

Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California
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Marcia Rittenhouse Wynn, Biography of an Historian

By Gilbert P. Gia

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D*esert Bonanza* is a landmark in the history of Mojave Desert mining, but so little is known about the author that her books and extensive family history become essential resources.¹ Marcia Wynn's cousin Jeannie Campbell Miller wrote, "We have always been steeped in history. On my dad's side I am a fifth generation born here in California. I have letters that my great-grandparents wrote to my grandpa and letters from his siblings from all over the state."² That family history helped make Maria Wynn an historian.

She had heard the stories from Grandpa Charles Wynn about joining the Union Army when he was 13, moving to Dixon, Illinois for schooling, enrolling in law at Michigan State University at Ann Arbor in 1869,³ and practicing law in Iowa and the Dakota Territory for the next two decades. She also heard about the real estate boom in Los Angeles that attracted Wynn to California and about gold on the Mojave Desert,⁴ which brought

¹ Marcia Rittenhouse Wynn, *Desert Bonanza: The Story of Early Randsburg, Mojave Desert Mining Camp*, Western Lands and Water Series II, Arthur H. Clark Company, Glendale, California, 1963

² Email to Gilbert Gia, 2014

³ Ann Arbor is 300 air miles from Dixon.

⁴ On Sep 17, 1898 the Corona [California] Courier reported that a mine on the Rand was yielding the equivalent of \$8,000 per day in gold.

him to Randsburg in 1896 to set up in law. Marcia probably also heard her diminutive grandmother Euphemia Wynn tell about how much she hated to leave cosmopolitan Los Angeles.⁵



*Randsburg roared in the 1890s
(From Historical Collection of Title Insurance and Trust Company)*

While the Wynns were still at Los Angeles their son Harmon⁶ took part in the Oklahoma Land Rush,⁷ and his account of that historic event comes across in the voice of an accomplished story teller. In this passage, however, he describes a bargain that his father made with him and Will Wynn, who was Marcia's father. The time is about 1890.⁸

⁵ Euphemia A. Orison Rittenhouse Wynn (Jan 19, 1846, Pennsylvania – Dec 1, 1909, California). Many in the extended family used Rittenhouse as a middle name.

⁶ Harmon Rittenhouse Wynn (Dec 6, 1875 - Aug 29, 1953). His paternal grandmother was Emmeline Maria Harmon.

⁷ The Cherokee Strip Land Run, also called The Land Run of 1893, occurred at noon on Sep 16, 1893 on land that later became part of Oklahoma. That day more than 100,000 people attempted to claim a share of the 6.5M acres opened by the government for settlement. (Wikipedia)

⁸ Charles Harmon Wynn (Apr 23, 1848, Monroe County, New York - May 11, 1926, Orland, California) and his brother Wilbur S. Wynn (Jan 1850-Jul 1912) were orphaned in 1857 at Wheatland, New York. Wilbur S. was adopted by his maternal grandparents at Wheatland, but in 1864 he lived in Indianapolis, Indiana with his paternal uncle, Wesley J. Wynn. (Wesley died in 1865.) Wilbur S. became a successful Indiana insurance broker and married Kate Slack. Wilbur S. never lived in California. Charles H. Wynn was adopted by his mother's cousin Oscar Harmon, who was an attorney in Danville, Illinois. (Oscar died in war in 1864.) Charles H. enlisted in Company I, 35th Illinois Volunteer Infantry at Catlin, Illinois in 1862 and was severely wounded at the Battle of Stones River. On Apr 1, 1862 he was transferred to Company I, 59th Illinois Infantry and subsequently took part in several engagements. He was mustered out of military service on Apr 5, 1865. In an email to Gilbert Gia in 2014, Jeannie Miller wrote, "These guys had a rough childhood."

