

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Ex-exec found solace in Desert Hot Springs

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"Harry Bennett had been watching his back trail most of his life, but finally — atop a winding driveway on a high knoll in Desert Hot Springs — he could rest. He picked up his binoculars and scoped his kingdom. The long views in every direction would reveal a car's dust trail miles before anyone could reach him. Assured he was safe, Bennett settled behind his easel and gazed at San Jacinto peak across the valley."

So starts another fascinating tale written by Ann Japenga, this time about Harry Bennett. Japenga's writings bring desert artists into focus, obscure and famous. Bennett qualifies as both — and much more.

Japenga's musing continues: "Picking up his paintbrush, he leaned in just inches from the canvas to accommodate his failing eyesight. In this pose he felt powerful again — as he had felt in Detroit when he was Henry Ford's enforcer, an heir to the Ford Company throne known by the nicknames 'The Little Giant' or 'Little Fella.' With his horses pacing in the corral below, Bennett relaxed into the simple rhythm of landscape painting."

"He'd always had a rich fantasy life, and now he could imagine he was an exceptional western artist like Charles Marion Russell. The Old West had plenty of room for bad guys with hearts of gold, and Bennett was a bad guy by any measure. 'America's Most Reviled Corporate Thug,' a headline once called him."

Japenga's full article may be found on her California Desert Art website where she reveals decades of research by writer Thomas DeWald about Bennett. DeWald explores Bennett's life before art when he was working for Ford. He built weird and exotic retreats, what DeWald calls his "ninja houses," including a Gothic castle near Ypsilanti, a pagoda boathouse on an island in the Detroit River, a log-shaped cement bunker and a compound in Desert Hot Springs. He kept lions as pets, practiced shooting in his basement office and made sure his outposts featured escape tunnels, gun turrets, trap doors, hidden passageways



Paul Grimm portrait of Harry Bennett and his horse Sonny painted May 1944, oil on canvas. ARTIST PAUL GRIMM

and even a moat.

Bennett first arrived on the desert in 1939 taking a room at the El Mirador Hotel in Palm Springs. According to Japenga, he promptly rented a horse from McDonald Stables on Ramon Road, and when "his horse climbed up out of the Araby wash and into the mountains, Bennett must have had a revelation: Here he could escape the cold and the killing and live like a cowboy."

Bennett returned in 1940 to supervise the work on a new hideout to be built on 80 acres of land given to him by Henry Ford, just outside of Desert Hot Springs in a place then called Seven Palms Valley. The site was remote enough not to require a moat. Nevertheless, Bennett's usual security precautions were taken. Curious strangers were definitely not welcome.

Once the leading contender to run Ford Motor company, Bennett lost the power struggle for control and by 1945 he was living full-time in his new desert digs. The house was "way out in the middle of nowhere" according to DeWald. "There was the B-Bar-H (Ranch), and Janet Gaynor lived nearby. Harry's place was way, way out."

Bennett called his desert compound S-Star Ranch, derived from his name and his wife's, Esther: Est-Har or S-Star. It was certainly isolated. There was no telephone. Armed guards with dogs patrolled the surrounding washes. Shots were fired into the air, warning people to stay clear. Secrecy and security shrouded his presence, a lifetime of those habits being hard to break even in the remote desert.

Bennett had numerous underworld associations cultivated over decades of awful and now unlawful activities. "A parade of Detroit ex-cons and gangsters came to ride horses and play cowboy at the getaway on the hill." Many believe the myth of Al Capone hiding out in Desert Hot Springs actually got its start due to Bennett's presence and infamous bad acts.

Japenga notes the "juxtaposition of evil and family life gives a Sopranos feeling to Harry Bennett's story. Like Tony Soprano — who could dismember a guy and then dash home for ziti — Bennett maintained a respectable veneer, despite a tendency to torture people with pliers."

The juxtaposition within Bennett's own personality of brutal thug and aspiring artist fascinated DeWald who discovered Bennett's own art training as a teenager, his detour to the Navy, a stint in boxing and reputed introduction to Henry Ford by famous newspaperman Arthur Brisbane.

DeWald chronicles Bennett's friendship with Palm Springs artist Paul Grimm, master landscape painter and keen observer of the subtleties of the desert, who had an art studio on Palm Canyon. In April 1942, The Desert Sun carried an article about Grimm completing a huge canvas for a wealthy Chicago businessman. "While it is of unusually great size, the canvas is extremely appealing, depicting a favorite Grimm desert scene of mountain background, with sandhills, verbenas, primroses and greasewood in the foreground."

After the particulars of the gallery and the Chicago commission, the article continued, "just recently Grimm also finished another large canvas, this for Harry Bennett, personnel director in Detroit for the Ford motor concern. Ben-

nett has an extensive and elaborate new ranch establishment across the Coachella Valley from Palm Springs and near the B-Bar-H. A lover of the desert, he ordered one of his favorite scenes placed on canvas to be hung in his Detroit residence."

Interestingly Grimm also counted fellow painter President Eisenhower as a friend, and Eisenhower would regularly drop by his studio as well. One wonders if Eisenhower and Bennett ever met. Known for landscapes, Grimm's portrait of Bennett with his horse Sonny, painted in May 1944 as they painted together, is highly unusual and a testament to a genuine friendship.

Bennett became known as a bona fide desert artist, according to Japenga, and "was invited to exhibit at the Little Gallery of The Desert, appearing in a show alongside Axel Linus and curated by J. Marie Ropp. Ropp was a major figure in desert art. She established the Little Gallery in Cathedral City, before moving the shop to Desert Hot Springs. She later ran the Desert Magazine Art Gallery." Ropp knew both Cabot Yerxa and Agnes Pelton, "so it's likely the Little Giant rubbed shoulders with his pueblo-building neighbor and with Pelton too."

In 1968, Bennett sold the S-Star ranch and moved to Las Vegas. His eyesight diminished, he stopped painting. The massive hilltop hideout at 19900 Bennett Road remains, just past Ford Avenue, named for Henry himself. The indoor swimming pool is barely recognizable. Gone is the full-size antique rickshaw converted into a movable bar in the dining room, but as Japenga notes, the view of the Mt. San Jacinto from Bennett's hilltop perch is unrivaled.

Landscape painting in the desert seems an unlikely and quiet end for the notorious Bennett, too strange to be true. More of his story may be resurrected by a visit to Japenga's website and the Desert Hot Springs Historical Society for discussion with the experts there.

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