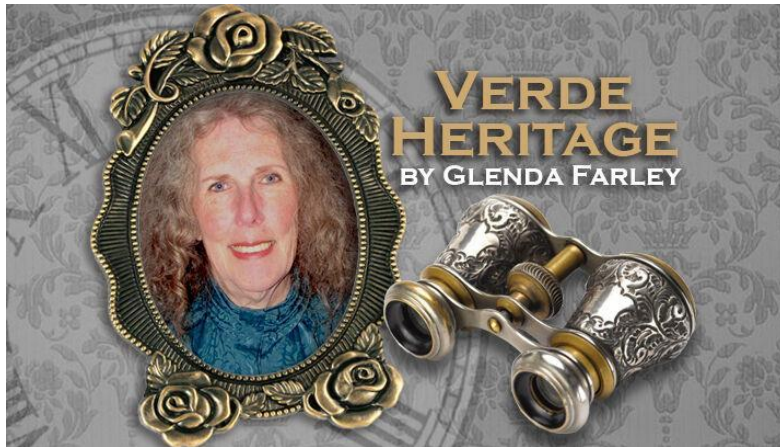


PIONEER PICNIC TRADITION

Glenda Farley Sep 19, 2018



The traditional gathering at the Montezuma Well Picnic Ground will be from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m. on Sunday, September 23, 2018.

The pioneer picnic is a traditional gathering and potluck lunch enjoyed by members of pioneer families and their friends. This tradition began when a group of new settlers, established residents, and people from the military post gathered in the shade of an old cottonwood tree to hear "Parson" James C. Bristow preach his first sermon in the Verde Valley on Sunday, October 3, 1875.

"Each year Parson Bristow called his flock together and blessed them and thanked God that they were still left and showed the way for them to follow in the bad times that came. After a few years the annual ceremony came to be known as the 'tree meeting' and people came from all over the valley to be present. Youngsters whose parents were children at the first meeting came until their own children attended." The 1917 crowd gathered on "Sunday afternoon under the old cottonwood tree that has stood on the banks of the Verde River several miles below Aultman on Middle Verde for hundreds of years and under which for nearly half a century Parson Bristow has preached a sermon to his flock each year. ... As the old man stood beneath his old cottonwood tree with the wind blowing his gray hair about, ... he preached once more and blessed them all. After the sermon was finished there were good eats, fried chicken, home bread and all the good things one gets at the homes along the Verde." (The Jerome Sun; October 15, 1917; The Verde Independent; October 3, 2012.)

"Just 44 years from when he delivered his first sermon in the Verde Valley, Reverend James C. Bristow, 84 years old, preached at Middle Verde" in 1919. "Times have changed. Rev. Bristow preached to 400 friends and neighbors who ... were dressed in holiday attire. ... Lined up under the cottonwoods were nearly three score modern automobiles that bucked and snorted and roared when their drivers attempted to force them through the river sand that was meant for equine hoofs. ... Only seven persons were present who heard James Bristow preach on that memorable day in 1875. Several of them were so young at the time that they remembered nothing of the occasion. Ed Dickinson, for instance, was only two years old. His brother, Frank, was nine, and their sister, now Mrs. William Back, was only a little girl. Two tiny daughters of the minister were there; they are now Mrs. John Ralston and Mrs. James Wingfield. ... The oldest person in attendance who was one of the Bristow assemblage in 1875, was

Captain Hance, Camp Verde pioneer. ... Everybody went away feeling it was good to have been there." (Verde Daily Copper News; October 6, 1919; The Verde Independent; October 3, 2012.)

Reverend James C. Bristow preached his last sermon on October 3, 1920. "It was an inspiring sermon. ... About 200 friends and relatives were there." Reverend James Clawson Bristow died at Middle Verde on January 20, 1921. (Arizona Baptist; "Arizona Baptist Beginnings;" by Stella M. Jordan; December 1920; and Sharlot Hall Museum.)

Several years before the last sermon, the old cottonwood "tree caught fire and its branches were mostly dead; only a few green shoots were struggling bravely to live." The traditional "Old Tree Meeting" on the first Sunday of October was continued by the church at Middle Verde.

The Verde Valley Pioneer Association continued the yearly tradition, with gatherings during the first part of May and the first part of October. Reunions have often been at the Clemenceau School during the spring and at the Montezuma Well Picnic Ground during the fall.

There were about 500 people at the spring reunion at the Oak Creek ranch of James Page in 1929. John Bristow, association president, and other pioneers talked about Verde Valley history. James Page "said that when the matter of establishing a post office was taken up with the Post Office Department at Washington," [1885] the intention was to honor a well-known resident, Elmira Cone, so the name "Coneville" was on the application. "The people of the district were so glad to get the Post Office that they ... made no mention of the misunderstanding and the name remains Cornville." The October reunion was scheduled to be held at Montezuma Castle. (Verde Copper News; Jerome; Tuesday, May 7, 1929; The Verde Independent; May, 2017.)

"Record-breaking attendance marked the semi-annual meeting of the Verde Valley Pioneers Association held at Back's Park near Montezuma Well" on Sunday, May 7, 1939. Mrs. Millie Fain was president of the association. Verde Valley residents were joined by residents of the Arizona Pioneers Home at Prescott and Miss Sharlot M. Hall, past president of the Arizona Pioneers Association. The program included reminiscing by the trail-blazers, music was provided by the Soda Springs String Orchestra and Mrs. Rachel Verretto with her group of accordion players, and guests enjoyed a picnic dinner. The association planned to meet again in Back's Park on October 1. (Prescott Evening Courier; May 10, 1939; The Verde Independent; May 18, 2016.)

Margaret Goddard, of the Camp Verde Historical Society, wrote in 1973: "The success of the Pioneer Picnic was gratifying to us. 'Thank you' to all who brought that marvelous food, to so many of you who helped with the tables and especially to Rhoda Van Deren, of Cornville, who was in charge. Thanks also to an anthropology class from N.A.U. who helped with registration and moving those heavy tables around. Montezuma Well picnic ground is a wonderful place to have a large picnic." (The Verde Independent; November 8, 1973; p. 20.)

THE VERDE VALLEY PIONEER PICNIC will once again be at the Montezuma Well Picnic Ground. The event will feature local historian guest speakers and an opportunity to participate in an old tradition from 11 AM to 3 PM, Sunday, September 23, 2018. The event is free and everyone with an interest in the history of the Verde Valley is welcome. Bring a dish to share during the potluck lunch. This event is hosted by Ghost Riders Tours, Jane Goddard.