

Saga of Death Valley's Jimmy Dayton

By Audrey Walls Lloyd
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Jimmy Dayton's name crops up repeatedly in the lore of Death Valley. While more articulate contemporaries such as Death Valley Scotty and Shorty Harris supplied the ingredients for bizarre anecdotes and clever newspaper copy, Dayton's attributes -- loyalty and sincerity -- were largely overlooked by the local-color-seekers. But, that's the way Jimmy Dayton preferred it. He was that kind of man.



Jimmy Dayton's first Death Valley job was as a swamper on a 20 Mule Team borax freighter.

IT WAS NOT in Jimmy Dayton's heart to Leave Death Valley. Perhaps he never should have tried. Jimmy had lived quietly in the valley for nearly 20 years. To him this region was a siren who held him enchanted, while those who did not know these arid acres regarded Jimmy's siren as a hag whose searing breath and clawed bands conspired only with tragedy.

Jimmy stayed on even during the forbidding months -- June, July, August and September. He knew Death Valley, its wagon ruts, canyons, water holes, burro trails, mesquite thickets, and sand dunes. As for loneliness -- he never thought of it until he fell in love. Only then did he try to leave the Valley.

Most motorists who pass the stone monument erected to the memory of Jimmy Dayton and Shorty Harris on the west side of Death Valley can recall a little of Shorty's story -- but nothing of Jimmy's. Unlike a number of other pioneer Valley residents, Jimmy was not an exhibitionist, a spinner of tall tales-a character. Instead, he was a soft spoken salt-of-the-earth fellow who contributed as much -- perhaps more -- to the Valley's traditions as the more talkative frontiers-men.

Most notable of the characters was Death Valley Scotty who made front page news for 50 years. Shorty Harris, the inveterate prospector who was buried at his own request at Jimmy's side, is remembered for his individuality. Then there was Bellerin' Teck Bennett who, upon his arrival at Furnace Creek to begin ranching operations, roared to the Heavens (there was no one else around to hear his words): "All this belongs to me!" meaning not only the acres he cultivated, but all of Death Valley.

In 1882 Jimmy was swamper for Ed Stiles, the first man to drive a 20 Mule Team outfit out of Death Valley. Later Jimmy was made foreman of Greenland Ranch and he began this work almost where Bellerin' Teck left off, but he did his job quietly. The legacy Jimmy left to the Valley was his sense of loyalty.

The ranch, whose name was changed to Furnace Creek in 1907, was then owned and operated by the Harmony Borax Works. It was here at the base of the Funeral Mountains, on the white floor of *Tomesha* ("Land Afire") that an oasis grew.

Under Jimmy's hand alfalfa fields were planted and harvested to provide feed for the Harmony 20 Mule Teams, pasturage for cattle, hogs and sheep, and feed for turkeys and chickens. Thus was fresh food provided for the Harmony crews during the October to May working season.

During the summer months the Valley was unbearable for everyone except Jimmy Dayton. Supplied with water from Furnace Creek Wash, the ranch practically took care of itself during the off-season and all Jimmy did then was guard the Borax Works equipment. He took it easy in the shade of the tamarisks and drank plenty of water.

Sometimes during the summers Jimmy would pack his outfit and leave the blazing pit for a brief vacation in the cooler atmosphere of Los Angeles. With several month's pay in his pockets he would go on a spree sufficient to last him the year ahead.

On one of these Los Angeles outings he fell in love. When he returned to the ranch he brought his red-haired bride with him.

At first Mrs. Dayton was thrilled with the novelty of her new home. Greenland Ranch was beautiful in the spring and winter months. She reveled in the delicacy of the blooms, the golden poppies-tiny cups of yellow that floated on invisible stems.

There were brown-eyed primroses, fragrant by day, and wild roses that filled the night air with sweetness. Tall white daisies nodded to her, and she listened to the yellow whispering-bells that dried on their stalks and clung there to rustle sweetly when the wind blew.



The Death Valley road a half century ago. Photo by Frasher's, Pomona.

The parched days of summer ended in unbelievable sunsets. Nowhere else on earth were they as beautiful. Then the stars trooped out to form great beacons in the sky. This valley was a stark and lovely cathedral.

But apparently it was not enough. Gaiety beckoned from Los Angeles. She heard laughter and voices and music.

At first she struggled against these disconcerting sounds. She turned her eyes to the flamboyant Panamint and Funeral mountains that enclosed her world -- this white pit in the lap of the earth. She listened to the killdeer, the doves and rock wrens, and she watched the crested long-tailed road runners scurrying swiftly across the sands. There were poisonous snakes, too, and the ravens which circled heavily in the sky filled the air with hoarse croaking ...

What kind of man was this who asked her to make a home in a blistering sink? "Jimmy! Take me back!"

Sadly he outfitted a wagon for the trip.

