



the road to ARAVADA SPRINGS RANCH

A Respite for More Than a Century

written and photographed by DARCI HANSEN

Somewhere in the middle of nowhere ... where asphalt turns to dirt and dirt becomes the wilderness. It's a place of isolation ... and utter freedom. Standing along the southern end of Nevada's Virgin Mountains, I gazed across the vast frontier. The landscape on the horizon was a classic picture of the American West. I imagined legendary western artists like Bierstadt, Dixon, or Payne painting a masterpiece here.

On the southern side of the Virgin Mountains, a paradise exists—a place where the indigenous people and settlers alike escaped the heat of the surrounding Mojave Desert communities and found respite above aridity for well over 100 years ... likely longer. It was called Aravada Ranch.

My truck was packed with sleeping bags, an ice chest full of food and drinks, my camera with three different lenses, and some tools (which I know how to use if necessary). Carmen Snow, a southern Utah native and cowgirl herself had never explored the backcountry southwest of Mesquite. She was in for a treat—I needed the wilderness; she needed a road trip. In a single day, we'd accomplish both in route to Aravada.





travelers and horses in the days before motor vehicles. History from the ranch reads, "The teams of horses knew to stop there even if the wagon driver had fallen asleep."

We headed east following Whitney Pass road climbing along the lower south side of the Virgin Mountains. The drive up and over Whitney Pass led to some incredible views. To the south was Gold Butte and to the west, Lake Mead. Further east, the spectacular Grand Wash Cliffs in Arizona appeared on the horizon, providing the backdrop to my first view of Aravada Springs Ranch.

Aravada lies along the borderline of Nevada and Arizona which also divides the Gold Butte and Grand Canyon Parashant National Monuments. As such, the ranch is surrounded on all sides by the two monuments. The monuments have no visitor services and there is no developed infrastructure except for Aravada. And that is why I came here- to experience the frontier.

The property was lush and green surrounded by weeping willows that danced across the top of the reservoirs and dipped into the running springs. It was a contrast to the expansive frontier that can be seen in the distance. The ranch was just as I had read about in its history written by the family; a place where wilderness and man still co-exist. Its purpose for the Whitney family, as told in their written history, was to be a summer escape from their harsh life on the western frontier.

The ranch is approximately 30 miles from the Bunkerville/Riverside exit of Interstate 15. The route itself can be a bit of an adventure with little asphalt and lots of graded or primitive roads. Maneuvering around the potholes is well worth the experience of driving through the rugged rock formations and pristine desert of Gold Butte National Monument. Although I had explored Gold Butte and some of its remote areas before, I slowed down to appreciate every unraveling mile.

A popular destination along the road to Aravada is Whitney Pockets, a pair of natural water 'pockets' that were enlarged with small concrete dams in the early 1900s to provide a watering stop between St. Thomas and the ranch. Whitney Pockets were important to both



Nay family on front porch of cabin.



Fenton Whitney and sisters in front of a Joshua tree.



1948 Delbert & Bryce Ballard on roof, Sheridan on barrel at Whitney Ranch.

"In May of 1910, George "Luke" Whitney and his family made the long trip by buggy from their home in St. Thomas, Nevada (see page 22) to the Bunkerville (Virgin) Mountains east of town to look into the possibility of buying a ranch. Luke's wife, Julia, suffered from poor health. The family hoped to find a place that would provide relief from the harsh heat, difficult living conditions, and alkaline water of St. Thomas.

In August of that year, Luke purchased the Aravada Ranch from Bert Nay. Luke's son, George "Fenton" Whitney, described the climate at the ranch as 'the best in the world,' saying, 'It is high enough so the heat is not too bad, and far enough south so the winters are very mild.'

The Whitney family spent the next seven summers (1911-1918) clearing brush and rocks from the ranch land, building terraces, and planting, cultivating, and harvesting crops which they would sell or trade in the neighboring communities.

Their children loved the ranch and couldn't wait to go back there each summer. They gathered desert flowers, hiked Billy Goat Peak, and went for picnics in the nearby caves. They cooled off with water fights and swam in the fresh water of the reservoir.

Almost immediately, the family started renting (space on the ranch) to women and children who would come up during the summer. With its natural springs and a reservoir surrounded by weeping willow and cottonwood trees to provide shade, the ranch was a beautiful and pleasant haven. Fenton Whitney's wife, Lettie, often described the Aravada as 'a pregnant woman's paradise.'

Fenton himself wrote about the sense of community at the ranch and its many visitors: 'Then there were those 4th of Julys ... What fun we had. Father would set off some dynamite in the early dawn, which caused excitement among the young fry—and there were scads of people there, many who lived there all summer long, and many who came up from St. Thomas to escape the heat. The rows of tables set up under the trees were filled and refilled with the most delicious foods.'

The ranch passed to Luke's daughter, Flora, and her husband, Alan Nay. The Nays continued the tradition of allowing friends and family to visit. And they weren't the only ones. It seemed like almost anyone who grew up in Mesquite, Bunkerville, Overton, or Logandale, Nevada throughout the 1900s had camped at the ranch at least once either with the scouts, as part of a church or youth group, or on a family campout."