"When my brother and I were around 14 and 16 years old we decided it would be a good idea to start smoking cigarettes. A lot of the boys in our crowd were smoking and we didn't want to miss anything. In those days, all cigarette packages had a picture of some actress-or-other enclosed with the smokes. We boys all had collections of these pictures and used to exchange them back and forth. When we happened to have two or more of the same lady (of course the better looking they were, the more they were prized), we used to give odds of three or four to one for some of the good lookers."⁹

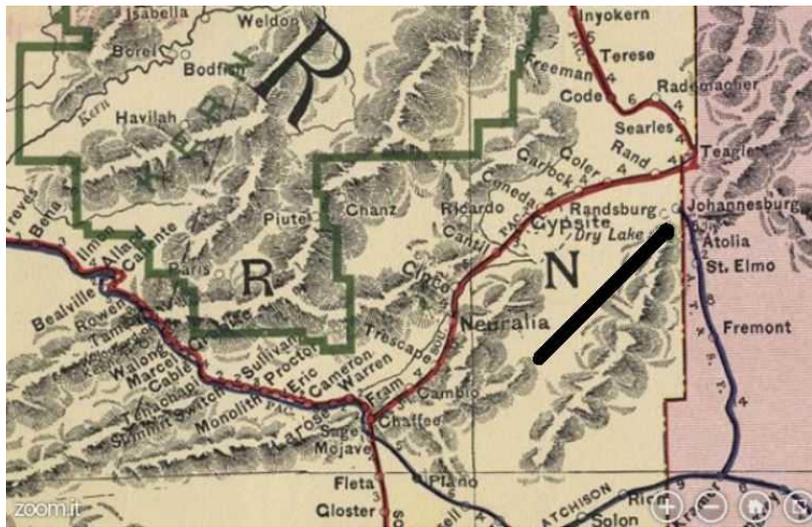
"Well, when Dad found out about our smoking he had us up on the carpet and made us a proposition. He said that if we would not smoke until we were 21 he would give us each \$100 on our twenty-first birthday. I believe this is a good idea for some of our modern fathers to try when a boy reaches 21 and hasn't any more sense than to start smoking. It won't hurt him much. I surely have to smile at the above little sermon because I started at that age and have been smoking like a chimney for 49 years."¹⁰

"Anyway, that hundred looked like a million to us, and we took him up on it. Will held out for a couple of years and then started to smoke again. By that time the hundred did not look so big, but I wanted to stick it out on Dad's account. I was anxious to go to Cripple Creek for any mail and see if Dad still remembered. Neither of us had mentioned it for several years. On our arrival at camp we both made for the P.O. and among the letters were several from Mother and one from Dad. I was so excited when I saw his letter I could hardly open it, but I finally did, and as I unfolded the sheet of paper, a draft for \$100 was staring me in the face. He had not forgotten."¹¹

⁹ ***An Average American*** by Harmon R. Wynn, grandfather of Jeannie Campbell Miller. Typewritten manuscript, 63 pages, signed "Harmon R. Wynn, 56 Poplar Ave. Santa Cruz, California". Copy from Jean Miller to Gilbert Gia, Jul 2014

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.



Arrow: Johannesburg-Randsburg.

Rail south to Los Angeles does not appear on most maps after 1920.



THE BALTIC MINE WITH TEN-STAMP MILL AND CABINS IN THE BACKGROUND; PLACERING OPERATIONS IN THE FOREGROUND

A few months after the Wynns arrived at Randsburg -- then called Rand Camp -- a miner named Billy Logan sold his mining claim while celebrating "*in the robust fashion of the miner of the world over.*"¹² The next day he realized he had been cheated and sought Wynn for legal help. Wynn got the property back, and in return received one-third interest in the Baltic Mine.¹³ That mine, and a stage line that Wynn bought soon after moving to Randsburg were what brought his sons to the desert.¹⁴

¹² **Desert Bonanza**

¹³ **Bakersfield Californian, Sep 4, 11, 1957**

¹⁴ **Charles H. Wynn bought a stage line that served the 36-mile route between Randsburg and the rail depot at Mojave. He sold it before Oct 1897, the date that the Randsburg Railway Company completed its 28-mile line between Kramer Junction and Randsburg. By the 1920s that rail line no longer appeared on maps.**

By 1900 they were married and living near the Baltic with their families. Marcia Rittenhouse Wynn was born at Randsburg in 1901.¹⁵ Nine years passed. The Wynns now resided at the Black Hawk Mine, about a mile southeast of the Baltic, and there in 1910 the US Census enumerated two families. The first was that of Wilbur Wynn, who operated the cyanide plant,¹⁶ his wife, Mabel,¹⁷ and their two children, Marcia, 8, and Rose, 4. The second was Harmon Wynn, joint operator of the cyanide plant, his wife Beulah, and their two children, Margaret, 4, and Carrie, 2.¹⁸ At the time of the census, the mine had become the children's playground, and there Marcia led her sister and her cousins in "*hair-brained, sometimes dangerous games,*"¹⁹ wrote Jeannie Miller, but this is how Marcia described it:

