



The GILMAN RANCH FLYER

Issue No. 8

Gilman Historic Ranch and Wagon Museum

Summer 2000

MARSHALL FRENCH GILMAN, DESERT NATURALIST

by Francis J. Johnston



Sarah and M. French Gilman

Editor's note—Marshall French Gilman was a handsome man blessed with keen intelligence, inherent curiosity, and boundless energy. He came closer to actively achieving fame than any other Banning Gilman. Mr. Johnston, author of THE BRADSHAW TRAIL, thought him worthy of a book and wrote several biographical articles about him, the shortest of which appears here. A more detailed account of Marshall French's life, also written by Francis Johnston, appears in the 1996 City of San Bernardino Historical & Pioneer Society's publication HERITAGE TALES which is still available from the society.

Born November 12, 1871, he was the first child of James Marshall Gilman and Martha Smith whose marriage in January had united two names that were to be associated with San Geronio Pass in Riverside County, California, for the next century. Growing up on the family ranch, now a Riverside County historical park, French, as he was known, was thoroughly grounded in the frontier knowledge and farming skills that were to help him make lasting contributions in the fields of ornithology, horticulture, agriculture, and botany.

After French graduated from high school, his education was sufficient in the 1890s for him to be appointed principal of Upland Elementary. However, he soon returned to Banning as editor of the Herald. In short order he also was horticultural inspector, deputy quarantine officer, and forest ranger in western Riverside County. When the U.S. Forest service was formed he moved to Palm Springs as Postmaster and also began horticultural experimentation in peaches, almonds, oranges, figs, and watermelons in the employ of

the McCallum family, founders of that community.

Keeping pace with these activities French had developed a keen interest in birds. With the family ranching reaching to the desert, he could explore, study, and collect freely. At age 13 he had an extensive egg collection. By 19 he had done field work with professional ornithologists.

While stationed as a forest ranger in San Diego County, Gilman heard that a local rancher had shot a condor and taken it to his ranch where efforts were being made to help the injured bird. He and two friends visited the ranch to assist and measure the bird. It took six men working together to measure a wingspread of nine feet, ten and a half inches. Gilman found that two other condors had been killed nearby, one with eleven- and the other with twelve-foot spreads. Gilman provided more information on the species in notes he wrote for *THE CONDOR*, Journal of the Cooper Ornithological Club of Los Angeles which he had joined in 1901. He reported visiting the San Bernardino Mountains in 1888 and counting fourteen condors in one place. He also found there where two pairs between Banning and Palm Springs.

While still busy in Palm Springs French was managing two fruit ranches in Banning. While going back and forth he met the school teacher on the Morongo Indian Reservation, Sarah Elizabeth Morris. She had come from Missouri in 1888 upon learning the position was open. She and French were married in the home of friends in Los Angeles, August 16, 1899. They returned to the Pass to live while Sarah continued teaching on the reservation and French continued in agriculture.

Sarah quickly noticed French's penchant for botany and ornithology and gently used her academic skills to help him develop a scientific approach to both fields. By 1905 their joint interests were so interwoven they decided to combine their careers in the Indian Service. December found them at the Fort Lewis School, La Plata County, Colorado. Service moves followed, she as teacher, he as instructor in farming or industrial arts. On the Pima reservation, Arizona, he superintended the school.

During these years he continued to supply *THE CONDOR* with various notes and articles. The March-April 1909 issue contains a classified bird list from Fort Lewis. An article on Gambel's quail, *Lophortyx gambeli*, delineates the western limits for this bird which he determined over a long desert pasear. At 4,000 feet he found the Mountain quail, and in canyons along the way, the California quail. He speculates on the possibility of hybridization between Gambel's and California quail.

A number of service moves followed until 1916 when the Gilmans resigned and returned home to Banning. Until 1931 French held several agricultural business positions. He supervised cotton experimentation near Palm Springs; studied native American ethno-

botany on the Papago Reservation in Arizona; searched for hosts of the Mediterranean Fruit Fly; and did field research in sand dunes with the U.S. Department of agriculture which was published in the Smithsonian Report for 1930.

Experimental work on the Banning home ranch with his brother, Arthur, included grafting in walnuts, peaches, and persimmons. Also studied were a hybrid orange, Blue Peruvian Cotton, and the propagation of native plants. Field trips with the noted naturalist, Edmund Jaeger, identified the poor-will, *Phalaenoptilus nuttalli*, as a desert dweller that goes into inactive torpor during the Winter. He also identified the sahuaro screech owl which received his name, *Otus asio gilmani*.

