UNCLE NATE *of Palomar*

The entertaining story of the carefree life of Nathaniel Harrison, a negro, but known as "the first white man" to live on Palomar Mountain

By VIRGINIA STIVERS BARTLETT

"If I were to tell you the story of Napoleon, I should take it from the lips of Frenchmen, who find no language rich enough to paint the great captain of the Nineteenth Century. Were I to tell you the story of Washington, I would take it from your hearts, you who think no marble white enough on which to carve the name of the Father of his country. But I am to tell you the story of a Negro, who has left hardly one written line. . . . ."

UNLIKE Wendell Phillips, who had to glean the story of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the negro leader of Haiti, from the reluctant lips of his enemies, men who despised him as a negro and slave, and hated him because he had beaten them in battle, I have the story of Nigger Nate from the friendly lips of ranchers on Palomar Mountain, who loved him because he was human and friendly.

It was spring on the Palomar, in the County of San Diego, cradle of California. All day we had ridden through fields of flowers, followed green watercourses and mustard-bounded roads through the Valley of the San Luis Rey. We passed the mission that gave the valley its name, then the humble red tiles and *campanario* of the Asistencia San Antonio de Pala. Again and again we raised our eyes from the willow-mirroring waters of the San Luis Rey River to the looming purple bulk of Palomar Mountain. Palomar (the dove cote) named for the great flocks of wild pigeons that visited the region in other days, coming in such great flocks that they bore to earth the sturdy, ancient branches of oaks and sycamores where they rested.

By sunset we were at the great Pauma Rancho. The master of the rancho, a transplanted Kentuckian well known in San Diego as "Jack", awaited us with a barbecued dinner. We fell upon the beef, charred with oak wood, the *frijoles*, and coffee.

Even repletion and weariness could not keep our eyes from constantly seeking Palomar Mountain. Below us the Pauma Valley curled, with symmetrical fields of tiny bean shoots, young grain, and wildflowers tesselating it, cut by the swift flowing Pauma Creek. Then the mountain soared more than 6000 feet toward the sky, a very old mountain, eroded by ages into soft contours; friendly and accessible in spite of its height. Sunset poured over Palomar, an indescribable pageant. Wood smoke, odors of oaks, pungency of pines mingled with the biting smoke from hand-rolled cigarettes.

When it was dark, we wandered down to the Cañon de los Tecolotes, (canyon of the night owls). It was perfectly still except for the moving of a stream, and the chuckling of the night owls.

"Now I understand, Jack," I said, "why you are never lonely, though you say your nearest neighbor is ten miles away."

He knocked his pipe against the heel of his boot, and carefully killed all the little red coals with a rancher's respect for fire.

"No one could ever be lonely here. Nigger Nate, the first white man on Palomar lived here about eighty years, and he was never lonely."

"*Nigger* Nate . . . the first *white* man?" Jack chuckled.

"Well, that's what he always called himself, and no one ever disputed him. He was the first man not an Indian to live in these parts. The Spanish-Californians never lived up here; they stayed around the mission, and in San Diego. But Nate had a cabin on the mountain, near a spring. Why, there's a monument to his memory there now."

A monument! My mind's eye saw other monuments scattered through California, honoring the State's immortals. Tusitala's galleon in Portsmouth Square in San Francisco; Father Junípero, serene on the headlands above the Bay of Monterey, the stone marker to the Donner party on Donner Lake, another marker on Frémont's trail over the mountains into Santa Barbara; the majestic Pioneer Mother at Ontario, Stephen White on the green courthouse lawn in Los Angeles. A noble company, a goodly company. And among them a monument to a negro, an unknown negro.