*"Dynamite and cyanide were two lethal doses we all grew up with. I recall during my pigtail days dropping a dozen sticks of dynamite from the highest window of our very tall mill. I, along with my sister and two girl cousins, watched for the expected explosion from our safe, high perch. The ground below was hard as cement and the general idea was to produce a tremendous noise if we could but drop the sticks so they would go off. The dynamite was warm and soft and nothing happened when the sticks hit the ground, they merely squashed out of their paper wrappings and pancaked on the hard surface. Another time, with a little freezing weather, we might have had more excitement than we'd bargained for – with probably a spanking thrown in for our trouble. Though we took this chance with dynamite, you couldn't have hired us to play with dynamite caps. WE knew better than that! We also gave a wide berth to any cyanide lying around."*²⁰

¹⁵ By 1901 the Wynns owned the Baltic outright. (Bakersfield Californian, Oct 17, 1941 "40 Years Ago") The 10-stamp mill was a pile-driver-like machine for breaking ore.

¹⁶ The Black Hawk Mine was 2-1/2 miles south of Johannesburg. (*Report of California State Mineralogist*, State Department of Mines. vol 17, 1921); Morning Echo, Jun 12, 1910

¹⁷ Jessiman Mabel Heaton Wynn (later Sigfried)

¹⁸ Four employees were also enumerated. All were around 50 years of age and unmarried. Note at bottom of census page: "*Here ends the enumeration of what is known as the 'Stringer district' of Randsburg No. 2. Mines scattered over area 10 by 6 miles. White Camp. 10 miles from Randsburg.*"

¹⁹ Email of 2014 to Gilbert Gia from Jeannie Miller

²⁰ Desert Bonanza, pp 163-164



Marcia Wynn, center front. Smiling faces and the year 1910 suggest the teacher is Orsavella Long. (Image credit: Jeannie Miller)

About this same time a new schoolmarm came to the Johannesburg schoolhouse. This is how she effected the children:

"When Miss Orsavella Long, who was shorter than her name, and very young, came out from Indiana to teach at 'Jo'berg,' she wasn't as large as some of the boys in the seventh and eighth grades. Yet she managed to teach, in the most able manner, all grades, and find time to enter into all our games. And she didn't lack the energy after school to take methodical care correcting our papers: Nothing escaped that young eye of hers. She somehow managed to make every pupil in the school want to be first in class work, and we all studied under her understanding guidance with a will. Orsavella was a natural-born teacher."²¹

"Orsavella played tag, baseball and anti-anti-over with us at recess time and noon. When we used a small miner's shack just across the road from the schoolhouse to toss the ball over, she occasionally kicked her Number-four slipper over the roof, to the consternation of the opposing team on the other side. When one of the boys put garlic inside the girls' desks, she gave the girls a bottle of perfume, which

²¹ Desert Bonanza

*was used profusely, and almost made the original prankster ill -- perfume being one of his detestations.*²²

*"When a snake was placed in her desk, a prank in which the writer was the leading light, Orsavella never raised an eyebrow but reached in and pulled the garter snake out. What she may have felt inside was never known to the students. From all outward appearances, finding snakes in school desks was daily routine."*²³

*"When we rode a wildly-careening homemade wagon (without benefit of brakes) down the steep road of the mountain back of the school, Orsavella sat on the long plank body of our speeding, high wheel vehicle and took her chances on seeing the next day dawn with the rest of us."*²⁴

*"At Christmas time we would make a large tree out of the branches of creosote bushes. By using a main trunk of lumber, with holes drilled-in for sticking on the branches, we made out very well. We all went out and gathered the fullest branches of the pungent creosote we could find. And then tailored the tree to suit our fancy, sticking the longest branches in the bottom holes and the smallest near the top of the custom-made trunk. The tree was then decorated in the traditional manner with popcorn and cranberry strands, candles, bright ornaments and colored paper cutouts. Before cars were in the country in any number, everyone walked or drove a rig or wagon to these entertainments, coming in sometimes from long distances."*²⁵

"When she eloped one night during the middle of the school term, she politely sent a wire from Los Angeles to the school board stating she would be willing to teach the remainder of the term providing they would grant her a two-week honeymoon! She was too good a teacher to lose; besides, the surprise element and her audacity probably startled the board into granting her demands. At any rate,

