



The end of the Mobley Café: “Not even a scorched branch remains to mark the place where the Mobley enterprises went up in flames.”¹ (Forest Supervisor Walt Puhn, 1966)

Sam Mobley – Dreamer or Con Man?

by
Marie Mogge

Letter to Sam Mobley from Lyndon B. Johnson, Office of the President, September 7, 1965:

Your dear friend and mine, Dr. Clain Steffanelli Curator of Numismatics of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. has informed me of your untiring efforts in the search for Silver ore to alleviate the world shortage of Silver for coinage and commercial use. I wish to thank you on behalf of the Citizens of the United States, and the world at large for pointing out the true facts of an abundant supply of both Gold and Silver in the mines of the United States...²

Memo from Walter Puhn, Forest Supervisor of the Sierra National Forest to the Regional Forester, February 10, 1966:

I know of nothing that has been a greater pleasure for me to report to you than the successful conclusion of the Mobley mining claims' case as far as Sam Mobley himself is concerned. Sam Mobley is irrevocably wiped out and nothing remains of his establishment on Highway 41 but a pleasant parking place seeded to grass.³

For 23 years from 1942-1965, a spectacular drama played out along the banks of Lewis Creek. Once the home of poet and entrepreneur Clifford Corlieu, this quiet location became the battleground between an irascible character named Sam Mobley and the U.S. Forest Service.

Who was Sam Mobley? To some he was a thief and a con man, to others he was a loyal friend who believed in the laws of the United States, laws that gave him the right to dispose of his property as he saw fit. Maybe he was all of these things.

Samuel Mobley appears in the historical record in 1939, and disappears from the record in 1965. He became involved with Anel Corlieu Mortensen, daughter of Charles Clifford Corlieu (for whom Corlieu Falls is named) sometime in the 1930s. They eventually married. Few would dispute that he could be a difficult man. His name crossed the desk of three Forest Supervisors and numerous rangers; none would forget the name of Sam Mobley.

It all started innocently enough. Clifford Corlieu filed the Veiled Face mining claim in 1919, in the area now known as Corlieu Falls. He may, or may not, have actually mined the area. Probably, he used the claim as an excuse to build a cabin and live as a free spirit beside a waterfall -- not a completely unique use of a mining claim. He lived on the claim for ten years, until his death in 1929.

One of his four daughters, Anel, saddened by her fathers passing, obtained a special use permit from Forest Supervisor Maurice Benedict in 1935 to continue possession of her father's cabin and claim

for “sentimental value.”⁴ In 1937, Anel Corlieu Mortensen, carrying on the entrepreneurial Corlieu spirit, obtained yet another special use permit from Forest Supervisor Maurice Benedict for 10 acres of forest land to build a resort near Corlieu Falls. At this resort she planned to sell “nicknacks from pine cones and other forest products, such as strangely formed limbs, etc.”⁵ to the tourists traveling Highway 41. And that is how the trouble began.

This is also where the story begins to get complicated. Coincidentally, this is where Sam Mobley enters the picture.

In 1939, a Mr. R.C. Ramage somehow came into possession of the physical property of Anel’s resort. How that transfer occurred became cause for disagreement.