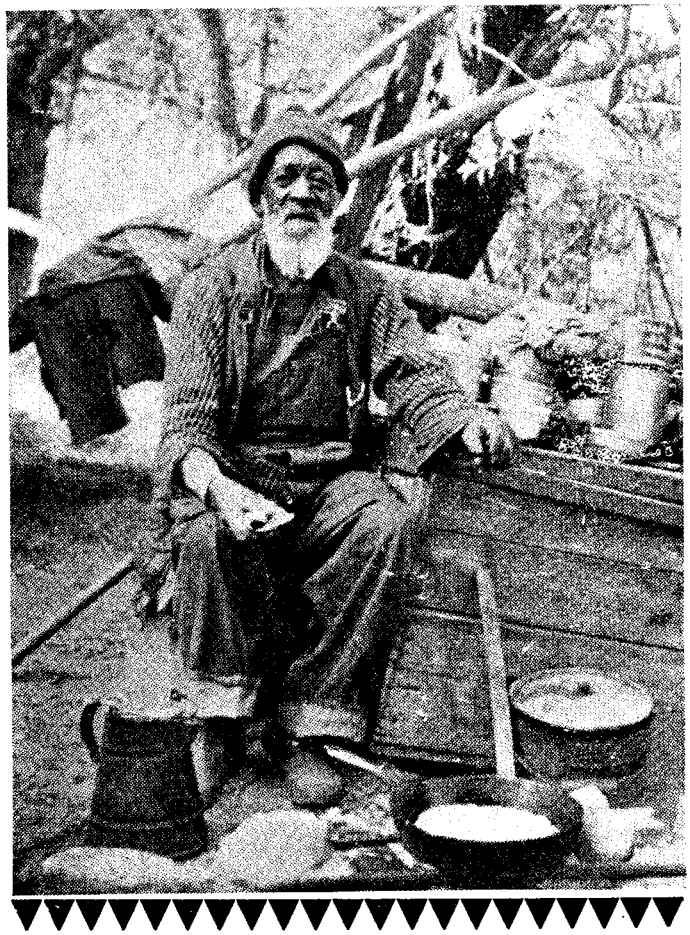
I was about to frame more questions, but my host anticipated me.

"We'll start early in the morning and go there, then you can see the place for yourself."

About five the next morning the sun rose over Palomar. The morning was misty, the colors glorious. Below the peaks a herd of little white clouds moved unhurriedly southward, like white woolly sheep stealing across the slopes that shone so green in the early morning light. In the trees over the ranch house a thousand birds woke with clamor—mountain towhees, wrens, linnets, golden orioles, and curious birds coming north from such strange places as the valley of Comondú in Baja California. And such sweet odors! But the spice of bacon and coffee overcame everything else.

As we left, our host pointed away across the valley, narrowing his eyes. "About half way down that grade you see zig-zagging

Nathaniel Harrison, the Kentucky negro, is regarded as the first "white man" to settle in the back country of San Diego County, and about him has grown a considerable legend



there, stands Nigger Nate's. We'll be there directly."

"Directly" evidently meant several hours.

We passed through many Indian reservations, Yuema, Pauma, Portero, La Jolla, Rincon, with their scattered hidden adobes, where many lived under one sagging roof; there were tiny government schools, herding their dark broods like small hens with too abundant families.

There was a single gasoline station, but because a picturesque Indian was sitting on a pony at the pump, we forgave it its unfortunate existence. The Indians seem very happy in Pauma Valley. They raise corn, cattle, grain, "and plenty *frijoles* and *niños*," said our host. We saw them frequently riding on horseback, in crazy buggies, or crazier Fords, working in the fields, or just doing nothing.

Rising higher, we looked down on green meadows, spotted with red dodder, that strangling parasite, called sometimes the matrimony weed. We could see the roofs of the adobes, and on a slope a little graveyard, the apotheosis of desolation. Higher and higher we climbed, through bull pine, sugar pine, red cedar, balsam, canyon oaks, with their sweet acorns, so dear to the Indian palate; clumps of frothing white and lavender mountain lilac, *cascara sagrada*, and red manzanita.

Then we were at the summit of Palomar. The country stretched below us, mountains to the north, desert to the east, Mexico to the south, the hazy Pacific to the west.