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

*she returned with her new husband at the end of her honeymoon trip and took up teaching just where she left off. And don't think we didn't have to make up in studies for this extracurricular honeymoon vacation. We had to study harder than ever to make up, but none of us minded in the least."*²⁶

Gold had attracted Grandpa Wynn to the desert, but it did not make him rich. In 1907 a Kern County court found a judgment of \$2,632 against the Wynns, which probably gave weight to the story that Grandpa Wynn's move to the desert had deprived the family of becoming Los Angeles real estate tycoons.²⁷

Marcia's father, Will, died when she was 15.²⁸ Mabel Wynn and her girls moved to New Mexico to live with Fairchild relatives, but they did not stay a year, and in 1917 they were living in an up-scale Los Angeles neighborhood.²⁹ There, Marcia attended high school and learned typing and shorthand, but in 1920 she was a stage dancer, probably in the movies, said Jeannie Miller.³⁰ Family memory today recalls that the sisters were bright, outgoing, and energetic.³¹

About 1921 Marcia married Edgar M. Samelson who was a 23 year-old electrician with the Navy at San Pedro.³² Edgar Samelson, Jr., was born in 1923.³³

²⁶ Ibid. In 1912 and 1913 Orsavella Long attended the annual Kern County Teacher Institutes at Bakersfield. Bakersfield Californian, Nov 25, 1912, Nov 24, 1913

²⁷ Bakersfield Californian, Feb 8, 1908. Judgment was found in favor of the Bank of Tehachapi on Dec 23, 1907.

²⁸ Wilbur Wynn (Aug 16, 1873, Iowa - Jan 12, 1916, Los Angeles, California). In the settlement of Wilbur's estate, his uncle's wife and daughters, Kate Slack Wynn, Gladys Wynn Elliott, and Iris Wynn Van Winkle, received one-third interest in the Baltic Quartz Mine. Bakersfield Californian, Feb 10, 12, 1916. The 1920 Census indicates that the Wynns had a tenant.

²⁹ Letter to her cousin Carrie and Carrie's husband, Don, dated Feb 15, 1979

³⁰ Her mother was a sales clerk. Fourteen year-old Rose was a student. Jeannie Miller wrote of Rose, "My mom taught school for 33 years at Big Sur in three different one-room schools. She was also a great writer."

³¹ Jeannie Miller

³² Edgar Magnus Samelson (Dec 25, 1898, Newell, Iowa – Nov 4, 1957, Glendale, California)

³³ Edgar Magnus Samelson, Jr. (Nov 16, 1923 – 1998.) In 1950 he attended USC on the GI Bill. Daily Trojan, vol. 42, no. 16, Oct 9, 1950. In 1953 he graduated in engineering.



Marcia and Edgar

(Photo credit: Jeannie Miller)

Details about the little family over the next two decade are sketchy. In 1930 they were at Council Bluffs, Pottawattamie County, Iowa where Edgar worked as an electrician, and in 1940 they were back in California.³⁴ The census of 1940 did not show an occupation for Marcia, but her husband was a well-paid, 36-hour-a-week electrician in the motion picture industry.³⁵ In 1942 Edgar, Jr., enlisted in the Army Air Corps and took officer training.³⁶

³⁴ **Edgar came from Iowa. In the Southland their address was 430 Sinclair Ave, Glendale.**

³⁵ **His annual income shown on census line 32 was equivalent to \$42,000 today.**

³⁶ **Edgar M. Samelson enlisted as a private in the Medical Administrative Corps on Sept 8, 1942. Service number: 19127401. <http://aad.archives.gov/> (Citation curtesy Kern County Genealogical Society)**



Marcia Rittenhouse Wynn Samelson and family
(Photo credit: Jeannie Miller)

Marcia got the idea for her first book during one of the Wynn's frequent trips to the desert. At a stop at Kernville, Marcia and Edgar met a couple who shared their family story, and from that came *Pioneer Family of Whiskey Flat*, published in 1945. *Pioneer Family* is not about the Wynns, but at the time Marcia was writing it she must have known what her next book would be.