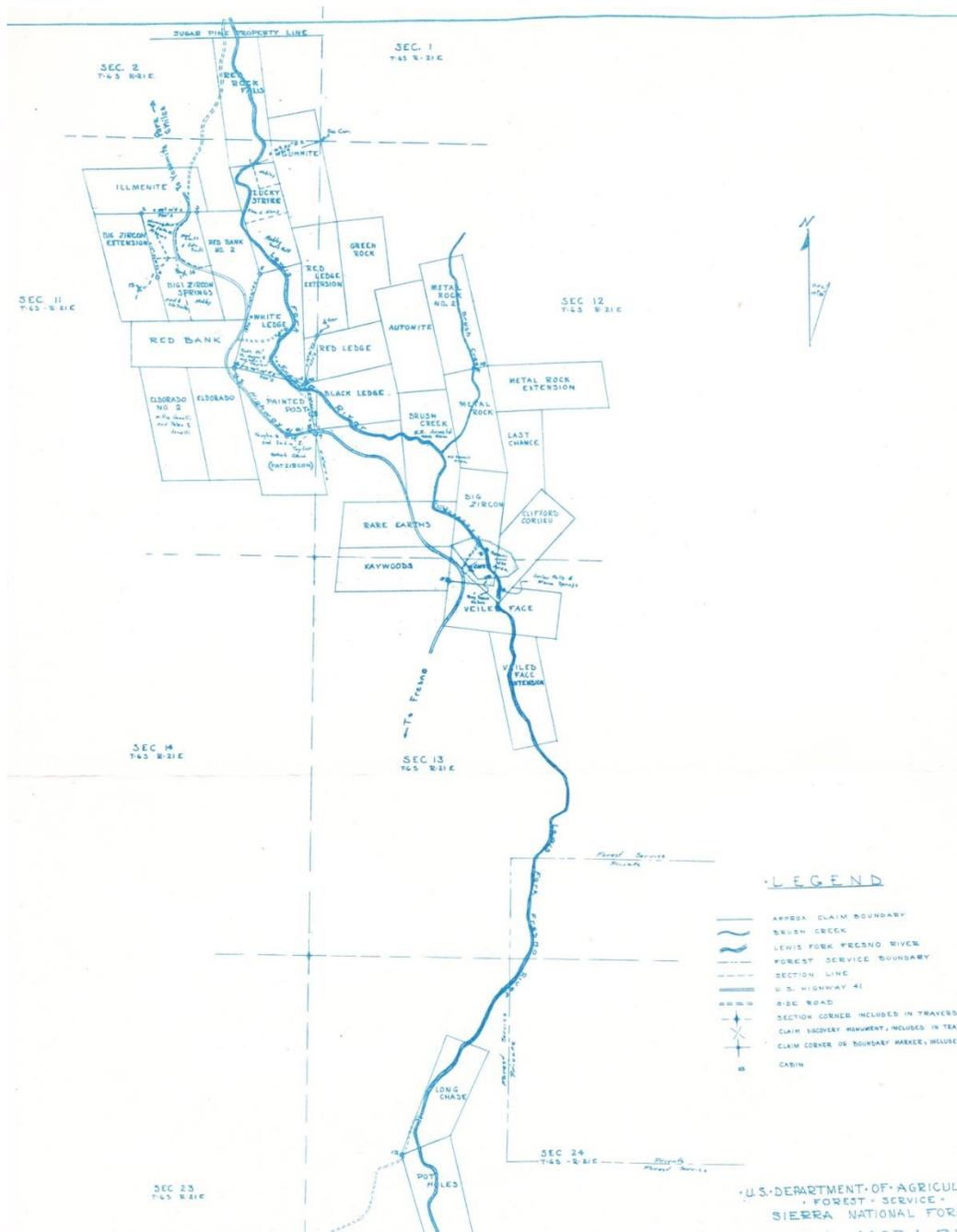
The Forest Service contended that Anel sold the physical property to Ramage, essentially as a loan, while executing an agreement whereby the property would be reconveyed to her by Ramage in one year, for the sum of \$1750.00, plus the expense of a caretaker. Since the property changed hands from Anel to Ramage, the Forest Service transferred the title of the resort special use permit to Ramage.

Sam Mobley’s version is just slightly different. Forest Supervisor Benedict, after realizing the value of the property being held by Anel Corlieu Mortensen, and after accepting a bribe to have Anel displaced, began “a reign of terror” which caused “serious physical and mental damage”⁶ to Anel, in order to encourage her to abandon the property. As part of this reign of terror, Clifford Corlieu’s cabin was burned to the ground by Ranger Sam Munhall, a dishonest minerals examiner was hired to declare the claim invalid, and the resort special use permit was illegally transferred to Mr. Ramage (Ramage being in on the deal to oust Anel).



Ranger Sam Munhall, according to Sam Mobley he was a key player in the Forest Service's reign of terror. In any event, Ramage came into possession of the special use permit and its property. He operated the resort for a time, then sold the permit to a Mr. DeVaux who also operated the resort for a time. DeVaux later deeded the property to the Boy Scouts of America.