The knowledge both French and Sarah had acquired reached the public, especially children, through the hospitality provided at their home in Banning. Unfortunately Sarah contracted glaucoma and was confined to Banning thereafter.

In 1931 French expanded his area of interest to include Death Valley. This was in cooperation with Frederick W. Coville, a botanist with the Bureau of Plant Industry, U.S. Department of Agriculture. In 1890 Coville had been directed by Dr. C. Hart Merriam of the Department to undertake The Death Valley Expedition in order to establish a botanical baseline for the Valley. As a result of this field work two large survey reports were published by Coville in 1893. In 1931 he returned to the Valley for follow-up work and met Gilman. After their joint field work they continued to correspond into December of 1936 when Coville died. At least forty-two letters from Coville to Gilman are on file at park headquarters although there are no copies of Gilman's letters to Coville. The technical information, questions, answers, and plant specimens that passed back and forth in this correspondence further enhanced Gilman's standing in the scientific community of the time.

As a result of that standing he was appointed Acting Custodian of the new National Monument (now park, 1995) when it was established on February 11, 1933. He remained in that capacity until the Superintendancy was activated in May 1934.

A check list, The Plants of Death Valley National Monument for 1946, is accompanied by a memo written in March of that year by W.B. McDougal, Park Naturalist. He notes "the number of plant species known to occur in the Monument is probably somewhere between 600 and 700. . . . All but a very few of the specimens were collected by Mr. M. French Gilman . . . who undoubtedly knew the flora of Death Valley more thoroughly than any other person."

THE CONDOR for September-October 1935, carried, "Notes on Birds in Death Valley," by Gilman. French remarks that while he was Acting Custodian he established a feeding station for animals at the overflow ponds a half mile below Furnace Creek Ranch. All his bird study now had to be done through binoculars as he was enforcing anti-shooting regulations.

The climax of his botanical career came in 1935 and 1936 when, under the auspices of Coville, one plant genus and three species were named for him. Letters tell some of the story. July 2, 1935, "another paper now in press contains the new species *Cymopterus gilmani* . . .," wrote Coville. The common name for this is Gilman parsley. *Astragalus gilmani*, a locoweed of the higher elevations, is mentioned January 7, 1936. A third species is *Gilia gilmani*, noted on page 491 of *A CALIFORNIA AND SUPPLEMENT*, Philip A. Munz, 1968.

Coville documented the genus in *WASHINGTON ACADEMY OF SCIENCES*, Vol. 26, May 15, 1936, pages 209-

213 as *Gilmania*, a new name for *Phyllogonum*. The plant in question was *Gilmania luteola*, commonly called golden carpet.

Barely three years after these scientific triumphs tragedy struck. Now 83, blind from the chronic glaucoma, and subject to falls, Sarah contracted pneumonia and died November 10, 1941 in the home in Banning, French by her side.

Illness had now become a part of his own life. His eulogy in *THE CONDOR* for January-February 1945 mentions that a few years earlier he had been ill. Upon recovery, though nearly seventy, he climbed Telescope Peak, over 11,000 feet at the end of a seven-mile trail from Mahogany Flat past bristlecone pines, the oldest trees in the world. Nevertheless severe sunstroke in the Valley put him in the hospital where he failed to respond to treatment and died July 18, 1944.

They are both interred in Sunnyslope Cemetery, Banning.



FARMS KIDS AT THE FARM

Ranch Hand Bill Deans was instrumental in having 11 high school students from Hemet and Norco High Schools, two of their teachers, and the Riverside County FARMS coordinator for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Pedro A. Torres, visit the Gilman Ranch. FARMS (Farming, Agriculture, and Resource Management for Sustainability) is a program which educates rural, urban, and suburban high school students about the relation between sustainable agriculture, science, and natural resource conservation. The program has been successful in bringing together students, teachers, and agriculturalists in a collaborative effort to help improve human health and the environment.

While at the ranch, the students visited the museum and toured the ranch. At the French Gilman Native Plant Garden, Bill lectured on its continuing growth and care and explained how one day, when it's complete, it will be a feature attraction at the ranch. The remainder of the students' time at the ranch was spent weeding, mulching, and watering the garden under Bill's supervision.