The new book came quickly,³⁷ and in 1949 M.W. Samelson of Culver City published *Desert Bonanza*,³⁸ and it became an acclaimed success.³⁹ The Wynn family history was a stepping stone in completing that work, which Marcia explained in a letter of 1979: "*Of course Mother wrote many letters to me throughout the years telling me stories of the early days, and that kept a good deal fresh in my mind.*"⁴⁰

³⁷ Marcia Rittenhouse Wynn, *Pioneer family of Whiskey Flat*. Los Angeles, Haynes Corp. US Copyright Jun 6, 1945. Copyright renewal, 1976. This book is the biography of Nettie Yarbrough.

³⁸ Arthur H. Clark (1868-1951) founded a bookselling and publishing house in 1902 in Cleveland, Ohio and became a major printer of Western history. In 1930 Clark removed to Glendale, California.

³⁹ Bakersfield Californian, Feb 19, 1949 (Columnist Ralph F. Kreiser). Desert Magazine, May 1949: "*Desert Bonanza is rich in the flavor of boom camps—and historically important. M. W. Samelson, Publisher, 3630 Eastham Dr., Culver City, California, 1949, 285 pgs., photographs, sketch map, glossary of popular mining expressions. Limited first edition \$4.00.*" The address 3630 Eastham Dr. was the printing house of Murray & Gee.

⁴⁰ Letter from Marcia Wynn Samelson to her cousin Carrie and Carrie's husband, Don, dated Feb 15, 1979

In 1950 at Cantil on the Antelope Valley, historians Frank Latta, Richard Bailey, Ross Rogers, Paul Hubbard, and Cecil Wise⁴¹ were honored guests at the dedication of an historical monument. Present, too, was "noted California writer Mrs. Marcia Wynn Samelson," wrote the Bakersfield Californian, and the newspaper added that her participation "was most appropriate, because Mrs. Samelson produced many interesting works based on Kern's desert and mountain regions."⁴² In 1957 the Californian again identified her as Marcia Samelson but days later changed it to Marcia Wynn,⁴³ and the penname remained with her for the rest of her life.

In 1956 she was in Europe, perhaps with her husband to visit his Swedish relatives,⁴⁴ and the following year she was in Randsburg for dedication of the Baltic Stamp Mill that had been removed from the old mine to the Johannesburg museum.⁴⁵

Edgar Samelson died in late 1957, and for the next five years Marcia edited *Desert Bonanza* and enhanced it with an index, a map, and 23 new illustrations. In 1963 Arthur H. Clark Company published the book in its second edition.⁴⁶

In the 1970s Marcia started a third book, but unlike the others this one was entirely about the Wynn family. In early 1979 she wrote,

⁴¹ Cecil Orin Wise (1889 -1959) came to the Rand District about 1925 and worked as a miner and carpenter. In the late 1940s Wise became a judge. The only reference Gilbert Gia found in connection with books and Judge Wise were references to WWII ration books and also to hunting. A newspaper wrote, "*Justice of the Peace Cecil O. Wise has promised to 'throw the book' at any and all quail and dove hunters who hunt out of season.*" Bakersfield Californian, Sep 3, 1947

⁴² Bakersfield Californian, Dec 2, 1950. *Old Randsburg and The Yellow Aster Mine*, Desert Magazine, July 1951. *When Ezra Hamilton Found Gold at Willow Springs*, Desert Magazine, Nov/Dec 1951, (vol 14, no 13). *The Doctor Finds His Vein: In the boisterous mining camps of California*, Westways, Oct 1978. Gilbert Gia found no other articles by Marica Wynn.

⁴³ Bakersfield Californian, Sep 11, 1957

⁴⁴ On Jul 23, 1956 she departed Europe from Bremerhaven, Germany on the USNS Geiger. The New York Shipbuilding Corporation of Camden New Jersey laid down the Geiger on Aug 1, 1949 for American President Lines. She was launched as the *President Adams* on Oct 9, 1950 but was renamed USNS Geiger on Jan 2, 1951 after conversion for use by the Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS). The US Navy acquired her on Sep 13, 1952, and she made many runs throughout the world carrying civilians, US troops, and refugees.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USNS_Geiger.

⁴⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Sep 4, 11, 1957

⁴⁶ The first edition had 15 plates. US copyright was renewed in 1976.

