each one individually. That's what I'll do. It'll save a lot of time and effort."

And so began what I would call, "George's Journal."

The rest of this chapter is quoted from that script:

## **STAR CREEK**

**1977**

November 1, 1977: I am comfortably seated in my trailer, facing east from the mouth of the canyon into which I pulled last evening.

I found Star Creek, as expected, still running a fair amount of water in spite of the drought. And clear. There was no one at the camp site when I arrived, but twenty minutes later two pickup trucks with trailers showed up. I chatted a while with the newcomers, who then went ahead and made camp for the night. They are an "older" couple and a young couple, father and son and wives, who have come to camp and to hunt the chukar partridge.

Last evening, when the air turned cool, I looked out across the valley just as the sun's rays hung onto the highest peak. It glowed dark red for a moment, like a coal just before it dies in a campfire, then it was gone, leaving only the razor sharp silhouette of the ridge against a cold gray sky.

It was a night of perfection: Cool, clear, calm, crisp but not quite freezing. A scattering of high thin clouds enhanced a late rising moon. Toward dawn the clouds overhead and up the canyon to the west cleared away, leaving the half-moon stark naked in the sky.

Now the morning blooms. At first only the crisp skyline, the same one I saw last night, was visible. Then the transformation of dawn to daylight unfolded. A band of stratified clouds, running from north to south, now hovers motionless in the eastern sky. High thin cirrus portends a storm some great distance away. The sun, shining up from beyond the Earth's curve, touches the clouds with silver. The dull silver changes to red, to vermillion, and back to silver again, all within ten minutes while I savor my morning coffee.

The old man and the boy have left camp in the pickup and gone up the canyon. I expect their wives will clean up the breakfast mess then sit around and "visit," as women do. After the pickup had gone I heard some chukar-talk. My guess is that they were roused by the noisy truck just above camp. I suppose I'd better look to my old twelve-gage and prepare to do some hunting myself.

November 2: It is 6:30 in the morning, the exact time when the rising sun sends its first piercing rays through my trailer window and

into my eyes. I awoke at 5:45, just as the high clouds began to glow. As anticipated, it was another grand sunrise. But let me go back and recount the events of yesterday:

The pickup had been gone several minutes when I heard the chukars again, calling from somewhere across the creek. So I took my shotgun and hiked up the hillside, pausing on the way for a breather and to take in the view. A rocky ledge above a canyon mouth affords an excellent birds-eye view of the creek below, which is why, I suppose, man since prehistoric times has taken to watching for game from that vantage point.

I noted the effects of a recent sagebrush fire, most likely started by a careless camper, that had burned an area between the creek and the roadway some three-hundred yards long and thirty wide. The fire completely exposed the ruins of an old homestead; the rock foundation of a house and the remains of stone fences surrounding a corral and small pasture. From my lofty perch I visualized a bygone time when the owners of that home tended their cows, pigs, chickens and horses, perhaps raised a small garden, and watched the same sun rise over the same distant mountain that I had.

The birds I'd come for were in quiet hiding, so I started back down the hill. A shiny stone caught my eye and I picked it up. It was an obsidian projectile point with a broken tip. (When whole it would have measured about 1 by 1.5 inches.)

The broken arrowhead re-triggered my thoughts of those hunters of prehistoric times, whose quarry included buffalo, deer, antelope and lesser animals, swans, geese, ducks, quail, and of course the slow-flying sage grouse. At least they never had to contend with the frustratingly elusive Himalayan chukar partridge. I used up an hour in search of another arrowhead, but found only broken pieces and chips.

The old man and his son came back from up-canyon and they, too, were empty handed. They offered me a beer and we visited for a spell, talked about the canyon and hunting and so on. They expect to leave this place and go to Lovelock where they'll hunt pheasants in the fields, a much less strenuous sport indeed.

I decided to cross the big valley and explore the mountains where the sun rises. I hesitated, however, because the Travelall had been showing an unusual propensity for over-heating. On checking it over I could find no reason for it, and was perplexed.

