



## MONTEZUMA WELL

## Montezuma Well 1864 - Present

Montezuma Well, long the home of prehistoric Hohokam, Sinagua, Yavapai, and Apache people, was, following the establishment of Arizona Territory in 1863, a working cattle ranch and one of Arizona's first tourist attractions before being acquired by the National Park Service in 1947. The Well itself passed through a series of owners between 1883 and 1888, when William and Margorie Back bought the squatters claim for the land and filed for a homestead. Over the next 60 years, two generations of the Back family operated the Well ranch and museum.

### History of Land Use

Although most likely encountered by Spanish explorers in the late 1500s, Montezuma Well was not officially re-discovered until 1864, when it acquired the name "Montezuma" from a party venturing forth from Fort Whipple, a military establishment some 50 miles west. These early visitors noted not only the deep water of the Well itself, but also the prehistoric dwellings in and around the Well, and the prehistoric irrigation ditch later reclaimed and used by the first settlers (this ditch transports Well water to residents of the Verde Valley to this day).

The first Euroamerican settlers, Wales Arnold and his wife Jennie (Sarah Jennie Wells) arrived at the Well in 1870. The Arnolds cleared the old prehistoric irrigation ditch and fields,



Wales and Jennie Arnold, the first Euroamericans to settle near Montezuma Well, ca. 1877. The couple were married in 1869 and established their claim at the Well in 1870. Original image courtesy of Sharlot Hall Museum.

## OVERVIEW



COWAN (2012) FIGURE 7

William "Bill" Beriman Back sitting on the porch of the original Back Family home. Original image courtesy of Helen Cain.

diverting water from both Wet Beaver Creek and Montezuma Well to irrigate 30 acres of their holdings, which they operated as a mail station and support post supplying hay and vegetables to the local military post and feed and range space for the horses and mules of the express riders, freight wagons, and stage lines passing through Beaver Creek and the Verde Valley.

In 1878 or so, Wales Arnold lost the mail contract. At this time, he was serving as Justice of the Peace for the expanding Beaver Creek population, so the family, including their adopted Yavapai daughter Lulu Verde, remained, supplying horses and other supplies at the nearby Beaver Head Station. By 1880, however, Arnold foresaw the demise of the stage lines as the railroad moved across Arizona, and sold his claim to Robert Hornbeck, a former employee, moving his family to a ranch south of Camp Verde.

Hornbeck kept the claim for barely a year, selling to William Gilmore Wingfield and his brother-in-law, Robert Pleasant, in 1881. Pleasant accidentally shot himself at a dance, and in 1882, Wingfield and Pleasant's heirs sold the claim, cattle, and the One Horseshoe brand under which they had operated to Moses H. Sherman and Henry Mehrens. Mehrens married Amanda Hutchinson, of one of the original Verde Valley families, and began using the open rangelands surrounding the ranch to raise alfalfa, cattle, and horses.

Prior to the 1882 sale, the boundary of the original homestead had never been patented, but with Sherman's and Mehren's







The Back Ranch, ca. 1944. The old museum and entrance road to Montezuma Well are visible to the far left.

purchase of the claim, the homestead boundaries were officially drawn and filed, opening the adjacent lands to additional claims, including that of one Samuel Shull. Shull, a stockman from Soda Springs, claimed the parcel surrounding Well itself, which he used to range cattle.

Shull was murdered in 1887, by parties unknown, but as legend would have it, had just a few months prior traded his claim to Abraham Lincoln "Link" Smith, half-brother of Robert Hornbeck, for a blue roan horse. Smith then sold the claim to William "Bill" Beriman and Marjorie Back for a team of horses, doubling his profit. The Backs moved as permanent settlers to the homestead in 1889.

Marjorie Back and Amanda Merhens had traveled together to Arizona from Missouri as children, and for the next few years, the two families lived as neighbors. In 1891, however, Henry Mehrens died from injuries sustained in a fall from his horse. His partner, Moses Sherman, had since moved on to Phoenix, but his wife, Amanda, stayed on. Amanda served as postmistress for the short-lived Montezuma Post Office in 1892 and continued to operate the ranch until 1897, when she succumbed to pressure from her husband's old partner, Sherman, and sold to the Backs. The sale reconsolidated the property originally claimed and operated by Wales Arnold, which remained the Back Ranch until sold to the National Park Service in 1947.

### The Back Ranch

Prior to purchasing the neighboring property in 1897, the Back family had worked steadily to clear the bottomlands for farming

and to re-excavate the Montezuma Well outlet and ditch. With the acquisition of the Merhen/Sherman property, the Backs also acquired Wales Arnold's originate water claim to half the flow of Wet Beaver Creek, which allowed the Back family to continue and expand their herd of cattle, their hogs, hay, and produce, and the orchard spanning the combined ranch property.

The first Back residence was built two years before the family bought the neighboring property. Built in 1895, the house had five bedrooms, a poured concrete foundation, and a Dutch-hip roof — what was essentially a mansion for the times. The property also included a log smokehouse, which remains standing, hog pens, and a variety of other outbuildings.



The Back Ranch log smokehouse, built ca. 1895.



Bill Back taking visitors on a boat ride in Montezuma Well on the 4th of July, 1916.

By 1900, the Backs had seven children - Mildred, Alfred, Bertha, Harry, the twins Jessie and Jennie, and William Lester, or "Little Bill." The family sold the products of the ranch, including smoked ham, bacon, and other meats, in the Verde Valley and Flagstaff areas. William Back also served on the school board, was the local voting precinct judge, and served on the road commission.