"Have been working for months now on my story of our life at the mine. So many re-writes! This is not a history of the family, nor of mining or the country, it is just the things we did, our games and mostly the things I got into. In fact I don't remember any of the rest of you getting into trouble. I wonder at the patience of my mother and Aunt Beulah. I know when people not familiar with the mining country read it they will think I made some of it up, but I didn't have to! Don't remember any of us ever getting hurt, but we had some mighty busy guardian angels. I hope you won't mind my telling about my getting you to recite the poem about Dinah and the wooden leg. Have been writing for past eight hours, so please excuse strike-overs and any other errors, but wanted to get this off to you before procrastinating longer."⁴⁷

She finished *Gold Brick at My Feet: Story of A Mojave Desert Mining Family*⁴⁸ in the eighth decade of her life. In 1983 she sent the manuscript to Arthur C. Clarke Company, and that summer the firm answered that printing *Gold Brick at My Feet* would cost \$12,000.

***Gold Brick* was yet unpublished in 1990, but by then Marcia was in declining mental and physical health and unable to promote it. A year later Glen Dawson of Dawson Books, Los Angeles took up her cause and wrote to Dan Cronkite of Sagebrush Press asking if he wanted to print the book. Cronkite demurred. In July 1991, Dawson sent it to astrophysicist and Western mining historian Richard E. Lingenfelter asking if he cared to write an introduction to the book or to edit it and find someone else to publish it.**⁴⁹ That effort was not productive either.

In time the manuscript found a home in Dr. Lingenfelter's personal library. He explained, "*The MS was part of the Yellow Aster mine material*

⁴⁷ Letter from Marcia Wynn Samelson to her cousin Carrie and Carrie's husband, Don, dated Feb 15, 1979

⁴⁸ Several online booksellers show *Gold Brick at My Feet* as an out-of-print book, but the work was never commercially printed and exists only in manuscript form. Jeannie Miller wrote, "*In the last letter I have from Marcia to my mom, she said she was almost through with a book, and this was in March of 1979. Marcia was living in Ventura at that time. I have a notation saying that in 1983 a publisher was looking at her manuscript.*" *Gold Brick at My Feet* is a 143-leaf manuscript in typescript with nine leaves of plates at the University of California, San Diego.

⁴⁹ Letter of July 24, 1991. Dr. Richard E. Lingenfelter (1934 –) is author of more than 200 scientific papers. He has also written several books and articles on Western mining and American history.

that I purchased from Dawson's Bookstore in L.A., probably in the 1990s. That material included Marcia's letters re Buchanan,⁵⁰ so Dawson's must have gotten it from Marcia's heirs or estate."⁵¹

When Lingenfelter retired from the University of California at San Diego he donated his collection of mining references to the university library, and today, thanks to his generosity, the public can read *Gold Brick at My Feet*.⁵²

Marcia Rittenhouse Wynn Samelson died on April 18, 1993 at Coupeville, Washington, but her virtuosity lives on. In this passage from *Desert Bonanza* she recalled years back when she looked upon the desert home she would soon leave:

"The beauty of the desert lay in all directions as you gazed out from the sunrise side of the hills forming the Stringer District. At night when the full moon came up over Red Mountain or Cuddeback Lake, according to its season, it swung like a huge yellow pumpkin lantern in the sky, and sheer magic lay over the desert. Our sunrises, though slightly delayed by Red Mountain, when the sun was riding out its northern orbit, served as a morning awakener, and warmed the shadows out of their hiding places. Our sunsets were such gaudy extravaganzas of color, no sane artist would think of painting them."⁵³

"But these things were seen through a pair of very young eyes, and the mind that registered them was uncluttered with years or cares. Once, I rode horseback early in the morning over the top of the little hill back of the cabins, the day after a heavy fall of snow. During the night the snow had turned into icy casings for the millions of desert bushes spread out in all directions. The sun rose over Red Mountain into a clear sky and shone over these icy sheaths, as I rode up on the hill top, and transformed the desert into a mystic garden of diamond-strung shrubbery, glittering and twinkling prisms, strung from every smallest

⁵⁰ The Buchanans were part owner of the Yellow Aster Mine.

⁵¹ Letter to Gilbert Gia from Dr. Lingenfelter, Jul 2014

⁵² *The Richard and Naomi Lingenfelter Western Mining Collection*, U.C., San Diego

⁵³ *Desert Bonanza*. Arthur H. Clark, Jr., was head of the company when it published *Desert Bonanza*.

*branchlet. It came to my very young mind that perhaps I should never again witness a scene of such delicate, startling beauty.*⁵⁴

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⁵⁴ **Ibid.**