I went anyway, driving up Inskip Canyon alongside an intermittent stream (dashed lines on my map) stopping occasionally to look for chukars. I noted that the engine was overheating again, and puzzled over it. About three miles into the canyon, on sighting four or five chukar-birds across the trickling creek, I stopped the Travelall, grabbed my shotgun and took off after them. I was to learn two things: one, that I can still run uphill after a chukar; two, that I've forgotten how to shoot one.

I got up one bird and fired twice. The second shot winged him and I saw him fall. I tossed off a third shot at another bird and just plain missed him. It was impossible to find the downed chukar in the tall sagebrush. He will become dinner for a coyote or a hawk, no doubt. Right then a hunting dog would have been a real asset. I got back in the Travelall and drove on up the canyon.

A road off to my left drew me like a magnet. It should take me to the top of the mountain, I reckoned, and it's foolish to be this close and not know what's on the other side. Away I went.

It was a good enough trail for a 4WD vehicle, but now I was really concerned about the overheating engine. Not worried, mind you, because I was, after all, on vacation. And what could be serious out here, well away from the job? But I was miffed at my own inability to solve the problem.

I topped the pass at roughly 7,000' above-sea-level, stopped and got out to stand on the very crest over which I had recently watched the sun rise.

As usual the weather was fine. The sky was mostly blue but with the same high clouds that had prevailed for days. A light breeze blew from the west up the canyon, at maybe six knots. I walked to the front of the Travelall and opened the hood so the engine would cool down. It was really hot now. But why?

True, the last half-mile to the summit had been a steep climb, but it should have been no work at all for the big V-8, especially as compared to some places I'd been. I proceeded to check again all of those things which I had already checked, looking over and under and around the engine for something unusual.

I'm probably not the only guy who does so, but every once in a while I do something annoyingly stupid. Like that time on Harrison Pass when I jumped to the conclusion that the fuel line was vapor-locked when it was really out of gas. Now I was to discover that I'd done something, earlier, that was really dumb.

While leaning on the fender, staring under the hood and trying to think of an answer to my problem, I saw something move under the front of the engine. I bent down for a closer look. It was just the grass blowing in the wind. But then my eye caught another movement, this one between the regular and the air-conditioner radiators. By wedging my hand into the narrow space, I could touch the object with my fingertips. It was a folded newspaper. The very newspaper that I, myself, had placed there a couple of weeks ago to raise the engine temperature so I could make a good test of the antifreeze solution.

What a relief. By the simple act of jerking that totally forgotten newspaper from its harmful repository I cured the overheating problem. And there was no one but God around to chuckle at my stupidity.

When I returned to camp at dusk, my "neighbors" were gone but had tucked a note into the jamb of my trailer door.

"We thank you for letting us share your camp with you," it read. "Many thanks...the Kirn Family."

I smiled to myself. Only in the country does one find such thoughtful and courteous folks.

I set about preparing dinner, having already decided that tonight's the night for steak, potatoes and lettuce salad. The realization was every bit as good as the anticipation, and it was with a tremendous feeling of satisfaction that I turned in for a good night's sleep.

November 3: Last night passed in total silence, as did the one before. It seems strange with no wind blowing down the canyon at dusk

as it does in the summertime. It figures, however, since there is very little valley heating during the day at this time of year. It was noticeably quiet, with neither wind nor neighbors in camp.

The sun rose this morning without any color at all. There are no clouds, not even any dust in the atmosphere to reflect the rays. It looks very much as if it will be another dry Nevada day.

Yesterday, when I drove up the canyon behind my trailer, gray low-level clouds lay like a mantle on the peak. But they were almost completely dissipated by noon.

I saw nary a chukar up there, nor very few signs of them; although I did hear their frustrating conversation. In search of a way to the top of the north side of the canyon, I went up a mining road to about the 6,500' elevation (my camp is at 5200') and reached a dead end. Failing in that venture I came back and drove to the site of Star City, where I paused to survey the remains of that once busy mining town. With only a few stone foundations and walls left standing it is hard to believe that in 1863, two years after it was born, Star City was the county's largest community with 1,200 residents. It was a lively place for seven years, it is written, then dwindled away and died almost a hundred years ago.