A few breathless moments at the peak of Palomar, then down the grade called Nigger, a narrow steep trail that doubles on itself endlessly on the mountain side.

At last we stopped suddenly at a little monument, oddly foreign yet strangely suitable in its wild setting. I thought it was a tomb, but it marks no grave. It is a cenotaph in that mountain solitude. White quartz and granite, roughly cut, form the monument, which is about five feet high. In a niche is a copper plate, with the words:

Nathaniel Harrison's Spring
Brought Here a Slave About 1848
Died October 10, 1920
Aged 101 Years
A Man's a Man for a' That

A few feet away is the spring, now cemented over, and from which an old fashioned pump, with a little priming, brings clear, cold water.

Clambering a little way up the mountain side, we found the cabin of Nigger Nate. It is not like a miner's cabin, nor the shacks of cattlemen or sheepherders.

Upon the pine-clad slopes of Palomar Mountain, Uncle Nate built this rude shack which he made his home for many years

Any one from Dixie would see it and say, "a darkey's shack!" It looks as though it might have been brought, sticks, stones, and mud for the chinking, straight from Nate's birthplace, Kentucky, and set up on one of the West's oldest mountains. Nate built its one room, twelve feet square, with its door and window, himself, and the weird, rambling fireplace that looks like an Arthur Rackham illustration for a haunted house. Once it was covered with a shake roof, but that has fallen in during the rains and suns of a decade that has passed, since its dusky owner left it.

The ridge pole of sycamore is still in place and from it hangs an old shovel handle, with a dangling collection of rusty wire hooks. These once supported Nate's flour, sugar, bacon, and surely "cawn meal", and kept them out of reach of the thieving pack rats. Forlornly empty they rattle harshly in the sweet mountain breeze. No edibles about now to tempt the hungry little wood creatures. But I saw the hind leg of a rabbit in the fireplace. Did Nate cut off the magic hind foot, and carry it away with him when the white folks took him away from his cabin, and down the mountain? For that's what they did. . . .

The first negro to approach California, without actually reaching here, was Estevanico, or Little Steve, an Arabian negro from Azamora on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. He came with Cabeza de Vaca in search of the Seven Cities of Cibola, and found death at the hands of the Zuñi Indians who called him the "black Mexican with the chile lips". Whether they called him that because his lips were red like chiles, or that they were swollen from eating chiles there is no way of knowing.

Negro blood began trickling into California with the first white blood. According to the Franciscan historian, Palóu, the first Christian burial with the rites of the Holy Catholic Church in California, was given a dead man with negro blood.

A street in San Francisco is named Leidesdorff, for William Alexander Leidesdorff, once vice-consul of Mexico in earliest American days, a diplomat and man of affairs. He owned the first steamship to pass through the Golden Gate. Leidesdorff was the son of a Danish sugar planter, and a mulatress, and was born on the Island of Saint Croix.

The linseed oil, and paint which colored the bear of the Bear Flag was filched by one John Grider, negro, and member of the Bear Flag party. Other negroes who played their parts in California history were William Robinson, and George Moore, who were pony express riders.

In 1855 the first colored convention was held in Sacramento. There were members all over the State, and as there was no rapid mail, word of African activities were transmitted via the barber chair, as every barber in those days was a negro. Peter Beggs of Los Angeles was a well known member of the fraternity, and has been mentioned by at least two distinguished historians, Major Horace Bell, and Judge Benjamin Hayes.

There is one other Californian negro who distinguished himself for writing a poem, which was published in the '70s. He signed himself "Jeams", and called his poem *My Razor.*

A thunderbolt from Heaven sent,
When angels warred against their god,
Fell on the summit of Mount Atlas,
And Hercules tore it from the sod;
Vulcan, the mythological smith,
From a small spark this razor made,
And Venus, who admired the work,
Smiling sweetly, kissed the blade.