The Backs also converted Montezuma Well into a tourist attraction. The family had begun entertaining guests almost as soon as the house was completed in 1895, and had improved the area near their barnyard to provide guests a place to camp and picnic while visiting. By 1910, Bill was guiding tourists around Montezuma Well and offering guided excursions to Montezuma Castle, and by 1912, when the Backs sold most of the ranch property, tourism, including boat rides within the Well itself, had become his primary focus. In an January 22, 1915 interview with the *Daily Citizen*, a newspaper out of Tucson, Back said:

*I have fenced in the huge well, to protect it against vandalism and personally conduct sightseers to the interesting places, as well as the bleak caves below the well, where the head men of the [Aztec] tribe evidently held their meetings in the misty past.*

Back also imposed a fee, of course, and the tourism operation continued to be a success, even after Bill's death in 1929 (the same year in which the original Back ranch house burned to the ground). The youngest of the Back children, William Lester (Little Bill), and his wife Mae (Cox), moved back to the ranch to oversee both the farm and the Montezuma Well tourist operation. They build a new bungalow-style house for themselves near the old homesite, and then a small stone museum

for the Well, as well as two rental cabins near the campground and picnic areas. Little Bill and his sons also developed a line of "petrified" souvenirs (items soaked in the water of Montezuma Well until they developed a coating of lime), which they sold along with pottery sherds and arrowheads, and maintained the operation of Montezuma Well until the National Park Service acquired the property in 1947.

### The National Park Service

Although Little Bill had agreed to take over the Back Ranch operations following his father's death in 1929, the family had also expressed interest in having the government take over Montezuma Well as a national monument, an action that was ultimately legislated by Congress in 1943.

Turn over of the property, however, was delayed until funding could be approved and acquired, so that Montezuma Well did not become part of the Park Service (as a unit of Montezuma Castle National Monument) until 1947.

The National Park Service continued to use the Back structures and tourist operation until the Mission 66 initiative of the 1950s, when the museum, cabins, and outbuildings were removed. Many of the original structures remain standing, however, and are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

### The Back Ranch Historic District

Although some of the Back Ranch buildings have been lost to time (the adobe Arnold's Station building, for example), to fire (the original 1895 Back home, which burned in 1929), or have been dismantled, others still remain and are now part of the Back Ranch Historic District, listed in part on the National Register of Historic Places in 2006 and in full in 2012.



William "Little Bill" and Mae Back's bungalow, built in 1929.





WILLIAM L. COWAN, 2012

Looking east along Montezuma Well Ditch, potentially the oldest in-use irrigation canal in central Arizona.

The District encompasses approximately 205 acres in total, and includes portions of the Back Ranch that retain the materials, design, workmanship, feeling, and associations inherent to the era in which they were constructed and used.

**Back House Foundation, ca. 1895** - This consists of the concrete foundation of the original five-bedroom Back house. The house was built in 1895, but burned to the ground in 1929. The house had a poured concrete foundation, and may have been the first house of this type built in the Beaver Creek vicinity.

**Smokehouse, ca. 1895** - The Backs built and operated a log smokehouse starting in 1895 or so. The smokehouse was used to preserve ham, bacon, and other meats, which the Backs sold in markets in the Verde Valley and Flagstaff. The smokehouse remains standing and is now one of the oldest preserved log structures in the Verde Valley.

**Hog Pen, ca. 1895** - The Back family housed their hogs in pens they constructed in natural limestone overhangs (these spaces were also used prehistorically). The alcoves also served as excellent dry storage and were put to that use by the Back family over the years.

**Montezuma Well Ditch** - The Montezuma Well Ditch was originally constructed, in part, by the prehistoric occupants of the region (Hohokam and Sinagua). The ditch was later cleaned and put to use by the Arnolds, and then by the Backs. Both families maintained the ditch and used it to irrigate their fields. The ditch is still functional, and may well be the oldest in-use irrigation canal in central Arizona.

**Island Ditch and Flume, ca. 1910s** - A quarter mile-long ditch built by William Beriman Back that was originally fed by a 100-foot long flume extending off Montezuma Well Ditch. The Island Ditch and flume irrigated a garden area used to grow watermelons and other produce.

**Back House, ca. 1930** - The second Back residence, built by William Lester "Little Bill" Back upon his return to Montezuma Well after his father's death in 1929. The house remains standing and is an excellent example of bungalow-style architecture.

**Farm and Pasture** - Originally Sinagua agricultural fields, the Back Ranch farmlands, pasture, and fields were used to raise alfalfa and to graze cattle, horses, and mules. The fields have not been cultivated in more than 50 years, and the natural vegetation of the area is beginning to take hold.

**Picnic Area** - Once a campground, the Montezuma Well picnic area is now served by a restroom, water fountain, and picnic tables maintained by the National Park Service. The picnic area was also the site of the Verde Valley Pioneer Association reunions from the 1920s through the early 2000s.

## Summary

Acquisition of Montezuma Well by the National Park Service has allowed for not only the protection of the Well itself (a natural resource), but also of the prehistoric and historic sites and artifacts (cultural resources) now contained within the boundaries of this unit of Montezuma Castle National Monument. Visitors can still visit the Well, observe the Sinagua dwellings and the Hohokam/Sinagua/Historic irrigation ditch, picnic near the Well, and with this overview in hand, look down into the valley as they drive into Montezuma Well and envision the Back Ranch in its heyday.

## Source Literature

Cowan, William L. (edited/revised by Robert L. Spude)

2012 Back Ranch Historic District - AZ 0:05:42 (ASM), William B. Back Ranch (Historic American Building Survey #AZ-217 A & B), Montezuma Castle National Monument, Montezuma Well Unit (MOWE). National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, prepared by Arrowhead Historical Research Associates, Rimrock. Approved July 18, 2012, and on file with the National Park Service.