This was not my first time in Star Canyon. Last year, in June, on our way to Elko County for the 4th-of-July holiday, Rita and I decided to stop overnight here. Instead we camped at Bloody Creek, the next stream to the south, thinking it was Star Creek.

It was a natural mistake, for the road to Bloody Canyon takes off at the Star Creek Ranch whereas the turnoff to Star Creek is a mile north of it.

But we had the trailer all set up, albeit in a very poor place, before I studied the topographical map and discovered my error. So we scouted that canyon, which we found to be rich in wildflowers and other beautiful things, before driving over to Star Creek to explore it as far as the site of the old city. While breaking camp at Bloody Creek, the following morning, Rita lost a gold earring in the wild grass; a tiny, shiny gold nugget which I searched for in vain with my metal detector. It must be there still.

Another time, just four months ago, when Dot and Elly came from the East to go trailering with us, we camped on this very same spot on Star Creek. (I found the proper turnoff that time.) We hiked and fished and generally enjoyed the canyon's quiet beauty, factors that led me to return this fall.

But I digress. Today I drove to the upper edge of the erstwhile city, parked the Travelall beside the remnants of an old building and got out to look and listen. Right off I heard some chukar-talk. With my shotgun at the ready, I walked up the canyon on foot. The birds, of course, immediately shut up. Nor were they about to show themselves. On my way back down I came upon two apple trees near a small spring. Both bore ripe fruit. From one hung greenish-yellow apples, small and not very appealing, but the other one boasted of luscious red apples averaging two-inches in diameter. Amazingly, I guess because they are so isolated from other fruit trees, there were no signs of worms in any of them. I picked three of the red ones, to go with my lunch, and

left the rest for the deer. Those were the best-tasting apples I've eaten in years.

If you stand in the middle of Star City and look up toward the west, you will see an old mine head-frame. Star Creek, and a road, come down the steep canyon behind it. Last summer, with Dot, Elly and Rita aboard, I attempted to drive the Travelall up that way, in the hopes of finding the entrance to a big cave that I've heard about. But that road, which doubles as the creek bed and was washed out, was impassable. I had to back down.

Today I took the south fork of the road, below the head-frame, thinking it would put me high on the shoulder of Star Peak, from which I might hike around to the big cave.

This road was steeper than I'd expected. The grade, as measured with my Brunton pocket transit, averaged twenty percent. The last pitch, forty-six percent. Two of the switchbacks were so tight I had to stop and back and turn again to get around. In one mile I gained a thousand feet in elevation. (Whoever built that road was an expert in his craft.) At road's end, at the 7,500' elevation, I found myself on a ridge leading to the base of a sheer cliff around which there was no easy way to pass.

But what a beautiful place it was. I took a deep breath and savored the distinctive aroma of mahoganies, twisted and gnarled from the winds, growing there in a sparse grove. And my, what a view!

Far away to the north I could see the freeway, which, with its parallel strips of macadam, from this distance appeared more like a railroad than a highway. I couldn't make out any vehicles, but knew that I-80 was cluttered with cars and trucks speeding from there to where.

I hiked a half-mile to the southwest, along the base of the high cliff, to stand on another ridge 500' higher than the first. From there I had a good view of the south end of Buena Vista Valley. And in the Stillwater Range, thirty-three miles away, with my binoculars I identified our microwave-radio station. Close under my feet I could make out a part of old Unionville.

Unionville, like Star City, was originally laid out in 1861. The place was briefly known as "Dixie," until Northern sympathizers won out in local politics. Its location, at the mouth of a rather shallow canyon and 800' lower, was much more conducive to survivability than Star City.

