

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT LONESOME IS

**Afton: a desert station along the
Mojave River on the Salt Lake Route**

or

Who is buried in the cemetery?

John V. Richardson Jr.

**Ya' better believe it—
an interview with Frank "Cowboy" Curtis**

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Afton: A Desert Station along the Mojave River on the Salt Lake Route

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Who is Buried in the Cemetery?

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It seems little is known about the Afton watering station or its depot and other buildings; certainly nothing is known about those who are buried in its cemetery there. Hence, the purpose of this paper is twofold: 1) to provide more information in one place about the settlement and, more importantly, 2) to identify those buried in its cemetery.

Watch for the Afton Canyon Road exit off Interstate 15 between Barstow and Baker, California. About a mile southeast on the gravel road lies the now ghost settlement of Afton¹ alongside the Mojave River, a desert station on the now defunct Salt Lake Route (aka 'The Clark Road') of the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad Company.² Note, however, the tracks are still used today by the Union Pacific Railroad.³

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- 1 Etymologically speaking, Gudde claims the place is named after some town "back east," but I would guess in Virginia or New York state (see *California Place Names: The Origin and Etymology of Current Geographical Names*, 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, p. 4); before it was known as Afton, the area along the old Mojave Road was called Cave Canyon, according to Dennis Casebier, *Mojave Road Guide* (Essex, CA: Tales of the Mojave Road Publishing Company, 1986), p. 11. Contemporary newspaper accounts call the area The Caves or the Caves Country.
 - 2 Incorporated in 1901 in Utah, the SP, LA, and SLC RR included U.S. Senator William Andrews Clark Sr. (D-Montana) and Colonel/Judge R.C. Kerens of St. Louis as its two largest stockholders. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the line ran out to Pomona and Ontario by 7 March 1903 and Colton and San Bernardino by 3 July 1903; the company added a Pullman car in 1905. The company dropped San Pedro from the corporation's name in 1916 and Senator Clark sold out in 1922. By March 1939, the telegraph offices in Afton and Baxter were closed [incorrectly, however], according to *The Railroad Telegrapher* (vol. 56, 1939). The best sources of further information are John R. Signor, *The Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad Company: Union Pacific's Historic Salt Lake Route* (San Marino, California: Golden West Books, 1988) and David F. Myrick, *Railroads of Nevada and Eastern California: Volume 2, The Southern Road* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1992).
 - 3 This locale is clearly marked on plate 69D5-6 of the *California Atlas* (Delorme, 6th ed., 2003) and on the USGS Cave Mountain topographic quadrangle (1948) while the USGS Board on Geographic Names GNIS ID is 252842 (35.036372N, -116.379744W); for those with an archeological bent, the settlement is near site CA-SBR-85, which was excavated in the 1980s; see Joan S. Schneider, with appendices by Mark Z. Sutton and Robert M. Yohe, Dennis L. Jenkins, Chester D. King, Paul Bouey, and Joan S. Schneider, *The Archeology of the Afton Canyon Site (CA-SBR-85): Mojave Desert, San Bernardino County, California*. Quarterly Series Vol. 36, no. 1 (Redlands, CA: San Bernardino County Museum Association, 1989).



Figure 1. **Afton Station, California.** Photograph by André J. Doyon.

Afton Station (fl. 1904-1943)

Located on the east side of the Mojave River at an elevation of 1407 feet, Afton was founded by the SP, LA, and SL Railroad when it provided the settlement with a 429 foot deep well drilled into the alluvium—“the depth to water at the time of completion in August 1904, was 17 feet.”⁴ Because the first official train arrived in Las Vegas from Los Angeles on 1 May 1905,⁵ some number of inhabitants, eventually including bridge foremen, section laborers, track walkers, telegraphers and water pump engineers, must have been present.

As an aside, telegraphers reported back to the dispatcher on the passing of trains; “section laborers work as members of a gang to perform routine and non-routine track and roadbed maintenance and repair, including installation of rails, ties, switch-

4 D. G. Thompson, *The Mohave Desert Region, California, A Geographic, Geologic, and Hydrologic Reconnaissance*, U.S. Geological Survey Water-Supply Paper Number 578 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1929), p. 511-512. Note that the well is D. G. Thompson’s number 46. The importance of water is not to be underestimated in the pre-diesel age. A Baldwin 4-4-0 steam locomotive (its tender holding 3500–7000 gallons) cannot operate on water which contains high levels of “incrusting minerals...[and] foaming salts,” according to Signor, p. 98; but, of course, NALCO, an anti-foaming agent, could be added.