When Jimmy returned alone, things were different. There was little work to do at the ranch now, for the Harmony Borax Works had been closed for several years, and Death Valley saw little life except the Indians, plodding prospectors and their burros.

Years passed and the ghost-like remains of the old borax plant depreciated under the erosion of wind and neglect. But Jimmy stayed on. He believed, like others, that the shut-down was temporary, that the newly discovered borax deposits at Calico would play out -- and then the Harmony would come to life again.

These were long and lonely years, but Jimmy faithfully performed his duties. He grew and baled alfalfa and kept the yard in order and the tamarisks watered.

It was a blazing August sun that poured its heat into the Valley during the summer of 1899. It created an inferno over the salt and borax sinks, and in the heart of Jimmy Dayton as he lay in the shade with a jar of water at his side. He watched the sudden flight of three sparrows. Back to the mountains -- that's where the sparrows were going -- where the air was moist and the butterflies plentiful.

"If we are to live together," his wife had told him, "you will have to go where there is life."

Suddenly he became aware that his work in the Valley was done. It was a dream to think that the 20 Mule Teams would return. Having tasted human companionship, his loneliness was more unbearable. He would go. A man ought to be as smart as a sparrow!

He wrote his letter of resignation, addressed to W. W. Cahill of the Harmony Borax Works at Daggett, the company's nearest office, 150 miles to the south.

In the letter he mentioned the date he planned to leave, and that he was bringing a four horse team, two led horses which he had borrowed in Daggett the last trip, a wagon with his household goods and, of course, his dog. The letter was a precautionary measure. Even in summer the trip to Daggett should not take longer than a week -- but it was always a good idea to notify the office in advance. If something did go wrong help would be sent.

The nearest post office was on the other side of the Panamints at Ballarat. For five dollars Jimmy hired an Indian to mail the letter. The messenger climbed the mountains, spent the night at the spring in Wild Rose Canyon, and reached Ballarat the following evening. Tired and thirsty after the long hike, he headed for the nearest saloon. It was two weeks before the letter reached Daggett.

"Something has happened to Jimmy!" Wash Cahill exclaimed. "This letter is two weeks old which means Jimmy is a week overdue now. We'll have to find him."

"I'll go," Frank Tilton offered. "Who will go with me? It's a terrible trip!"

Dolph Navares stepped up. "I'm ready," he said.

They passed Garlic Spring, Coyote Well, Saratoga Spring and Bradbury Well. No sign of Jimmy.

On the fourth day the men headed into the furnace. They toiled on, deep in the salt and alkali floor of the Valley. Now they were only 22 miles from Greenland. If Jimmy had started out surely he would have made it to Bennett's Well. That was it! He had changed his mind - decided not to leave after all. "We'll find him asleep in the shade, with a jar of water by his side ..."

Tilton and Navares tried to smile. Their heat-parched lips would not respond.

Three miles beyond Bennett's Well they found Jimmy's wagon, the four horses dead in their harness. The animals had made a wild effort for freedom and lay sprawled in the churned sand. The two led horses lay dead at the rear of the wagon, their necks stretched from the short halters tied to the end gate.

Jimmy had tried to save the horses. The reins which had been tied to the back of the driver's seat, were slashed through. But an instinctive habit carried over from his swamper days -- of setting the brakes the instant the wagon stopped ---kept the animals from reaching water and forage.

Jimmy's dog, whining weakly from a nearby mesquite thicket, attracted the attention of the two men. The starving beat-crazed animal's legs were draped across the body of Jimmy Dayton.



Stone monument now marks the graves of Jimmy Dayton and Shorty Harris.

Gower, who lived at a nearby mine, thoughtfully replaced the marker with an old ironing board on which she wrote the name, Jimmy Dayton.

They gave Jimmy two more funeral services after that. The second came 35 years afterward when Shorty Harris was buried by his side. A few years later, State Senator Charles Brown of Shoshone had a bronze plaque made to mark the graves. And when a new road was built along the west side of the Valley, a monument of native stone was erected for the graves, and the bronze plaque cemented in its center. This event provided the third service for Jimmy.

The date on the plaque, as on the ironing board marker, gives the year of Jimmy's death as 1898. Historical sources indicate that it was the following year. But, Jimmy doesn't care one way or the other. He never wanted to leave Death Valley anyway. So, in the warm sands he loved, Jimmy Dayton sleeps.

They knew that his illness -- stroke, heart attack or whatever it was -- had been induced by the heat. Jimmy had not wanted to lie down in the broiling sun, and the horses would take the wagon that provided the only patch of shade. After slashing the reins, he somehow made it to the mesquite thicket.

Tilton and Navares fed and watered the dog, and continued on to the ranch. Next morning they ripped boards from the barn and made a coffin. Then they returned to the thicket and buried Jimmy in a shallow grave. One of them said a prayer while the other placed a wooden headboard to mark the grave.

Later, after the headboard split to pieces in the sun, Pauline