With Dot and Elly we had toured Unionville, where a half-dozen homes were inhabited by a breed of possessive citizens who kept looters from packing everything off, as has occurred in so many old mining towns. It was so quiet when we were there the deer and quail feeding in the fenced-in yards in the center of the village hardly looked up when we passed. Earlier, out on the alluvium by the highway, we had had the good fortune to observe a den of swift foxes; a mother and three or four young ones. The kits were unusually tame, even when I stopped the rig and photographed them.

Now I remained on the high bench a while, contemplating whether or not to climb another three-quarters of a mile to the very top of the peak. I elected to head back to the Travelall. Anyway, on the way up I had seen a cave opening that I wished to investigate.

Back at the car I stretched out on a rock ledge, which was conveniently shaped like a chaise lounge, to eat my lunch. It was pleasantly warm in the sun. Food and drink never tasted better. And then, with my jacket pulled close about me, I dozed off for a half-hour or so of sweet sleep.

On awakening, I gathered up some of the dead, seasoned mahogany wood, with the idea that I might someday use it for carving; then drove down the road to a place about level with the cave I'd noted. With my camera and binoculars slung over my shoulders, a flashlight stuck in a side-pocket, I headed off around the cliff base. I passed by several false openings and actually went beyond the one I was searching for, but by backtracking I found it, about thirty yards higher than I thought it should be. It would be a difficult climb.

There were lots of loose rocks and few good footholds but by groping for handholds in the ledges and brush I ascended the talus to the cave mouth. A welcome mat of grass, some of it still green, apparently nurtured by moisture seeping from the back of the cave, beckoned me to enter.

The entrance to this natural cave, which, at 7,500' elevation is 3,000' above the valley floor (roughly equivalent to the summit of Mt. Monadnock above its surrounding countryside, is symmetrical in shape, perhaps three meters high at the most. Inside, a fair-sized oval room nine meters wide by twenty meters deep opens up. The floor, with a centuries old accumulation of dirt, dust and dung, slopes upward to the rear.

There was no sign of the cave's having been dug by pothunters. Even the stalactites and stalagmites were virtually unbroken. Nor could I detect any real evidence, other than soot on the ceiling, that it was ever inhabited by man; although it was such an ideal place it must have been.

I did find an artifact outside the cave, at the base of the cliff. It was a knife or other tool made of white chert, 3.75-inches long by 1.75-inches wide and .25-inch thick.

I shot a couple of photographs and, leaving only my footprints behind, climbed carefully down the way I had come.

The sun had set by the time I returned to the Travelall, and when I got down to the creek it was dark enough to use the headlights. Hungry and tired, but with a sense of accomplishment, I entered my snug little trailer. Dinner consisted of bacon and eggs and potatoes. "Mystery Theater," coming to me from KSL in Salt Lake City, provided ample entertainment till bedtime; as it has these past three evenings. I turned in at nine and was almost immediately sound asleep.

November 4: I was awake before six, as usual, prepared to watch a colorful sunrise. The wind blew some last night, prefacing new clouds in the area, clouds whose bases appear to be at ten-thousand feet. But it was a dull dawning. The clouds wore a tarnished silver or pewter color, an indication of rain in the near future but not today. As a matter of fact, as I look up the canyon to the west the cover is already thinning.

By the time I finished my breakfast of cereal, doughnuts, juice and coffee I had decided to cross the valley again, this time to really bag some birds. Rita is always happy when I come home with

game, and I admit to a degree of satisfaction when I'm successful. (I need more shooting practice.)

So I headed across the bottomland on a rough, talcum-powdery trail of alkali dust (six-inches deep in places) next to a field of green alfalfa. The driving demanded so much of my attention I was totally surprised when, off to my right, a half-dozen birds cleared the fence and crossed the road just a few yards ahead.

I blinked and stared at them, trying to see if they were chukars. They were. And then, as I passed the point where they'd risen from the field, I spotted an extremely frustrated Wile E. Coyote. No wonder those usually reticent fellows had chosen that particular moment to cross my course. The pursuer, seeing me and afraid he'd become the pursued, turned and headed for the distant sagebrush. He paused once, with tongue hanging out, to look over his shoulder with disdain.

