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THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Ambush of Bill Keys led him to prison

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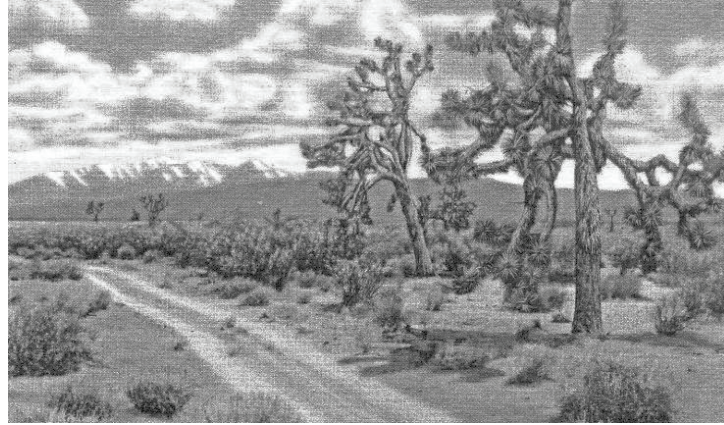
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The handwritten cardboard sign mounted on a stake on the dirt road threatened, "KEYS, THIS IS MY LAST WARNING. STAY OFF MY PROPERTY." The sign was stuck squarely in the middle of a road that Bill Keys had driven on thousands of times in the preceding three decades. On this day, May 11, 1943, he pulled his car to a stop and paused to take in the full measure of the warning. In the untamed West, he knew such a threat was serious.

Keys surveyed the surrounding terrain. All was quiet. He had lived on the desert on the same spot since 1911. He'd come there after a stint in the Mojave with another stalwart desert dweller who had built a sort-of castle, Walter Scott. Keys left the Mojave and hired on to run the Desert Queen Mine in Joshua Tree. When it closed in 1917, his wages were paid in land. The Homestead Act allowed him to acquire more for a stake of his own.

He borrowed the name of the mine for his ranch, Desert Queen Ranch. Keys continued the painstaking work of digging for gold and gypsum. He built a stamp mill to crush ore from other miners. He married, and built a house by hand, fathered seven children, added a schoolhouse, fruit orchard, vegetable garden and raised goats, chickens and cattle. He erected windmills, dug deep wells and dammed up the surrounding canyons to save rainwater. Bill Keys was undaunted by the most daunting of circumstances, scratching out a hard life on the hard desert.

By the time he was stopped in the middle of the road on that May morning in 1943, Bill Keys had faced unimaginable adversity. In 1936 the Joshua Tree National Monument was established surrounding his land and curtailing the grazing of his cattle. He'd been at odds with the federal government over it since. Three of his children had died in early childhood. The vein of gold in the mine had played out long ago. Larger cattle companies dealt unfairly with him. Trespassers and poachers stole his machinery. This sign and the dispute with his neighbor were just another chapter in a long story of hardship.



A postcard of a dirt road in Joshua Tree by Stephen Willard circa 1938. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The sign blocked the road and was fortified by purposely strewn remnants of cacti, Joshua trees and broken glass. Keys left the car and walked up to a small ridge to see further. From that vantage he caught sight of his disgruntled neighbor, Worth Bagley, charging down the hill with a gun in his hand. Bagley suddenly began shooting.

When it was over, Bagley lay dead. The story of the ambush is told in vivid detail in a book of the same name written by Art Kidwell. Keys had endured much before that day, but he would suffer most mightily afterward. Having defended himself against the agitated and mentally ill Bagley, Keys dutifully turned himself in to the local authorities.

The tragic story of his subsequent poor treatment and terribly unjust trial is a study in perseverance. Keys' incarceration at San Quentin is described by Kidwell, "Despite his present confinement, Bill's mind was still as well-tuned as his body, and few things that occurred in his present surroundings missed his attention. Many years of prospecting had conditioned his attentive powers. As he traveled for weeks at a time through isolated desert areas, his very life had depended upon his ability to recognize landmarks and to remember where springs and waterholes were located. Like the Indians who had traveled there before him, he knew which

plants could be eaten, which could be used as medicines, and which ones could kill him.... Living as he had done in such isolation had afforded him with as valuable an education as that provided by any school. Now he broadened his education by spending some of his confinement time catching up on his reading—a luxury that his long workdays at the ranch had left him little time to do." Despite this "leisure," confinement must have been torture for the rugged outdoorsman so keenly attuned to his environment.

Keys' long-suffering wife Frances was determined to clear her husband's name. She wrote letters and traveled to Sacramento twice to implore Governor Earl Warren to spare her husband. Out of desperation, she appealed to an old friend who was now spectacularly famous.

Erle Stanley Gardner garnered national attention through his Perry Mason stories. The erstwhile lawyer had first bumped into Keys in 1927 and then on regular sojourns to the desert. Gardner was impressed with the homesteader's fortitude and forbearance. He hadn't known about the ambush or Keys' legal troubles. The long plaintive letter from Frances took him by surprise.

Gardner pored over the transcripts of the trial finding evidence that had been wrongly excluded and testimony that

contradicted the guilty verdict. But before launching any further effort, Gardner put the case to his readers at *Argosy Magazine*.

Seeking justice for the wrongly convicted, Gardner had assembled a panel of experts for his "Court of Last Resort" which was adjudicated in the pages of the magazine. The readers would learn about a case and decide for themselves whether justice had been well-served. The Court experts had previously exonerated other prisoners, so Gardner put Keys' case to the readers to see what the public thought. The article in the August 1951 issue of *Argosy* entitled "Cooking with Dynamite" resulted in a flood of letters requesting that his "Court of Last Resort" undertake a full investigation. Gardner and his experts swung into action.

The ensuing events seem fit for a novel. Gardner could have hardly made up a more sinister plot than the ambush or a better name for a malicious character than Worth Bagley. After years of arduous work, the Court experts did indeed uncover a trove of exonerating evidence, including that Bagley had long planned to kill Keys. (Tragically too, it was determined that Bagley had a brain tumor that likely caused his violent and irrational behavior.) Gardner recruited State Assemblyman Vernon Kilpatrick to the cause, and together they presented the whole case to the prison parole board.

Keys had been imprisoned for 12 years for defending himself. In light of the new evidence, he was offered parole. Keys continued to press for some sort of justice and restoration of his good name. In 1956, Governor Goodwin Knight granted Keys a full and unconditional pardon.

Bill Keys lived out his days quietly on the desert he loved. The dirt road where he was ambushed is now part of Joshua Tree National Park and a tourist attraction. Park rangers lead walking tours of the Keys ranch and tell stories of Bill Keys' incomprehensibly hard life. Seemingly the stuff of fiction, but a remarkable and all too true story.

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