

J. W. Eversol

By Steve Kliwer

June 15, 1987

As a child I spent many of my summers at Cliff Camp and was often told several stories about a mysterious man (by the name of Wes Eversol) who inhabited that area.

Although he was seen by others, I never chanced to meet him, but have seen several of his unique artifacts.

Many of the stories about Wes Eversol were told to me by my Aunt, Betty Collins. She was married to Bill Collins, son of J. D. Collins, a well-known pioneer in Fresno County. The Collins family had herded sheep in the area and had homesteaded several parcels of land in the area of Cliff Camp.

In the 1960's, when most of my memories originate, Wes was considered very eccentric and at least a little bit dangerous. He was sometimes seen walking through the meadows with several large dogs on leashes, sometimes with a sawed-off shotgun or a double-bladed axe. He never said much, but was always polite when he did speak. In the earlier days he did quite a bit of trail work for the Forest Service and had done some work for my aunt. I have a short clip of 8 mm film showing him cutting down a tree next to the old cabin at Cliff Camp. Since Betty was concerned that this tree would fall on the cabin, she asked Wes to fall it for her, because of his experience. According to her he showed up bright and early at 4:30 AM! Obviously, he could not be accused of tardiness. In addition, Betty had employed Wes to split fence posts out of several large partially-burnt cedar logs. He also was an expert at making or 'riving' sugarpine shakes.

Wes seemed to have frequent disputes with others over property claims. We found several signs that he had made and placed in obscure locations, like the top of Lava Mountain. Wes possessed very few manufactured items but was extremely resourceful. The signs that he made were indicative of that. They were simply empty food cans which he had opened at both ends and the seam, then flattened them. With a nail, he imprinted a message by piercing a series of dots to form letters.

Most of these signs read merely "Boundary God's Place, JWE". However, one in particular was especially odd. It read something to the effect of "Northwest corner of God's Place, 500 yards East, 600 yards South, 400 yards West, and 800 yards North, JWE". This sign appeared to give the "meets and bounds" of a parcel of land called "God's Place". However, the description, if such it was, did not 'close'. In other words it merely described a random line and not a boundary that surrounded an area. Nor did it appear to describe land of any particular nature such as the mountain top or a meadow or a potential cabin site.

On several occasions, Wes was reported to have been seen acting in a most peculiar fashion. In one incident he was described as running through the woods, screaming, and swinging his axe at the air. In another he was down in the meadow below Cliff Camp, shooting his shotgun at the "spirits which were coming for him".

We kids were carefully warned to stay clear of this man. Stories about Wes were told around the campfire much like stories about a "Bogey Man".

In the early 70's, when we realized that no one had seen or heard of him for some time, my brother and I decided to visit his camp. The camp was located about a mile south of Cliff Camp, just off of the Crown V alley trail along a very small and seasonal stream bed.

Along the main trail where it crossed the nondescript stream bed, Wes had erected a wooden post with a sign pointing to his camp. We found the camp some distance down the stream where the draw began to narrow and steepen. Five cabins, backed up to a granite wall, were arranged in a haphazard fashion, facing across a fern filled glade toward the mossy stagnant pools of the stream bed. On the edge of the glade, perched over the rock foot-wall, sat Wes's minimal outhouse. Anything deposited in this toilet would simply fall about 5 feet and roll toward the stream.

The cabins were small, simply constructed, and quite sound. Each was constructed of logs 4 to 8 inches in diameter which were supported on odd-shaped granite blocks. Each log was notched just enough to secure the next. Hand split cedar shake was used to cover the sides and the roof. Although most of the hinges and latches were hand-carved, some metal hardware, made of discarded tin cans and wire, was in evidence here and there.

The largest cabin, approximately 8 feet by 10 feet, was full of firewood. The smallest cabin, also full of firewood was only 4 feet by 6 feet. A third cabin, along with firewood, also contained several large animal traps (presumably for pine martins) and gallon glass jugs filled with some kind of clear liquid. The "main" cabin, evidenced by the low porch roof with rocks piled up along the rear to serve as a chimney, was about 5 feet by 8 feet.

The door to the main cabin was secured by a simple hasp and lock with a large tin-can sign constructed like the other signs. It read: "NO TRESPASSING 1964, The law may wish to enter, keys may be obtained, J W Eversol" .

Inside, the cabin was very dark and close. A very short cot was built along one side. It was filled with straw and the remains of a corrugated paper cover. The ceiling and much of the walls were covered with more of this corrugated paper. Rough Hand-hewn shelves were tucked in here and there. Parts of magazines and books, miscellaneous bottles and boxes were strewn about. Rodents had rummaged through much of what was there to make their nests.

In amongst the litter several interesting items were found. The magazines were Field and Stream dated 1968. A book, only a part of which could be found, appeared to be a kind of how-to-build-it-yourself manual covering anything from snowshoes to cabins. In a small box were found several papers and a small sewing kit complete with a hand-made bone needle. The papers were interesting in that they were correspondence between Wes and Twining Laboratory in Fresno; regretfully reporting that the sample Wes had sent them contained no measurable amounts of gold and appeared to be undistinguished granite sand. This led us to conjecture that Wes may have been trying to patent a mining claim in order to legitimize his continued habitation of this camp. Behind the cabins, along a small side stream, there was evidence that Wes had started to construct a graded trail; however, it did not appear to lead anywhere.

