

California Historic Route 66 Association

Preservation, Promotion and Enjoyment of Route 66

Buzz Banks Article

In his yard near Green Tree Golf Course, Buzz Banks is chipping balls for his black Lab, Casey to retrieve. Banks is 79, Casey a strapping 11 months. "All my dogs' names have begun with a K' sound", Banks says. "Casey, Queenie... It's a good sound for calling. You can't be shouting, 'Melanie, oh Melanie!' while out hunting."

A retired officer with the California Highway Patrol (he was stationed in Victorville from 1941 to 1969), he used to play "real" golf. But he found it was taking too much time from his other loves: hunting and exploring.

"In fall 1991 I got an elk in Colorado. I took up exploring because the Mojave Desert's at the center of three old trails: the Santa Fe Trail and the Mormon Trail, both from Salt Lake City and the old Government Road, which goes east to Flagstaff. Some stretches have almost disappeared, but at Soda Lake it's easy to see the Old Government Road."

Whether chasing wagon ruts or entertaining visitors in his Victorville living room, Banks is a one-man oral history of California.

"I was born in Los Angeles in 1913," he begins. "We lived up and down California: as far South as cattle ranch in Ramona, near Mexico, and all the way to Hayfork in the extreme north of the state. In Ramona we lived in an adobe house with walls three feet thick. We had cows, pigs-paradise for a little boy.

"My dad was brilliant, but his own worst enemy. He'd get a job and almost immediately quit it. That's why we moved so much. He got over extended and lost the ranch in Ramona."

Banks earliest memory? "At age three I got on my three wheel kiddie car and ran away from home. I went about three blocks, before getting tired and going back home.

"I remember when I was 4, that was 1917, I had mumps on one side. My brother had it on both sides. We were at the San Francisco Embarcadero, watching the troops board ship for Europe.

"My favorite uncle was a photographer for Douglas Fairbanks and May Pickford. During World War I, he took pictures of all the big brass in Paris.

"I paid attention to the war because I loved him. He came back in one piece."

Bank's grandfather Thorpe invented "the original road map, the first honest-to-God, official highway map. He'd take all kinds of photos and reprint them with the captions like 'When you reach this barn, turn left.

The map that looks a bit like an Automobile Club Triptik, gives a wonderfully in-the-trenches vision of early 20th-century motoring. For example, Map 22, the route from Ventura to Santa Barbara, warns of "curves, heavy grades. Follow phone poles all through the mountains."

"But my grandfather didn't bother with the desert," Banks admits.

Appropriately for a CHP officer-to-be, many of Banks's childhood memories star autos. For example: "As a kid in Big Bear," he says, "I had a stripped-down Model T. We'd drive our cars out on the frozen lake - do doughnuts and spin out. We had much harder winters back then."

Banks was married in 1935, "Evelyn and I have two children," says the proud father. "Janet and Randy both live in Chino, within 1-1/2 miles of each other. We've always been a close family."

In 1941, Banks joined the CHP and came to Victorville. "That was the year the speed limit changed from 45 to 55 (I never did cite someone for going 46). George Air Force Base (known then as the Victorville Army Flying School) was just being surveyed. As you topped the pass from down below, you couldn't see any lights at all. All of Victorville was below the level of the fairgrounds and rural electrification hadn't hit yet.

"I was delighted. I loved the desert the openness and freedom."

According to Banks, who seems never to have minced a word in his life, "Back then, Victorville was a cattle town, a mining town, a real Western town. And many officers were winos. A sober officer couldn't get a promotion. This one wino drove away from the gas pump with the hose still in the car. He was promoted to inspector.

"Prohibition had made booze fashionable with people who would never have had a drink otherwise. It was smart-alecky, like graffiti. Big Bear and the Victor Valley were big centers for stills.

"Frank Day raised honeybees. He told me he sold his honey to the boot-leggers. The feds had learned to check sugar sales (sugar is used to make liquor), but they never thought to watch honey.

"In those days, you could fire in the air even in town. Victorville was only two blocks wide - just shoot up and a little to the side."-

But violence itself is far from quaint. "When gunfire starts." Banks says, you can't believe its happening. But it only lasts two seconds bang, bang, bang - then someone drops or runs out of bullets and gives up.

"It was attorneys who drove the cattlemen out of business. I remember Bob Hitchcock, a cattleman in Holcomb Valley, saying 'My grandfather ran off the Indians. Now it's my turn.' You see, all these 1 -1/2 acre lots had begun to spring up. One of Bob's cows would escape and wander into a kitchen garden. The homeowner would close the gate, locking the cow in the garden, and sue Bob."

In the early '40s, just one CHP officer was responsible for everything from Barstow to Needles and the state line. Banks's territory extended from halfway to Barstow to this side of the Pass, and from the L.A. County line to Lucerne Valley. "At first we had only a motorcycle," Banks remembers. "The state didn't believe we needed a car. Imagine being on a motorcycle and chasing a car in this wind!"

Another anecdote is reminiscent of Buster Keaton: In 1939, anyone who needed the CHP in Barstow would call Cunningham's Pharmacy, and George Cunningham would raise a flag outside his store.

Sooner or later, Walt Terry, the only officer in Barstow, would toddle by on his cycle, see the flag and step inside to see the report.

"Walt Terry was a legend for his knowledge of the desert," Banks recalls.

Another institution was Victorville's Deputy Sheriff Carl McNew, "last of the old time lawmen. He was here when there still were Indians. He always had a toothpick in his mouth and always carried three pistols. McNew was no good on targets, but he could shoot a nail through the wall."

According to Banks, a good CHP officer needs a sixth sense as well as the ability to observe. "As you stand by the door interrogating a driver, you can sense when the driver has stolen the car. There's infinitesimal body language. It was easy to catch even Greyhound bus drivers, and they pride themselves on watching the rearview mirror.

Crooks always fall for the good cop/bad cop routine. And all crooks -even speeders- rationalize their crimes. Suppose you had a crime yardstick that starts with shoplifting and goes up through embezzlement all the way to murder. Any bad guy will rationalize all crimes up to what he did, then criticize any crime above that point."

Banks mourns the stern old days of law enforcement. "In those days we could shoot. If they put Wyatt Earp on duty today, he'd be in jail by nightfall. You can't get away with his style of doing things.

"As a result of this Rodney King thing, half the L.A. police force is worthless, riding it out 'til retirement. They pull back and just do tailgate citations. I'm sorry for the other half: They get no support.

As for the Miranda decisions (which assures detainees the right to remain silent), "it destroys an officer to have caught someone in suspicious circumstances and not be able to question them."

Miranda came down June 13, 1966. Banks retired from the CHP the last day of September 1969.

Banks may have left the force, but his heart stills belongs to the CHP and its history. A scrapbook holds precious photos, including one of the old sheriff's offices on Seventh Street in Victorville, a block up from D Street.

"And I wish they'd do something to preserve the old jail on E Street," Banks says. "That's where we put prisoners overnight, Unless they were real bad; then we took them to San Bernardino.

"The prisoners were free to wander around - in winter, they had to feed the fire. Generally all went well, but once a drunken peg- leg guy took off his peg leg and was beating up the other prisoners."

For a man who went joy riding in a Model T, Banks is unafraid of modern technology. "At 76," he says. "I bought a computer, I want to write down some of my stories." Please do, sir.

Policing the Old Mojave Desert

By L. A. "Buzz" Banks

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