Keeping an eye to the place where the chukars had landed, I stopped the Travelall, got out, shouldered my gun and walked toward it. Predictably, the whole bunch took flight before I got within range. But I fired a round at the one nearest to me anyway, "to aid him in his effort to get airborne."

On the way up Inskip Canyon I checked every spring for sign, and in the course of a mile observed half a dozen different families of chukars and a single one or two. One old fellow ran ahead of the Travelall, in the wheel track. He was so big he fairly waddled. Like a duck, I thought. When he turned and ran into the brush I stopped the rig, got out and took after him. I never did see him fly, but I had to admit that he was a damned swift runner.

(I suppose I saw twenty birds all day. None of them wound up in my ice-chest.)

At noon I found a spring surrounded by quakies, seated myself on a green-and-brown carpet of grass and leisurely ate my lunch. I munched on a peanut butter sandwich and quaffed a root beer under quivering, golden leaves, made bright by the same sun that was warming my back; much as cowboys and shepherders (some who'd left their names and curious marks on the trunks of the trees) had done in this same timeless niche.

A spring and the little community it serves is a truly wondrous thing. Sooner or later, every animal who passes by must partake of its life sustaining brew. Early man, Indian, trapper, prospector, emigrant, cowboy, shepherd and I, the hunter, all at some time had stopped by this crystalline fountain and taken our fill.

A red-tailed hawk circled overhead, no doubt hoping that my presence would divert a mouse or a squirrel his way, or that I might be lucky enough to shoot a chukar and leave the entrails behind for his pleasure.

Neither I nor he had any such luck. I got back into the Travelall and slowly, reluctantly, coaxed it down the canyon and across the dusty valley floor to my camp. There had been but one visitor to the canyon in my absence, judging from the tracks in the powdery dust.

The daily temperatures have varied little since I came to this place on Monday evening: 40- to 45-degrees before sunup, 55- to 60-degrees during the daytime. And this evening it was far too windy to

broil my second steak over a campfire, so I changed the menu to macaroni-and-cheese and cooked inside, with gas.

But before dining, because my old allergy had flared up after spending so much time in the sagebrush, I treated myself to that rarest of pleasures out in the country: a hot shower.

November 5: I awoke at 6:00am to the sound of raindrops on the trailer roof, and decided to just lie in bed and enjoy the music. Which I did, for at least half an hour.

A rainstorm in Nevada is almost a phenomenon, so one must take the fullest advantage of it when it occurs. This storm began last night at about 10:30, initially in the form of barely perceptible droplets, enough to call rain. I was aware of its falling throughout the night, but not until dawn did it come down in earnest.

Now, as I sit at my table, from where I have watched the sun rise each previous morning, the ground-cloud or fog moves up from the flat - my range of vision is limited to a hundred-yards or so - then my camp is totally engulfed. However, in spite of the lengthy rainfall (for a total accumulation of a half-inch) the ground was so dry when it began that there is still not a puddle in sight.

This precipitation rounds out my weather conditions nicely. I've had warm, dry, sunny, windy, and now rain. And the way it's going there could well be snow by the weekend.

My plan yesterday was to do more driving and less walking in the sagebrush till my allergy clears up. I went to the north end of the valley, and, since I was close to the highway, stopped at the Indians' service station for gas.

This station is unique. The two gas pumps are conventional enough, but beyond that it is less a service station than a barn and yard. In addition to chickens, dogs, ducks, cows and peacocks, I observed two free-roaming goats. As I waited at the "shack" while an Indian maiden took my credit card for payment, a billygoat chewed the insulation off of a new battery cable that was hanging, not high enough, on the wall.

I headed toward Dun Glen, another old and uninhabited mining town. But because there were no road signs and I wasn't paying good attention to my whereabouts, I ended up two canyons too far. And while I pondered what to do about that a truck pulled up alongside and stopped. The driver, a young fellow from Humboldt County, was also hunting chukars, which, he conceded, "are scarce as hen's teeth and you have t'know the country to find 'em." I asked if this road would take me over the mountain. When he answered "No," I wished him "good luck" and turned onto the south fork of the road.