5 Douglas White, compiler, *The Story of a Trail: being an Authentic Record of the Breaking of the Mormon Trail between the Inter-mountain Empire and California’s “land of sunshine”, with the story of the founding and building along this historic pioneer highway of the Salt Lake Route* (Los Angeles, CA: Passenger Department of the San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad, 1905), p. 17. Note that several private cars, including Clark’s, traveled the rail route on 9-11 February 1905 after the last spike was driven on 30 January 1905.

es, ballast, and other track materials, using hand-held equipment and tools, including power tools.”⁶ Of all the duties of a section foreman

the keeping of track in gauge is one of the most important. This should never be neglected, and he must be familiar with the flagging rules and know that men whom he sends out to flag trains also know. Switches need looking after continually and should be examined regularly; fences should be looked after to keep stock out, thus saving money for stock claims.⁷

Indeed, the *Los Angeles Times* sent a reporter out to cover the establishment of the new desert railroad stops along the railroad, commenting on Afton Station in early February 1905:

Two men constitute the town, or more accurately speaking, did constitute the town until yesterday. One is the operator who sleeps alongside the telegraph instrument in his tent; the other is an engineer in charge of the pump station, he is working only to get a stake to go seeking mines in the hills; he “batches” in his tent alongside the tent of the operator... [Then,] two days ago a work train stopped there and unloaded new handcars, tools, picks and shovels and a gang of six or eight Mexicans. The boss was unloaded, too, a little wizened up Irishman who is to live all alone in the pretty section cottage which looks like a Swiss chalet...⁸

Most of the tents would be replaced by two section houses, a mover car house, telegraph house, pump house, the depot and living quarters along with an outhouse and a clothes washing area as well as the aforementioned section foreman’s house. A separate section for Mexicans existed as well. In this regard, Afton was something like other desert stations in terms of structures.⁹ A school teacher, Jean Lucas, arrived in September 1924, using “the large center room of the section-house for classwork.”¹⁰

Interestingly, the US Bureau of the Census did not consider Afton, California worth counting as a separate settlement in 1900, 1910, 1920, or 1930. In fact, the entire population of San Bernardino County was only 27,929 (1900), which was up from 25,497 (1890).¹¹ According to the 14th Census of the United States in 1930, Barstow

6 According to the Kansas City Southern Railway at http://hostedjobs.openhire.com/epostings/submit.cfm?fuseaction=app.jobinfo&jobid=216962&company_id=16021&version=1&source=ONLINE&jobowner=973175&aid=1 (accessed 11 November 2009).

7 “The Section Foreman: His Duties and His Rights” at <http://www.ghostdepot.com/rg/library/magazine/section%20foreman.htm> (accessed 11 November 2009).

8 “Ready-made Towns Dumped Off Trains: The Boomer Busy along the Line of the new Desert Railroad—How Coyote Cities Start Up” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 February 1905, p. III. And, *The LA Times* covered other notable events such as the 1913 train wreck of seven heavily loaded merchandise train cars in the Afton Pass tunnel (see “Wrecked Cars Stop Traffic; Freight Piles Up in Tunnel at Afton Pass; Trains diverted round-about to Reach Coast (3 November 1913, p. II8) . That tunnel, known as number one, was finally “daylighted” in 1957; see Signor, *The Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad Company*, p. 219.

9 See Christy Dolan, “Ogilby: A Desert Station on the Southern Pacific Railroad,” Symposium 4: A View Across the Cultural Landscape of the Lower Colorado Desert) In *Proceedings of the Society for California Archeology* 18 (2005): 82-88. In the previous century, its cemetery “was reportedly set aside by Chinese residents,” p. 82.

10 Margaret Fouts, editor, “A Teacher’s Life,” *Barstow Printer*, 11 January 1951 In Patricia J. Keeling, *Once Upon a Desert: A Bicentennial Project* (Barstow, CA: Mojave River Valley Museum Association, 1976), p. 221.

11 <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/33405927v1ch05.pdf> (accessed 9 November 2009).

