

Western Women: Mildred Back Fain part of family that owned Montezuma Well

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Born Sept. 17, 1879, Mildred Back was the first of seven children in the family of Marjorie Ann and William Beriman Back. At the time of her birth, the family was ranching along Beaver Creek near Cornville, in central Arizona Territory.

Millie became caretaker of her younger siblings, who began arriving in rapid succession. When her mother gave birth to twins in 1889, however, 10-year-old Millie packed her bag and headed out the door. As she lugged her heavy satchel outside, her father asked where she was headed. Millie replied, “Well, it’s bad enough to take care of kids when they come one at a time, but when they start coming two at a time, I’m leaving!”

By this time, the family had relocated to the Montezuma Well ranch that Bill Back had purchased for the price of two horses. The ranch derived its name from a natural spring on the land.

Scientists believe an ancient cavern collapsed and formed this limestone sinkhole that contains high concentrations of carbon dioxide and alkali, preventing fish from living in the spring.

The lake was named for the Aztec ruler Montezuma who was believed to have ventured into the area during the 15th century. Montezuma, however, never rode that far north. Both Montezuma Well and nearby Montezuma Castle remain misnamed to this day.

Sitting 100 feet below the desert floor, the Well spans about 470 feet across and descends to a depth of around 50 feet. Millions of gallons of water a day flow through the basin, with the water retaining a constant temperature of 76 degrees. A nearby cave contains a small pool the Back children dubbed “Montezuma Bathtub.”

Initially, the Montezuma Well land was covered by an immense woodland of mesquite and tangled cat’s claw vines. After clearing the acreage, the Back family realized enough mesquite firewood to keep them warm for several winters, and their orchards and gardens generated abundant crops of fruits and vegetables that the family sold to neighboring ranchers. In fact, so many people frequented the Back spread that in 1892, a post office was established on the property.

At this time, cattle ranchers in the Verde Valley drove their herds into Flagstaff for sale and shipment. Traditionally, the ranchers delegated one of their neighbors to collect the sale proceeds and deliver the money to other ranchers. One year, Millie’s uncle had the task of bringing the earnings back from Flagstaff, but as he made his way

along the trail, he became ill, unable to deliver the proceeds to his neighbors who were waiting to lay in stores for the winter.

Millie, not yet a teenager, was the only person available to be trusted with such a crucial and urgent errand.

Tightening her pony's saddle before setting off, Millie was thrilled to be free from the burden of caring for her younger siblings for a few days, a chore she readily accepted but was glad to relinquish even for the short time.

She reached down to ensure her precious cargo was secure. Pinned inside the pocket of her skirt, Millie felt the little purse that contained \$5,000, the cattle money that belonged to the ranchers.

As she approached Beaver Creek, she stopped to water her pony and saw a group of men camped along the water's edge. One of the men rose from the campfire and started walking toward the little girl and her pony.

Suddenly Millie jerked the pony's reins and sped toward the mesa above the men's campsite. Nothing but a keen instinct told her that the campers were up to no good and she should put as much distance as possible between her and the strangers.

Keeping a sharp eye behind her, she held tight to the reins as the little horse dashed across the bluff.

Not until later did Millie learn that the men were wanted horse rustlers with a deputy sheriff hot on their trail. They were captured about 70 miles away near Cave Creek after a fierce gun battle that left at least one of the outlaws dead.

Millie rode on to Oak Creek, delivered the money to the ranchers and hastened back to the ranch and her clamoring siblings.

The Backs eventually turned Montezuma Well into a tourist attraction. Millie and her siblings gave guided tours while their father rowed sightseers out onto the waters of the limestone lake. The children devised a scheme of dunking old horseshoes in the spring water until they were encrusted with lime to convince naïve tourists they were “petrified” horseshoes.

Wildlife thrived around the Well. Delighted visitors were spellbound when they spotted a mountain lion or sharp-nosed javelina. Owls, muskrats, porcupines, raccoons, beavers, deer and several species of snakes also made their homes around the water. Occasionally a flock of egrets stopped by, even blue herons and Canadian geese visited sporadically.

Millie left her Montezuma Well home to attend high school in Flagstaff and went on to Northern Arizona Normal School, the teachers’ college that later became Northern Arizona University.

In 1902, she married Granville “Dan” Fain, whose ranching family had been in Arizona since 1874. The couple lived in Camp Verde and their son, Norman William, was born in 1907. But the marriage did not last and the Fains divorced in 1920.

After Norman graduated from Stanford University, mother and son moved to Prescott Valley and ran the Diamond S Ranch.

Mildred Back Fain died in Prescott on Jan. 13, 1967. In a letter she wrote to her family she told them she was “off on a new adventure. Don’t grieve for you know I always liked a trip and I hope this one will

be the best one ever; and I'll just make the trail a little wider for you when you come along."

In 1906, Montezuma Well became a national monument.

The National Park Service purchased the Well in 1947 and continues to maintain and manage it.

Jan Cleere is the author of several historical nonfiction books about the early people of the Southwest. Email her at Jan@JanCleere.com.

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