It was about six miles across the valley floor to the mouth of a canyon called "Rockhill," where I noted that a collection of mining machines had been recently set up but there was no one around.

This canyon, unlike all the others I'd explored, was neither narrow nor steep. It was, however, well named, for there were more rocks than dirt in evidence. Seven chukars flew from the edge of the first water hole I came to.

By the looks of it the stream seldom runs in this draw, at least above ground. The only visible water is that which is caught behind dirt dams, built by local ranchers or the BLM, for the use of grazing

cattle. Chukars use it too. I thought I might find more of the latter farther on.

I cannot remember visiting a canyon anywhere in Nevada that I have not come across evidence of early white-man's occupation. This one was no exception to the rule. I found stone remnants of a half-dozen houses or cabins, a chimney here, a foundation there, sections of rusted iron pipe, parts of a steam boiler, manmade holes in the ground, all telling the story of why they had come. Nothing remained as a clue to whether or not they left with any precious metal, or with anything but their skins.

One of the structures was built right into the side of the wash itself, and may have been a water turbine to produce electricity. If so, there must have been a time when there was considerably more water than I now saw, the flow of which would have barely filled a teacup in half-a-minute's time.

Farther up the canyon were scattered patches of willows, like tiny oases. But most of the vegetation consisted of sparse sagebrush and rabbit brush, with a scattering of junipers on the sidehills. At a convenient spot I stopped, made myself comfortable on a log under an aspen tree, and ate my lunch while a red-tailed hawk soared overhead. A timid cottontail nervously crept away through the brush, not knowing that, although I had a twenty-two in the Travelall, I didn't have the appetite to kill him. Maybe the hawk was not so inhibited.

Now to the present: The sound of rain on the roof has diminished. The reason, I see on taking a look out the window, is that the raindrops have given way to heavy wet snowflakes. The outside temperature, according to my thermometer, is now 45-degrees, so I guess the snow level to be at least a thousand feet above the campsite. The all-enveloping cloud has thinned and I can see objects a quarter-mile away in the direction of the valley.

Back to yesterday: I went to the head of Rockhill Canyon and turned back, all the while keeping an eye out for chukar birds. The area was so dry, I reasoned, they just had to come to water sooner or later. This time my vigil paid off. I shot and hit one of four birds flushed from the brush across a wash, got off a second round and a second bird went down. The second one then got up and flew away. The results of a hurried postmortem on the first bird revealed that he'd been brought down by just two pellets, one in the head, and another in the neck. I could make a case for either of two possibilities: One, I'd made an extremely clever shot; two, I'd led the bird too much and was lucky to have hit him at all. Most likely I'd been leading them too far all along.

I finished field-dressing the chukar, washed my hands in the frigid stream, left that canyon and crossed another six miles of alluvial desert to Willow Creek. (There must be a dozen Willow Creeks in Nevada.) Alongside this one, according to my chart, was a road that would take me over the East Humboldt Range. From there I could return to camp via the south end of Buena Vista Valley.

The mouth of Willow Creek canyon was narrow and deep, and flanked by a copse of naked cottonwoods. A fair trickle of water flowed, though, enough to muddy the wheels and fenders when I drove through a ford. The farther I went, the more the terrain leveled out. Now the

creek crawled along under a cover of low willows. A fence enclosed a natural meadow astraddle the creek. I came to the remains of more old stone cabins, and more relics from early day placer operations, but no cultivated fields.

The condition of the road worsened, even for a 4WD. For the next twenty miles, with damned few exceptions, I drove through alkali dust at times half-a-foot deep. Undoubtedly the road had been recently bladed while dry and the traffic last weekend, the opening of chukar season, had churned it to powder.

Driving through alkali dust (for those of you who've never done so) is not unlike driving through snow or water. Alkali, whether wet or dry, is slick. You try to straddle the ruts in the roadway but your wheels slide into them. You drive through a "puddle" of dust and it splashes up and over the hood, settling like water on the windshield.