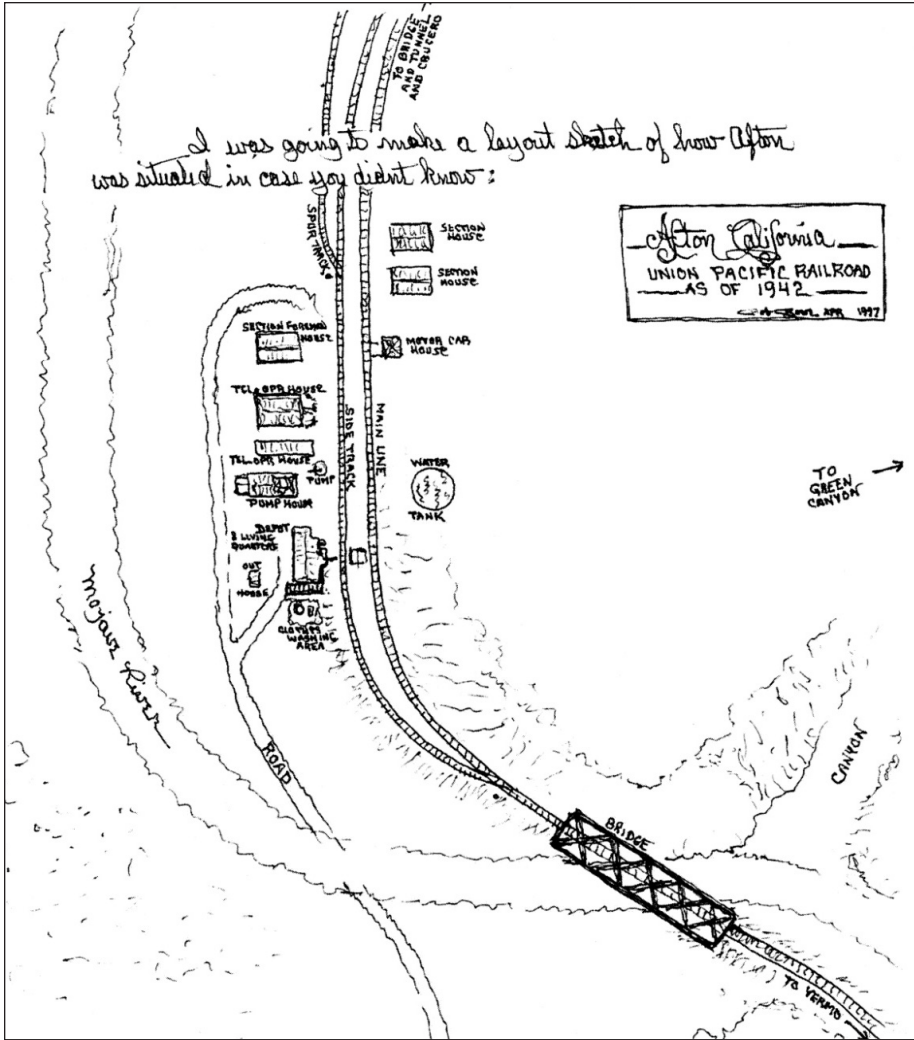


Figure 2. **Rowe's Recollection of Afton in 1942.** Reprinted with permission from "It Looked Like Eden: Reminiscences of a Telegraph Operator, Afton Depot, Mojave Desert, 1942–1943" (Victorville, CA: Mohave Historical Society, 2009).

Township¹² did not have a recorded population in 1900, but in 1910 it was 1,026 and 1,538 in 1920.¹³ If we accept Rider's estimate of 789 as the population for Barstow, then Afton at the highest could barely have had a theoretical population of 600, at most.¹⁴ Since Afton was not a division point (such as Yermo or Las Vegas) where

12 District 142 includes "Barstow Township, Barstow precinct No. 1, Barstow precinct No. 2, Hincley precinct, Kramer precinct."

13 Table 53. "Population of Counties by Minor Civil Divisions: 1920, 1910, and 1900," in U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Fourteenth Census of the United States, Volume 1* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1921), p. 356.

14 Fremont Rider, *Rider's California: A Guide-Book for Travelers with 28 maps and plans* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925), p. 626.

there were maintenance crews, it had to be much smaller; a couple of dozen residents at most. Nonetheless, a perusal of the Census District 142 enumeration reveals many Mexican surnames such as Murrilla, Reyez, Romero, Soliz, Vazquez, Villes, Ybarra, and Zanchez, among the 442 families enumerated.

By February 1938, Afton is described as “an isolated train order office midway in the gorge,” according to Signor.¹⁵ However, Robert C. Rowe writes engagingly of his two years in Afton as a telegrapher in 1942-1943.¹⁶ Finally, Afton started its decline as a settlement with the installation of central traffic control (CTC) which replaced the need for an on-site telegrapher in Afton by the end of World War II.