Meanwhile, Sam and Anel began filing mining claims along the Highway 41 corridor from Cedar Valley to Sugar Pine. They filed overlapping claims on the area of the resort, posted no trespassing signs, and purportedly harrassed customers of the resort. The couple mined for uranium, zirconium, hafnium, rare earths, and other unusual minerals.



*Sam and Anel Mobley's mining claims.*⁷

The first of many legal actions taken by the Forest Service against Mobley began in 1942. In August, the Forest Service acquired an injunction against Sam and Anel for mining activities in the area of the resort, and for interfering with the operations of the resort.

In September, Ranger Munhall served a Demand to Vacate notice to the couple. Sam and Anel left the resort area, but continued to occupy other mining claims, and continued to block access to the patrons of the resort.

By 1945, Mobley had set up a sawmill on his Brush Creek claim, and was sawing lumber for cabins.



Could this be Sam Mobley relaxing on the porch of his Brush Creek cabin?

Starting in 1945, the Forest Service began to repeatedly request to have a minerals examiner assess the Mobley claims. Sam responded that he would shoot any minerals examiner that came on his claims.

Mobley understood that being in the throes of the Cold War, with the nation gearing up for a transfer to nuclear power, his reserves of uranium, zirconium, and hafnium, all useful minerals for nuclear development, were important, even essential. He believed that he had located one of the largest deposits of uranium in the western United States, and therefore, had a valid claim. The Forest Service didn't quite see it that way.

In fact, they couldn't find any evidence that any minerals were present in any commercial quantity on any of the mining claims. In an official minerals examination, one where the examiner didn't get shot, Consulting Geologist Robert L. Rose concluded that, "No mineralogical features are present to indicate any of these claims have any potential as mining property."⁸

Sometime in 1945, Sam began selling portions of his claims to people to build summer cabins on. Sam knew he had valid claims, and that gave him the right to sell these properties. The Forest Service believed the sale of the properties to be fraudulent.



One of the many cabins built on Sam Mobley's mining claims

In 1950, the Forest Service again requested a minerals examination. Sam refused. Instead, he built a rock museum, then a café. Then he tried to sell timber off his claims. He sold a portion of a claim for the construction of a service station. By now, clusters of cabins, and roads constructed to access those cabins, could be found all along Highway 41 and Lewis Creek. A unique community of recreationists had been established.

Many of these cabin owners thought of Sam Mobley as their friend, and supported him in his battle against those who were trying to drive him out. Mobley considered the cabin owners to be investors in his mine, and in the future of the nation.

To write a history of any land
or place that has had a past
of people who came and settled there
and did the things that last

Is to raide the Ghosts of a sturdy few
that stand out among the throng
of those who have came and gone their way
thinking the time too long

To stay and toil to make a home
in a place so far away
from the beaten path where life is easy
for those who live only for today.

In the foothills east of the desert sands
where the granite craigs are seen,
miles from the railroad that would some day be built
through the valley of the San Joaquin,

Forming the cities we know today
Madera, among them, this County seat
of a country that had a past,
and now has a future none can deny
like her granite craigs will last,

To enrich the lives of those who come
to enjoy her climate and cenary grand,
and reap of her wealth of material things
in this most beautifull land.

Among his other talents, Sam Mobley was a poet. This poem continues for another 56 verses; it seems Sam didn't do anything small.⁹

Finally, the Forest Service had had enough, and legal action against Sam Mobley began in earnest. He was maintaining a rock museum on public land without authorization. He was maintaining a restaurant on public land without authorization. He was conducting restaurant business on public land without authorization. Not to mention fradulently selling mining claims for cabin sites.



Mobley's rock museum and café, a scenic stop for tourists on Highway 41 for years.

Sam Mobley was in and out of court in 1954 and 1955. Trials were scheduled. Trials were postponed. Trial dates were reset. Trials were thrown out on technicalities.

Sam continued to sell cabin sites through 1958. More charges were filed.

The beginning of the end came in 1959, when Mobley was found guilty of fraud in Superior Court.

Sam responded by filing a \$250,000 damage suit against Ranger Whitfield and Madera County.

In January of 1961, a federal hearing declared that Sam Mobley's mining claims were not valid and he did not have the right to sell them. Sam and Anel Mobley continued to defy the courts and the Forest Service by continuing to reside on the claims.