Yesterday, fortunately, the alkali was dry and the windshield wipers cleared it away without leaving a residue.

(The falling snow has turned to rain again.)

As it turned out, even though I chanced upon a number of good little springs, I saw virtually no chukars in Willow Creek Canyon. I continued on my way over the summit.

Three miles beyond, after traversing a series of steep, sharp switchbacks, I took a road to the southwest that proved to be as rough and torturous as any yet encountered. It was dusk when I came to the southern terminus of paved SR-50. The smooth sailing, after driving all day in four-wheel-drive on dirt roads, was almost unbelievable.

A yellow school bus disgorged a handful of kids by a mailbox at the entrance to one of three or four ranches in the valley. While waiting for the big red lights to quit blinking, I reflected on my good fortune. For four days I had had this country virtually all to myself. Two of those days I'd gone without seeing another person or vehicle. And in all that time, I had observed not one dune-buggy, motorbike, or chrome-bedecked pickup truck.

To be alone in the country, aside from its being a rare privilege, is a unique experience. Every decision you make is entirely your own. The consequences of those decisions are also entirely your own. There are [or were] no absurd government rules-of-safety to be followed. You know with an unconscious certainty that you must take care of yourself. You prepare for any possible contingency and face every possible hazard with that in mind. You keep a weather eye out, at the same time observing the sky, the mountains, the trees, the brush, the rocks, the dust, the flora and fauna. Wherever you drive or walk or stand or sit, you are aware that this is God's country and you thank Him for allowing you to have a share in it.

Back at camp, my altimeter indicated a drop in air pressure. A brisk warm wind blew in from the southwest, bringing with it the unmistakable smell of rain. I decided to mahogany-broil a steak for dinner, and quickly broke up a dead branch with my ball-peen hammer. The clouds thickened. I laid the broken pieces of wood on the charcoal briquettes in my brazier, and touched a match to them. The resultant fire smelled good. I made a pot of coffee and prepared a salad of lettuce, tomatoes and radishes. Cold leftover macaroni-and-cheese would serve as a side dish.

Hungry flames curled around the filet mignon, and my mouth watered in anticipation. I seasoned it with salt and pepper, flipped it over, melted a pat of butter on the second side, and finished broiling the cut to well-done perfection.

Inside my cozy trailer, I enjoyed this gourmet meal while the wind whistled about outside. "Um-m-m-m-m, good." Rita had selected a fine piece of meat for me.

I was ready now for my after-dinner cup of brandied coffee and a little cigar. But first, certain that it was going to rain quite soon, I went outside and shoved the covered charcoal-braiser under the trailer. Now I enjoyed my coffee and cigar uninterrupted, and listened attentively to an episode on "Mystery Theater."

By nine o'clock I was in bed. In a matter of minutes I was lulled to sleep by the trailer's gentle rocking in the wind.

November 6: It is after eleven. I have finished a late breakfast of hotcakes, bacon, juice and coffee. The visibility outside improved a while ago, enough to reveal new snow on the range across the valley. I got a brief glimpse of the mountain behind my camp, and judged the snow-line to be at 6,000'. The wind quit blowing some time during the night, and now a drizzling rain alternates with snow here at the canyon mouth. The earth is no longer dry and dusty, but a day of sunshine will make it so again.

At one o'clock, having cleaned the trailer and reorganized things in the Travelall, I hitched the two of them together. I am ready to leave Star Creek Canyon. A cold mist prevails, but the ceiling has finally lifted. I must head for home, to travel between Nevada's perennial snow-clad mountains in silence with my recent glorious memories for company.

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### **STAR CREEK 1979**

Following is the [brief] account of my second and last solo campout at Star Creek, also from my journal:

November 3, 1979, Saturday: I am once again camped at the mouth of Star Creek Canyon, having pulled in and set up my trailer on Wednesday. It is a rainy day (one of those for which we normally save up all those things to do) a warm front type of rainstorm typical of this time of the year. The overcast is complete, the ceiling just a couple-of-hundred feet above my trailer. I can barely make out the Star Ranch, about 2½-miles away in the valley.