Five Burials in the Afton Cemetery

Moving from left to right from uphill to downhill, there are five¹⁷ graves, oriented to the sunrise in the east. In a Christian context, this orientation is thought to be in anticipation of the coming Resurrection. Each is covered by a cairn or tumulus, which is a slight mound of dirt covered with cobble-sized local rocks, perhaps designed to protect the bodies from predatory animals or to somehow discourage grave robbers. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the practice can be traced back to the marking of Rachel’s grave (see Genesis 35:20);¹⁸ it was also customary for visitors to add stones as a mark of piety and remembrance as well as keeping the dead from escaping.¹⁹ The first or uppermost grave is bordered by railroad ties, symbolic of the locale. The wooden Latin crosses at the head of the graves certainly indicate Christian belief on the part of those responsible for burying the dead.

Burial Number One, José Flores (about 1882 – 29 June 1906)

Based on an online search of the *Los Angeles Times*, the print versions of the *San Bernardino Daily Sun*, and the *Citrograph* as well as the San Bernardino County Coroner’s reports, I now know that one of the five burials is that of a Mexican national named Gose Floris, more accurately rendered in today’s orthography as José Flores.

Early Tuesday morning, 29 May 1906, three workers (Floris, Garcia, and Martinez) came out from Los Angeles on the eastbound Number Two train. They arrived intoxicated. When Section Foreman Robert Y.²⁰ Williams told them that he would

15 Signor, *The Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad Company*, p. 1125.

16 Robert C. Rowe, *It Looked Like Eden: Reminiscences of a Telegraph Operator, Afton Depot, Mojave Desert, 1942-1943* (Victorville, CA: Mohave Historical Society, 2009.)

17 According to Sam Atwood, “BLM Moves to Restore Afton Canyon,” in the Sunday, 23 October 1988 issue of the *San Bernardino Sun*, the caption under a photograph states that there are actually “six on the canyon floor,” but the article’s text correctly says: “Five unmarked graves may be a testament to the perils of the Mojave Road,” pages A1 and A12; see clipping in black binder labeled “County, A” in the California Room of the San Bernardino Public Library.

18 “And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel’s grave unto this day” (KJV).

19 Theodor Reik, *Pagan Rites in Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1964), p. 44 and 48.

20 First name based on <http://www.bakercsd.com/linked/a%20brief%20history%20of%20baker.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2009); middle initial taken from SBC Coroner’s report; his own possible birth and death dates are 1839 and 1916 from findagrave.com.



Figure 3. **Five unidentified burials in the cemetery.** Photograph by the author.

not hire them, they attacked him with knives and a rock around 5:30 AM, about three-fourths of an hour after arriving. Suffering a broken right shoulder, broken ribs, and a smashed mouth,²¹ Williams fired his six-shooter in self-defense from the ground, instantly killing José Flores, a native of Mexico living in Los Angeles, and fatally wounding Inocencia Martinez, a native of Mexico who was living in Rancho Santa Anita at the time.²² Nineteen-year-old Martinez died on the third of June in the San Bernardino County Hospital,²³ but Ramon Garcia, wounded in the hip, survived.²⁴

Burial Two, Male, after 1873 or 1920s?

Sometime before 1988, “A BLM archaeologist dug into one and found a skeleton clad in Levi’s jeans, but no clue to the dead man’s identity or fate.”²⁵ The 20 May

21 “Pistol Barks Mexicans Dead: Cholos Assault Salt Lake Section Foreman: One Aborigine is Carted Away Still Clutching Bloody Knife,” *San Bernardino Daily Sun* 25 (no. 94, 30 May 1906), p. 1, col. 4 and “A Hot Battle But Foreman Scores: Cholos Wounded at Afton Brought to Local Hospital,” *The San Bernardino Daily Sun* 25 (no. 95, 31 May 1906), p. 2, col. 3.

22 “Mexico Trio In A Bad Melee: Railroad Cholos [i.e., of mixed ancestry] Attack The Foreman, One Killed; San Bernardino Sheriff Reports Lively Doings At Afton, Near The Caves—Laborers Go After White Man With Knives—Two Surviving Mexicans Not Expected To Live,” *Los Angeles Times*, Wednesday, 30 May 1906, p. II8. San Bernardino County Coroner Henderson Pittman investigated by holding two inquests: see “In the Matter of the Inquisition upon the Body of Gores Floris, deceased,” (SBC Coroner Report 1906-2nd ledger, page 181) and “Inquest on Inocencia Martinez,” 3 June (SBC Coroner Report, 1906-2nd Ledger, page 183).

23 “Died: Ignacio (sic) Martinez,” *The Citrograph* 38 (no. 21, whole number 988, Saturday, 9 June 1906), p. 6, col. 4.

24 “In the Matter of the Inquisition upon the Body of Gores Floris, deceased” page 5. Martinez, aged 19 years, was buried in San Bernardino’s Catholic Cemetery known as Mt. View’s Calvary Section; see, Lois Headley, “Four Cemeteries, San Bernardino, California,” *San Bernardino County Museum Association Quarterly* 14 (no. 2, Winter 1966): 27ff.