A pair of snowshoes, rather worn and much repaired were found, as well as an extraordinary wheelbarrow. Except for a scavenged tire, strips cut from coffee cans, and a few pieces of scrap wire, it was entirely hand-made from native wood. Even though it had been exposed to the weather for several years, every joint was still tight and secure. This was not a standard wheelbarrow. It was especially designed to be used for heavy loads on narrow steep mountain trails. It was long and narrow with a hand operated brake. In place of more standard bearings, the wheel shaft was cleverly set into grooves carved within the dense knots of the wood.

Over the years, we all wondered what had happened to Wes. Finally on June 7, 1987, Joan Weeks and I met with the Wishon Village store owners, Bill and Kathleen Jasper, to talk about this strange man.

Both had poignant memories of Wes. They both agreed that their first and strongest impressions of him were that he was a tall, very straight-backed, quiet spoken, Englishman.

When they had first opened their store, they had been warned by several of their neighbors about a crazy man. Crabtree, the owner of the nearby packstation told stories of Wes scrabbling up the oats and barley that were fed to the horses to use for his own meal. He also alluded to an on-going attempt by Wes to exclude Crabtree from the area. (This attempt may have involved the signs we found.) Russ Keane, the PG&E Lake Tender, apparently had a strong dislike and even a fear of Wes.

When Wes had the money, he would come to the store. According to Kathleen Jasper, Wes was always well-behaved, pleasant, and clean whenever she met him. At first, Wes insisted on wearing a pistol at all times, even when he came to the store. However, after Bill had a quiet talk with him about the danger of being seen by the sheriff with the gun, Wes took to leaving the pistol cached near the end of the trail. Wes, seldom had any money and the Jaspers, feeling compassion for this strange man, began to find several jobs that Wes could do in exchange for food. Wes, although usually a hard worker, would on occasion suddenly quit and leave. On one of these occasions he explained,

"Bill, I've gotta leave. The spirits have been throwing rocks at me all day."

At the same time, several stories from campers and hikers in the area arose about weird frightening experiences they had had in the woods nearby. One experienced woodsman told of hearing a strange cry, unlike anything, man or creature, that he had ever heard. Hiding behind a tree, he saw Wes coming down the trail with a double bladed axe. Wes appeared to be in torment. Every few paces he would scream, turn, and swing his axe at the ground behind him.

Once, Bill and several companions were hiking along the Crown Valley trail near Cliff Camp. Deep in a rather noisy discussion, upon toping a rise in the trail, they came face to face with Wes, who had a rifle leveled at them. Bill called out to him, Wes immediately lowered the rifle and explained that he was hunting a bear and had thought the sounds he heard was the bear returning.

Apparently, on one occasion, Russ Keane convinced the sheriff to have Wes committed. Wes spent about 6 months at a sanatorium in Napa before he was released. In the meantime Russ, who had been transferred by PG&E, walked into a store in Susanville and was approached by Wes. Surprisingly, Wes merely asked him if he was on his way back to Wishon and if he might catch a ride.

Another peculiar mountain man in the area, Shorty Lovelace, another trapper, had recently been forced out of Kings Canyon (Cedar Grove area) when it was changed to national park status. Shorty, as his name implies was of diminutive stature and lived under rather Spartan conditions. Shorty's Lilliputian line cabins in that area are still marveled at. Apparently, Wes and Shorty, had several run-ins over encroachment on each other's trap lines. Since Shorty's area centered on the Courtright area (some miles away), with literally hundreds of square miles available, it seems amazing that there was anything about which to argue.

Wes had constructed a kind of a buggy out of an old car body. Using a couple of mules which he had at the time, Wes drove this vehicle all the way down from the mountains and entered it in the Clovis Parade.

As Wes got older and less able to live in the woods, Bill attempted to get him some sort of financial aid, but was unable to stimulate even a pittance. Wes had another camp over near Secata Ridge (near Pine Flat). A rancher in that area took pity on Wes and gave him the use of a mobile home in Piedra, where Wes spent several years, finally dying in 1982.

Apparently, it was common knowledge that Wes was born in the 1890's along the Kings River, upstream of Pine Flat. His father was an Englishman and his mother an Indian. However, little else is known for sure. Throughout this story, it is apparent that Wes was a strange, quiet, tormented man. Bill tells of only one occasion when Wes discussed this. He said "Bill, my family is all dead now, but they will haunt me to the end of my days." Bill related a strange story that if true would begin to explain this singular man. According to a PG&E Snow Surveyor by the name of Stump, Wes had two sisters. At the age of about 14, Wes "began to have those feelings". One day his father caught him "messing with one of his sisters", cursed him, castrated him, and threw him out.

My uncle, John Kliwer, operated Camp Ducey, a resort at Dinkey Creek. He would often spend the winter there. According to John, Stump and another surveyor by the name of Mac, regularly did the spring survey. This survey required 110 miles on snowshoes. Their route took them past Swamp Lake, where PG&E had a small, but well-stocked log cabin. Their next cabin was at Dinkey Creek. If John happened to be at Camp Ducey, they would stop and have a shower and supper. They would usually stay overnight and then go on to Balch camp to complete the circuit the next day.