The scenery, though, is most attractive. Desert colors are wonderfully enhanced by rainfall, so the rim rocks and boulders are a dark and shiny brown. The leaves of sage have lost their dust and appear more green than gray against the bushes' black trunks and twigs. Bare buck brush and greasewood reflect a reddish hue. Such are the hillsides. In the bottomlands, wild grasses show almost white, having long been bleaching in the autumn sun. Willows along the creek still wear their green leaves, but the quaking aspens have long since shed their golden capes.

There is evidence of new mining activity up in the canyon, of drilling for silver ore. But the snow hampers their operations - so said the miners when they stopped by on their way down the road at 9:00 o'clock this morning. Since it is now snowing here, I reckon it is rapidly accumulating up there.

Sometime this summer, a fire raged through the sagebrush at the site of old Star City. It was very revealing. The brush, that effectively hid many of the old foundations, is now gone. Taking advantage of the situation I climbed up the side of the canyon and photographed the city, and also made a sketch to show the layout of the original buildings and streets.

Yesterday I drove over to the site of Star City's neighbor to the north, Santa Clara, about four miles away. I parked at the canyon mouth and hiked about a quarter-mile up a very steep trail to the long-deserted town. Traces of the old road still exist, but much of it has been washed away by flash floods.

In the narrows, parts of high retaining walls, constructed of boulders to hold the narrow roadbed in place, are still in situ. Above, deep gouges cut into bedrock ledges by the iron-tired wheels of countless freight wagons remain in evidence after nearly a century of disuse.

The town site itself lies above the narrows, where the canyon levels out somewhat and widens to about fifty yards, I'd guess. The creek, of course, flowed through the middle of town, flanked on either side by a main street, principle business structures, a secondary street and dwellings, the latter backed up (literally) against the hillsides.

I'll wager that a lot of hollering and cussing took place as teamsters urged their horses and mules up that pinched canyon and through the little village, especially with the incidence of mud and snow in winter and flooding in summer.

The townsmen took advantage of materials at hand in constructing their buildings. Since lumber had to be freighted in from California, a hundred-miles away, the local stone, relatively flat and three- to eight-inches thick (rather like eastern flagstone but more brittle) was used for laying-up the walls.

The fact that a number of partial buildings still exist at Santa Clara is attributable, I think, to the fact that the site is relatively inaccessible by motor vehicle.

I spent some time searching for treasures with my metal detector, but found only one item of even intrinsic value: the handle of a big brass key. There were signs of recent digging, so I'd guess that anything not buried deep had already been removed by treasure hunters. I had to be satisfied with the taking of photographs.

There is an interesting story about Santa Clara, originally printed in the neighboring city of Unionville's Humboldt Register. It seemed that for amusement the men of the camp, who called themselves the "Santa Clara Roughs," and the women, who were named (I suspect by the men) the "Amazon Maids," had a kind of game going. The Roughs would invite "proposals" from the Amazons, stating the time, terms et cetera. The Amazons would indignantly rebuff the invitations "because

of lack of thoroughbred blood in the town, and Amazons did not mate with scrubs!"

When they had these set-tos, the Amazons usually won "because they could talk louder, roll their sleeves higher without injury to muscle, spread themselves to better advantage, slam around more promiscuously, and were more generally on the rampage anyhow!"

Such were the goings-on in this city of 200 people in the late 1800s.

In a performance repetitious of two years ago, the snow and rain have ceased falling and the ceiling is now about five-hundred feet above the trailer. As yet there are no shadows, but the increased light now brings out in stark contrast the dark brown foothills nearby, the green fields in the valley, and the beautiful snow-clad mountains across the way.

It is with reluctance that I break camp and head for home.

Note: Rita and I would camp at Star Creek many times in the future, always for an enjoyable experience.