In 1850 the colored census of the new State of California was 962. Of these 872

BELOVED RECLUSE

of the mountains

REMOVED *from man's travelled ways, and yet not alone for he had the comradeship of the wild things, Nathaniel Harrison lived for seventy-two years in the eerie Eden of Palomar Mountain, "the first white man" of Palomar. He came to California a slave. In his highland fastness he gained his liberty—even from work, won the friendship of neighbors near and far, and contributed vastly to the color of a pioneer community.*—THE EDITOR.

were men; 870 of these were in six Northern California counties. That meant one negro for Los Angeles County, and one negro-at-large who could have been Nigger Nate.

But never a mention of Nathaniel Harrison do I find among negro records. It is said that he came in 1848, with Frémont's Battalion. That is doubtful. But he undoubtedly came with some expedition either as a camp follower, or as a body guard to some army officer. His reasons for coming to California he never told anyone. "Give Uncle Nate a drink," our host said, "and he would tell you more about the county than anyone in it. But never a word about himself."

This rough cairn stands monument to Uncle Nate Harrison, on the heights of Palomar Mountain

Was he a runaway slave, believing he would find California a foreign country where there was no slavery? Did he run away to the mountain of Palomar when he found his status unchanged in a country that was publishing advertisements for runaway slaves? Had he committed some crime, great or petty, which he was afraid to confide to anyone? He was a young man when he came to California "in 1848," according to his memorial, and it is unnatural for the young negro to flee the haunts of men, where he might contact people of his own race . . . the gregarious darkey, who loves, "folks an' comp'ny".

But a fugitive from something or someone he certainly was, and where, in those days or in these, could a fugitive find more remote or safer sanctuary than on friendly Palomar?

HE perhaps came with one of the parties that traveled by the southern route stopping at Warner's Ranch, and ran away from there to the Doane Valley, that beautiful mountain meadow on Palomar, fringed with the greatest pines south of the Tehachapi, abounding in deer, pumas, bear, and trout streams, where wild azaleas, lilac, giant ferns, and tiger lilies bloom in the summer. It was a nameless spot then, except for a possible Indian name. Years later two brothers, named Doane, homesteaded there. They lived for years without speaking, in cabins a few feet apart, because of some bitter quarrel. Nigger Nate did not homestead there. Years passed before he homesteaded his eighty acres on Nigger Grade. Was it because he thought himself still a slave? And did some wayfarer meet him, and tell him of the Civil War, and the Emancipation Proclamation?

Did that open a new life to him? For he came at last out of hiding, or was driven out by the snows, that kept him prisoner one long winter. Then he found his spring, and built his cabin. Gradually a few white ranchers settled on the mountain, and in Pauma Valley. These became his friends. From Lookout Point, near his cabin, he would look down on the trail he had made, and see a horseman coming up the grade, or a wagon clucking up the mountain.

And when the traveler arrived he would find Uncle Nate grinning happily, with a brimming pail of water for man and beast. They would gossip together, and drink perhaps a stronger water than came from the spring. Everyone brought donations to the old negro when they came up the mountain, and when travelers were scarce, Nate would mount his old white horse, and go visiting, to find out "how come". He must have been a strange figure, his skin polished black as coal, and his beard as white as the horse he rode, coming down the steep mountain trail, singing, chuckling and talking to himself in a detached manner.

He is almost legend now.

Among the old timers throughout the Palomar country I gleaned little bits of knowledge about Uncle Nate, as they called him. They remember him when they were children, and when Nigger Nate's Spring was a destination of their "wagon-days" picnics. He loved children, and children loved him. And he loved watermelon as might be expected.

"He would split a big melon in four, eat off one side, spit seeds out the other, and talk through the middle" one old timer chuckled. And when I asked this rancher for other information he said, "Oh, pshaw! You go on down to So-and-So's ranch, ask some of the liars down there about Uncle Nate. I'm only a second-rate liar. Down at that ranch they raise the best liars on Palomar."

Then the liars on the So-and-So ranch told me other things; how Nate always turned up by daybreak on Christmas morning, riding into the ranch carolling "Chrissmuss gif'!" Whatever other customs of the South he may have forgotten after nearly a hundred years, that one stayed with him.