25 Sam Atwood, “BLM Moves to Restore Afton Canyon,” *San Bernardino Sun* (Sunday, 23 October 1988):

1873 patent for “fastening pocket-openings”²⁶ shows waist-high jeans, not overalls. Furthermore, the presence of belt loops would date the jeans to 1922 and a red tab on the right back pocket would date the jeans to 1936, according to Levi Strauss and Company.²⁷

Burials Number Three through Five

As for the other three remaining graves, likely burial dates could range from about 1904 to about 1960; certainly, typhoid or the influenza of 1918 could account for them.²⁸ Given the morbidity rates in the late 19th and early 20th century, the burials are most likely those of males.

Speculations as to potential nationalities include: the track maintenance workers who mostly likely would be immigrants from Greece, Japan or especially Mexico (see the Tonopah & Tidewater Railroad experience)²⁹ as well as foremen from Scotland (i.e., Smith) or Ireland (e.g., Mahoney, McFadyen, or McNeece).

In summary, if other surnames and dates emerge, the San Bernardino archives section of the Vital Statistics office might be able to assist; in the meantime, I have established the Afton cemetery record as well as provided the name for one of the five burials there at <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=csr&CScn=afton+&CScntry=4&CSst=6&CSnty=218>.

References and Acknowledgements

At the outset, I want to thank Dr. Joan S. Schneider, associate state archeologist, for suggesting this topic. By way of general background, I conducted a thorough search of the web using Google (especially Google Books, Google Earth, Google News as well as Google Uncle Sam) and several book and periodical indexes (such as UCLA’s Library Catalog and FirstSearch). Newspaper articles obtained by searching the *Los Angeles Times* yielded occupational titles of residents; a perusal of the *Barstow Printer* (flourished 1910–1960)³⁰ might be helpful in the future.

Ideally, one would undertake a search of the State of California’s death certificates or the San Bernardino County Recorder’s records, but such would require a known surname and specific date of death. Normally, they do not search by locale or long time periods such as 1904–1943. Thus far, the most helpful source has been the San

page A12.

26 U.S. Patent 139,121: “Improvement in Fastening Pocket-Openings by Jacob W. Davis at http://www.google.com/patents?id=XnZNAAAEBAJ&pg=PA1&dq=139,121&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q=&f=false (accessed 26 November 2009).

27 “History of Levis 501 Jeans” at http://www.levistrauss.com/Downloads/history_of_levis_501_jeans.pdf (accessed 30 November 2009).

28 Kirsty E. Duncan, *Hunting the 1918 Flu: One Scientist’s Search for a Killer Virus* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003).

29 “Tonopah & Tidewater—Chronology—1901 to 1910,” especially during June and July 1906 at http://www.ttrr.org/tt_text/ttch_002.html (accessed 9 November 2009).

30 A perusal of Buckley B. Barrett, *The Barstow Printer: A Personal Name and Subject Index to the Years 1910-1920* (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1985) yielded nothing under Afton, cemeteries, or deaths.

Bernardino Sheriff's Department, Coroner Division (Linda A. Long) who found the inquest reports after I supplied the names and date of death. Dr. Mark Q. Sutton, who served at BLM Barstow from 1978 to 1983, referred me to Russell Kaldenberg (served from 1993–2003) and Dennis Casebier. I also talked with Ruth Musser-Lopez who worked for the BLM in the 1980s. Michele Nielsen, curator of history/archives of the San Bernardino County Museum, checked some sources for me and Robin Laska, the associate curator of archeology, made several referrals. Another helpful primary source has been the Union Pacific Railroad Museum Archives (John Bromley, archivist). Mr. Bromley told me that they did not have any specific material on Afton, but talked to me about railroad terminology including job titles and CTC technology. An online search of their records indicate numerous cow and horse deaths; their Western Pacific RR Company Series 5, 6th subseries contains data on sickness/death, but only for events after 1960; their Telegraphers' Mutual Benefit Association has death benefits; their Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers shows a membership book which records death dates. Other railroad sources including John R. Signor, who specializes in western railroad history, and the following museum staff were helpful in the early stages of this paper: 1) Kathryn Santos, archivist at the California State Railroad Museum Library in Sacramento , 2) the Western American Railroad Museum in Barstow and 3) the Mojave River Valley Museum, which published Rowe's book, although I purchased it from the Mohave Historical Society. Sue Payne, volunteer for the Arda Haenszel California Room of the San Bernardino Public Library, was especially helpful with vertical file material.

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