The reasons for Aravada's popularity as a destination were clear: it featured nine fresh-water springs, four ponds, numerous trees, and fruit orchards. Its elevation of 4200 feet provided relief from the stifling summer heat below. Almost 120 years later, I was standing in the same place that had been warming hearts and cooling down souls for decades.

Mark Rawlins, Luke Whitney's great-grandson, purchased the ranch in 2017, making him the fourth descendant to own it. Maintaining a number of the traditions that have been a part of the ranch's history was important to him. "I started coming to the ranch in the early 1960s when I was about 3 or 4 years old." What did Mark remember most about his childhood at the ranch? "Floating in the pond for hours with my cousins."

Aravada today is a work in progress. Maintaining the simplicity of the ranch essential to Mark, all the while adding a few modern conveniences to make an extended stay possible and comfortable. Recently renovated was Mark's, "Grandpa's Cabin," to include running water, shower, toilet, and electricity—things that were not essential to early visitors of the ranch. A few canvas style cabins ('glamping') have been added along with RV camping and hook-ups. Nothing too fancy—for this is the frontier at its best. To enjoy it in resort style would take away from the feel of stepping back in time.



Darci Hansen and Carmen Snow



GRAND CANYON-PARASHANT NATIONAL MONUMENT

Tucked in the northwest corner of the Arizona Strip, Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument is a remote landscape filled with colorful vistas, deep canyons, and stately mountains.

It encompasses four wilderness areas and part of the Shivwits Plateau near the lower end of the Grand Canyon. Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument lies at the junction of three major ecoregions—the Colorado Plateau, Mohave Desert, and Basin and Range Province—and is nearly equal in acreage to neighboring Grand Canyon National Park.

VISITING THE MONUMENT

While everyone has heard of Grand Canyon National Park, few know of its neighboring sister monument—Grand Canyon-Parashant. Located in the northwest corner of Arizona, this remote area receives a fraction of the number of Grand Canyon visitors but protects over a million acres of land with similar cultural, geological, and scenic values.



Photo by Bob Wick.

Much of the monument remains unexplored, with only five percent of the protected land having been surveyed. You can see remnants of ranching, mining, and timber cutting at sites like Tassi Ranch, Nixon Sawmill, and Pa's Pocket Line Shack. But human history here dates back much further. Thousands of archaeological sites—petroglyphs, agave roasting pits, pueblos—document the cultures and lifestyles of the Ancestral Puebloan and Southern Paiute cultures. The monument's name derives from an early translation of a Paiute family name "Parashonts," meaning "elk or large deer standing in water."

The "Grand Canyon" part of the monument's name refers to the watershed. Adjacent to the west end of the Colorado River, the monument is an important part of Grand Canyon's hydrology. Tributaries lead into the Colorado River, and many springs, including Tassi and Pakoon, lie within monument boundaries. These are fantastic places to visit; lush vegetation provides a stark contrast to the surrounding arid lands. Plant life in Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument is diverse, reflecting a 6,000-foot elevation range. Joshua trees and century plants grow at lower elevations, stepping up to piñon pine and juniper woodlands, to higher-elevation ponderosa pine forests.

The monument stands at an important intersection of three distinct ecoregions—the Basin and Range Province, the Mohave Desert, and the Colorado Plateau converge within its boundaries to create a varied and interesting landscape. This highly faulted topography contains canyons, mountains, cinder cones, and basalt flows that are the adventurer's dream. The Grand Wash Cliffs, Mt. Trumbull, and Mt. Dellenbaugh provide excellent hiking opportunities. The National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management co-manage several national monuments, but Grand Canyon-Parashant was the first protected area to share leadership between these two organizations.

— Courtesy of Grand Canyon Trust, Photo by Bob Wick.



The old apple orchard had been beautifully maintained. Newer orchards have also been planted alongside the original apple trees. In the early days of the ranch, additional income was gained by selling fruit to the visitors. I reached up and plucked a ripe apple from the tree. The deer who had been hiding out in the thickets slowly made their way into sight. I knelt down and offered to share a bite. They gladly obliged. Even the deer know this place is special.

Bob Bowler, a cowboy and rodeo man, lives on site assisting with ranch responsibilities. When Carmen and I arrived, Bob loaded us up in a UTV and spent the afternoon showing us the property and exploring Bureau of Land Management (BLM) roads across the Parashant. From outbuildings and historic cabins, to slot canyons, caves, and rugged rock outcroppings, the landscape remains wild.

About the time the sun began to set, we arrived at the border designating the monuments and the Arizona/Nevada state line. I jumped out of the buggy and climbed a rock near the road for a better view. This wilderness was exhilarating; the solitude, overwhelming. The expansive horizon beyond the mountain range in the distance was just catching the twilight. It was like a painting. Somewhere, out there, was the Grand Canyon, the Colorado River, and the spirits of all who once lived there: indigenous people, curious explorers, faithful settlers, optimistic miners, committed ranchers, and I would guess, a few wanderous souls. History will make certain, that many of them knew Aravada Springs as respite, both past, and present.