All the liars, second and first rate alike, agreed on one thing. Uncle Nate never did a solid day's work in his life. He was willing to come and help out at fruit picking time, or for other harvesting events, but on his arrival he always had a "miz'ry", and his assistance was by way of being entertaining after a little "miz'ry remedy". He hated work, shunned it, fled from it, and enjoyed the distinction of being not only the first white man on Palomar, but the laziest.

So after consulting the best liars on Palomar, I read a report in an old San Diego newspaper, written at the time Nate was brought down from the mountain. In it the reporter said, either in his innocence, or because he was unfamiliar with facts, and had to tell a story, "He was sober and industrious and esteemed by all." Surely this reporter out-prevaricates the prize prevaricators of Palomar! What he should have said was that Nate was a good-for-nothing, lovable old darkey, loved in spite of, not because of, certain qualities which he possessed.

THEN war times came along, and people were too busy, too worried, too sad to take trips up lovely Palomar. Few were the travelers by Nigger Spring, and no one noticed that it was neglected, and that Uncle Nate was not at hand to greet them. He was shy of greeting automobiles, anyway, and had never been known to ride in one.

He was too old then—nearly a hundred—to mount the aged horse and travel down the mountain side. So he lay in his unventilated cabin and dozed and dreamed, perhaps of the old South and the secret of his exile to the mountain.

Strangely enough, it was people of his own race who delivered Nate back to the slavery of the white man's ways. Some of them did visit him at last, and finding him so aged, and suffering from a cold, arranged with authorities to bring him to San Diego where he could have care. It is a mystery to his friends how Nate was persuaded by the authorities to get into the motor that carried him away. Perhaps it was an inborn awe and respect for strange whites with authority that caused him to leave.

Anyway, they took him away without giving him time for one farewell to his mountain, without letting him gather up any of his belongings the pitiful playthings of his loneliness not even his old pipe. They took him away from the mountain to the San Diego County Home for the Aged. As he put feeble, reluctant feet into the motor he had dreaded so long—was the dread premonitory?—he waved his black hand.

"G'bye, all," he said.

"They took him to the hospital," said the rancher who was telling me the story of Nate's last days. "They took him away from the mountain where he had lived for nearly a century—where he knew every trail, every tree, every stream, and breathed the mountain air with every breath. They put him in an institution. They meant well, it was the only thing to do. But we all believe he must have thought he was being carried back to slavery."

The rancher smiled sadly.

"When the nurses began peeling away his layers of overalls, which he had accumulated, one over the other, for years, it was the beginning of the end. Then they bathed him. I think that killed him. He didn't last long after that. Some of us would visit him, and he would beg to be taken back, back to Palomar."

In a little while he was dead.

And buried.

Not buried on the mountain, amid the lilacs and dogwood, with rabbits and quail to scamper over his grave, but in the paupers' field. Nathaniel Harrison, in the paupers' field! He who had owned sunset and sunrise, a spring of sparkling water, and the whole looming purple bulk of Palomar Mountain for companion.

But the friendly "liars of Palomar" could not forget him. They remembered the curious ways of this friendly and lovable old negro. They still knew the memory of his shuffling gait—his never-ending, yet never serious "mizries"—and to this day the ranchers will recall for their visitors stories of Uncle Nate and his tumble-down shack on the purple slopes.

Mayhap these tales have lost somewhat in vividness, but none can deny the truth and the color of the legend that is Uncle Nate's among the *rancheros* of Palomar.

So a negro joined the goodly company of California's immortals and has a monument erected to his memory—the first white man on Palomar.

Palomar Mountain (6126 feet) is a familiar landmark of San Diego's back country. In the photograph below its bulk looms dimly over the shacks of Temecula in Pichanga Canyon. Uncle Nate, a pioneer of '48, by his own commission, made the friendly mountain his home. Photo by C. C. Pierce