In April of 1964, Mobley was placed on probation for violating a court injunction against occupying his claims. A restraining order was then filed to prevent him from living on the claims. In November, four more lawsuits were filed against the Mobley's and some of the cabin owners, for living on government land without an authorized permit.

Court Orders Marshal To Clear Mining Claim

Federal Court Judge M. D. Crocker has ordered the United States Marshal's Office to clear the Zircon Springs mining claim of Sam Mobley of all improvements.

The judge, at a hearing yesterday, also held Mobley in contempt of court for not clearing

the mining claim himself as ordered by the court Aug. 10.

Last year the government filed suit against Mobley contending that the mining claim, located near Oakhurst, Madera County, bears no valuable minerals. This was determined at a Department of Agriculture hearing several years ago, the government says, and since that time Mobley has been living on the land illegally.

The government asked for 10 years rent at \$536 a year from Mobley and the request was granted by Judge Crocker.

Mobley has continually maintained that there are valuable minerals on the land. He did not appear at the hearing yesterday. Assistant US Atty. Richard Dauber said he served notice of the hearing to Mobley through the mail Nov. 8.

There are several buildings on the mining claim, including a museum, which Mobley says he does not charge admission to.

Mobley has filed a notice of appeal of the August ruling by Judge Crocker.

The judge said he will determine the punishment for the contempt of court ruling after the buildings have been removed.

In February of 1965, a trial was set for what the Forest Service hoped would be the final chapter of the saga: Sam and Anel's eviction. Sure enough, in August of 1965, the courts gave the Mobley's 60 days to vacate their property, as well as assessing the Mobley's \$5,360.00 rent for the ten years that they occupied the area without a valid mining claim.



Sam Mobley loaded up his remaining belongings and disappeared - where did he go?

The destruction of the Mobley Café and Museum, marking the end of “one of the most aggravated and frustrating mining claim cases to ever plague Forest officers anywhere,”¹⁰ took place on December 20, 1965. Forest Service crews led by Jess Love, “burned, buried or hauled away”¹¹ the buildings and remaining effects of the Mobley occupation.



The area today - a parking lot and trailhead few would recognize as the contested ground of the Mobley era.

Was Sam Mobley just misunderstood? Was he simply an entrepreneur trying to live the American dream, a patriot working for the good of the nation? Or was Sam Mobley a con man? Did he intentionally bilk people out of their savings by selling fraudulent mining claims? In the end, the result was the same. People lost their savings, lost their dreams, and had to tear down the cabins where they spent many leisurely hours enjoying the forest.

After the loss of his mining claims, museum and resort, Sam Mobley disappeared. No clues could be found as to where he went after he left the Sierra National Forest. Anel Mobley lived to be 87 years old, passing away in Fresno in 1982.



Sam and Anel, defeated in the end.

One final question remains: did Sam Mobley really believe that he was in the right? I think he did.

Notes:

¹ Puhn, Walter J., United States Government Memorandum (Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Mobley Collection, HD000313) 10 February 1966.

² Johnson, Lyndon B., Office of the President letter (Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Mobley Collection, HD000313) 7 September 1965.

³ Puhn: HD000313.

⁴ Redmond, D., A Summary of Proceedings In The Sam Mobley Mining Claim Problem (Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Mobley Collection, HD000314) 12 April 1962.

⁵ Redmond: HD000314.

⁶ Mobley, Sam, Corlieu Warm Springs letter (Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Mobley Collection, HD000306) 15 December 1962.

⁷ DeKalb, V.M., Sam L. Mobley Mining Claims map (Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Mobley Collection, HD000307) 7 October 1953.

⁸ Rose, Robert L., Geology and Mineral Resources of the Rare Earths, Kay Woods, Zircon Springs, clifford Corlieu, and Veiled Face Claims (Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Mobley Collection, HD000308) July 1968.

⁹ Mobley, Sam L., untitled poem, (Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Mobley Collection, HD000300) no date.

¹⁰ Puhn: HD000313.

¹¹ Puhn: HD000313.

References:

Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database. The Mobley Collection. HD000300 - HD000322: on file at the Bass Lake District office, Sierra National Forest.

Historic photographs are from the Sierra National Forest Historic Photograph Collection.