Bill extended an invitation to the group to return in the fall of 2000 and spring of 2001. ★



At the
GILMAN HISTORIC RANCH

The 6th Annual

**FRONTIER/MOUNTAIN MAN
LIVING HISTORY ENCAMPMENT**

SEPTEMBER 20, 21, & 22 (Wed., Thurs., & Fri.) FOR SCHOOL GROUPS

Group programs by appointment only—call (909) 922-9200 for details

SEPTEMBER 23 & 24 (Sat., & Sun.) FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

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GATE OPENS AT 9AM, EVENT ENDS AT 4PM

MEET THE TRAPPERS, MOUNTAIN MEN, AND COWBOYS OF THE GREAT WEST! Visit a 1700-1800s-era living history encampment. See period clothing, tools, and equipment as the rugged life of the pioneers in the early days of the west is recreated.

COME AND ENJOY YOUR GATEWAY TO THE WESTERN FRONTIER!

Shaded picnic tables are available on a first-come basis.
The Wagon Museum and the Gilman General store will be open.

SHELLEY SCHEMES AND DREAMS

I'm in the midst of schemes and dreams. Scheming on how to get the word out about the ranch and all it has to offer with school programs and events like the Living History Encampment coming up in September. And dreaming about the thousands of students, with their teachers and families, visiting and experiencing the unique opportunity the ranch offers as a gateway to the western frontier. I invite you and your families to come out to these events and make this your place for picnics and gatherings.

New happenings—

- ★ New event banners to be placed over Ramsey Street in September
- ★ Construction of new rest room facilities thanks to Supervisor Jim Venable and the funds he was able to find for the project

Be sure to come out to the potlucks held under the olive trees on the last Sunday of each summer month at 5 in the evening. There's always a refreshing breeze and lots of good food.

—Shelley Kibby, Site Interpreter

FALL & WINTER SIZZLER SCHEDULE

When the weather becomes too cold or damp for potlucks under the olive trees at the ranch, the Ranch Hands do the smart thing and head for the Banning Sizzler, 1750 West Ramsey Street, for their dinner meetings. Everyone, not just Ranch Hands, is invited—there is always good fellowship and entertainment.

Festivities begin at 6:00pm, and you have your choice of a steak or chicken breast dinner, or the all-you-can-eat salad bar for the moderate sum of \$8.50 per person. For reservations please call Joan at 849-2133 or Bonnie at 845-9502.

2000-2001 Dinner Schedule

October 10, Tuesday

November 9, Thursday

December 6, Wednesday

January 11, Thursday (Annual Business Meeting)

February 8, Thursday

March 7, Wednesday

April 10, Tuesday

May 8, Tuesday



FOR WANT OF A NAIL . . .

One of the lessons of history is that nothing is often a good thing to do and always a clever thing to say.

—Will Durant

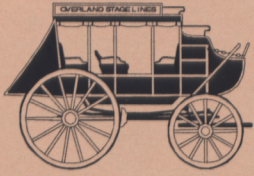
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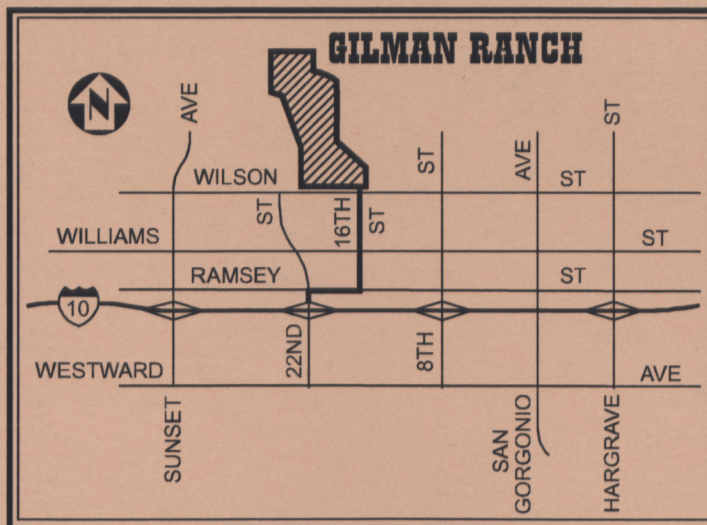


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"To acquire, protect, develop, manage, and interpret for the inspiration, use and enjoyment of all people,
a well-balanced system of areas of outstanding scenic, recreation, and historic importance."



The Gilman Historic Ranch and Wagon Museum is
located at 16th and Wilson Streets in Banning, CA.