

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Burro Train offered pleasant rides into canyons

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For decades in the 20th century, visitors arrived in the Coachella Valley by train. Once here, they availed themselves of a most unusual outdoor activity, riding on the Burro Train. This train was a succession of animals moving in the same direction, tethered together, like cars pulled by a locomotive.

Like its namesake, the Burro Train had a station where passengers bought tickets and boarded at Indian Avenue and Ramon Road. Its owner, Bob Bennett, cheekily advertised that he served as engineer, brakeman, fireman, conductor and porter on the unusual train.

At the station, a line of burros, saddled, bridled and ready to take visitors and villagers on a pleasant adventure stood tied to a hitching post awaiting departure. With hours to spend, why not take a pleasantly slow ride into Palm or Tahquitz Canyons aboard a burro, trained for safety to never break a walk.

The Burro Train was announced to the world on Nov. 30 1944: "Numerous prominent Villagers including Mayor Eugene Therieau will attend ceremonies tomorrow noon when Palm Springs Burro Train begins its initial journey to the nearby mountains. Operated by R. H. Bennett the train of ten burros will leave the intersection of Ramon road and Indian avenue three times daily at 9 a.m., 12 p.m., 3 p.m. Trips will be made to Tahquitz Falls, Skyline Trail and Inspiration point."

Like many others seeking the healing benefits of the desert's dry air, Bennett had come to the desert after suffering for a year with tuberculosis. Each day he would hike into Tahquitz Canyon and lie on the rocks in the sun. Soon he seemed to have recovered completely. The arduous hikes led him to believe that riding would make trip more accessible and would be attractive to others.

The rides were indeed a popular outing for sanatorium patients as well as hotel guests and proved a successful business.

There were several offerings: a two-hour excursion to the falls in Tahquitz Canyon, a 15-minute circle trip over the desert and a typical "pony ring" ride. When riders might attempt to urge the burros into a trot or a canter, they would complain the animals were lazy as it just couldn't be done. The burros were strictly trained never to break a walk as many patrons were little children, most of whom had never sat on in a saddle.

In February 1945, the magazine "Romantic Range" planned to feature the Burro Train on the cover. "In the village Tuesday was Hollywood photographer Shinye Wright, who spent the afternoon shooting pictures of a film starlet and cowboy, posed with one of Bennett's burros for one of the western magazine's forthcoming issues. The village's burro train also will be pictured in a future issue of Collier's."

The ride was also popular with locals and was thought to be an extremely unique attraction. "Francis Line, well-known lecturer and photographer of Eagle Rock, Calif., a brother of Winfield Line of the village spent the last weekend here with Mrs. Line and photographed a tour of Bob Bennett's Burro Train from start, along the trail to the falls and back to the finish, for his feature picture, 'Around the World in 30 Minutes.'"

"Mr. Line is photographing various spots in the southland which are replicas of spots in other portions of the world, such as vineyards at Guasti, reminiscent of Italy, the date orchards east of here, to depict the Near East and other southland points which resemble old world spots. His film will depict scenes around the world all to be found in Southern California."

The newspaper followed the business closely, announcing the births of new burros and their names to an interested readership. It also covered the story when some visitors took home a burro of their own.

"When visiting the famous Burro Train in Palm Springs last November, Mrs. Charles Drais and Mrs. Arthur Chapman discovered Cactus Amy. At that time she was only a month old and resembled a bundle of gray and white wool, with the familiar brown cross and tripped along on thimble-sized hoofs looking like an irresistible character right out of Walt Disneyland. After the took one look at Amy they decided she was the perfect mascot for Hidden Springs Ranch where they live...."

Despite the success of the rides, Bennett had other business concerns in town causing him to seek to sell



The Palm Springs Burro Train was an unique attraction. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

the Burro Train.

After a personal ad in December of 1946 failed, the concession was offered for sale in earnest in 1947 and priced for a quick deal. "Business includes ten burros, 1 horse, saddles, 1940 Ford DeLuxe Station Wagon in excellent condition and miscellaneous necessary equipment. The Burro Train holds an exclusive franchise to Tahquitz Falls."

The concern changed hands a few times before being acquired by Kenneth Johnson. Like Bennett, Johnson had pulmonary problems, an intractable pneumonia, and came to the desert for relief. He rode the Burro Train with his wife Eva, up into Tahquitz Canyon and miraculously began to feel much better. He returned often.

On evening ride up to a favorite spot, Johnson asked his wife how she would like to own a Burro Train, "because I just bought one."

After acquiring the business, Johnson increased the number of burros from 14 to 30 and added three hinnies, hybrids bred from a stallion and a she-donkey. The hinny acted as guide for the rest of the burros leading the string of riders on the trail.

The Palm Springs Burro Train was one of the first that was known in the United States and spawned other similar attractions. Fred Harvey Jr., the proprietor of

the most famous railroad hotels in the southwest, started the Grand Canyon Mule Train after riding on the Palm Springs Burro Train. The founder of Knott's Berry Farm, Walter Knott and his grandchildren were frequent riders on visits to town.

Because his children found the Burro Train to be one of their favorite activities, Mr. Knott's son, Russell, became interested in the operation. He spent four days watching the Burro Train come and go, checking the safety of the operation. Knott finally approached Johnson and asked him if he would be interested in establishing a Burro Train at Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park. In 1953, Johnson began his endeavor at the amusement park where he increased the number of burros to 77, taking as many as 1,600 riders in a day.

In the 1940s, Johnson also acquired Smoke Tree Stables, regularly sending riders into the scenic Palm, Murray and Andreas Canyons. Horses eventually completely supplanted burros, and there is no more train, but the Johnson family continues the tradition of pleasant rides into the scenic canyons. More information is at smoketreestables.com.

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