

The Legacy of the “Old Hermit”

by Tom Kollenborn (c) 2001

Elisha Marcus Reavis, the “Old Hermit”, was one of the most interesting characters to enter Arizona Territory in the 1860’s.

He was born in Beardstown, Illinois, in 1827. He was college educated and taught school for a short time in El Monti, California, before he started searching for gold along California’s “mother lode”. He worked a gold claim briefly on the San Gabriel River, about the same time Jacob Waltz, of Lost Dutchman Mine fame, worked for Ruben Blackney. Reavis’ gold prospecting was not too successful.

He traveled to Arizona Territory early in the 1863 and returned to California and married Mary Y. Sexton on December 30, 1867, in San Gabriel. Shortly after his marriage, he returned to a wanderlust way of life and started prospecting again along the San Gabriel River. Reavis’ wife eventually gave birth to a daughter, Louisa Marie, but Reavis abandoned his wife and young daughter and returned to Arizona Territory in 1869.

It is not known why Reavis left his wife and daughter in California. He supposedly returned to Arizona Territory with his uncle, Isham Reavis, a newly appointed territorial supreme-court justice. Shortly after his return, he operated a horse ranch on the Verde River north of Fort McDowell in 1870. It is believed Reavis broke and trained pack animals for the Army at Fort McDowell. It was at this time some historians believed he started accompanying the Army into the mountains south of the Rio Salinas (Salt River). Reavis apparently became aware of the idyllic valley south of the Salt River by 1872.

Elisha Marcus Reavis moved into the high mountain valley that now bears his name shortly after 1872. Voting records indicate he was registered in Pinal County in 1876. Reavis lived and farmed the valley for some twenty years and was a truck gardener who supplied vegetables to the small mining camps that dotted the central mountain region of Arizona Territory.

Much has been written, told and argued about the life and times of Elisha Marcus Reavis. Yes, he was a distant cousin to the infamous James Addison Reavis, known as the “Baron of Arizona.” However, he had nothing to do with his shady cousin, who became Arizona’s first big land fraud king.

Elisha was an excellent shot with his 45-70 Winchester rifle and the Apache respected his marksmanship and left him alone in his mountain retreat. Reavis supplemented his diet with game he killed with his rifle.

He was a loner, but he did enjoy visitors at his mountain sanctuary. He probably had the only library of fine books ever kept within the boundaries of the Superstition Wilderness Area. The Reavis legend grew because of his personal appearance, his intelligence and the isolated way he lived. He never shaved or cut his hair and seldom took a bath. His unkempt appearance certainly added to this legacy.

The old hermit’s health created a lot of concern among his few friends in the fall of 1895. He was close to seventy years old and still making trips from his mountain home to the small towns in central Arizona Territory to sell his vegetables. The chores around his farm were enough to keep a young man busy all the time, let alone a seventy year old man.

Reavis cultivated and irrigated about fifteen acres of land by himself. He had chickens, turkeys, hogs, burros, two horses and several dogs to care for.

Next Week, Part II

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A man named James Dalabaugh often checked in on Reavis to see how he was doing. Dalabaugh knew Reavis wasn’t doing too well in the spring of 1896. Dalabaugh had stopped by the ranch on April 10, and Reavis was preparing to leave the ranch for a trip into Mesa to buy seed potatoes. Dalabaugh made a check of his mining property in the area and ended up at the JF Ranch on May 6, 1896, and found out his old friend had not stopped by the ranch. Dalabaugh decided to back track to the Reavis Ranch. Along the trail just out of Roger’s Canyon he found the remains of the “old hermit” under a large juniper tree.

Elisha Reavis died along the Reavis Mountain Canyon trail about four miles south of his home on April 10, 1896. The old hermit was buried in an Indian ruin nearby because it was the only place a grave could have been dug. His grave was marked with a stone bearing his name, date of birth and date of his death. This lonely marker disappeared sometime during the 1980’s.

Reavis did not have a considerable estate. However, the estate was large enough that Pinal Superior Court Judge D.C. Stevens was appointed as probate. Stevens appointed H.H. Benson as the administrator of the estate and John J. Fraser was appointed the appraiser along with Charles P. Mason. James Willaboa was appointed to care for the animals and other property at the ranch until the probate was settled.

The following is a list of things that were probated by the Superior Court of Pinal County. The list included \$60 in cash, 300 pounds of corn and beans, cook outfit, wheel barrow, shot gun, rifle, several sets of harness, ten pack saddles, two riding saddles, chisels, wedges, shovels, picks, grinding stone, wagon, two horses, twenty-two burros, fifty turkeys, twenty hogs, cultivator, plows, disc, land leveler, and many other items found around a farm.

A careful study of the Elisha Marcus Reavis probate provides the information that would illustrate why so many people have made confusing remarks about the old “Hermit of Superstition Mountain.” He did not plow fifteen or twenty acres by hand. He owned draft animals. His team pulled shear plows, disc plows and a land plane to prepare his garden each year. He had all the necessary tools to operate a truck garden high in the mountains north of the Silver King Mine. It is amazing how Reavis packed all of this equipment into the valley from Silver King, Pinal, Florence and Mesa.

Reavis’ legacy includes the many landmarks named after him. There is Reavis Valley, Reavis Mountain, Reavis Trail Canyon, Reavis Gap, Reavis Creek, Reavis Saddle and Reavis Fall.

It has been more than a century since the “Old Hermit” died and yet we are constantly reminded of his existence by these many landmarks named after him. He was a well educated, hard working man who preferred the isolation of his mountain valley far removed from society in general.



Reavis Ranch Valley

Frazer e-mail from Tom

