

KEEP THE SESPE WILD & FREE

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

PO Box 715, Ojai, CA 93024

(805) 921-0618 • www.sespewild.org

December 2015

by Cary Sterling (1979)

RAMON ORTEGA'S LAST RIDE

THE LIFE & TIMES OF RAMON ORTEGA

All accounts agree that Ramon Ortega was a brawny man of great physical power. One of those who remembers is Charles Ruiz, a man who spent much of his boyhood in the upper Sespe. 77 years into life, he has seen many changes in southern California, but thinks the Sespe changed least.

For many years before the coming of the road, Charles' father owned a ranch in the Chorro Chiquito, several miles downstream from Ramon Ortega's [which was at Potrero Seco, west of the summit of Hwy. 33. near the headwaters of Sespe Creek.] During the 1920's, Charles Ruiz was the Forest Service's horseback patrolman for the Sespe Hotsprings area. He eventually settled in Ojai.

For 13 years he and his wife lived at the estate of Krishnamurti, where Charles managed the famous philosopher's groves and gardens.

Charles and his wife now live in the caretaker's house at the Smith-Hobson estate. The Hobsons were the beef barons who bought most of the cattle brought down from the Sespe and Cuyama ranges. The two main houses of the Smith-Hobson estate are now Ojai's City Hall.

The mind of Charles Ruiz contains a very accurate map of the mountains of northern Ventura County. He knew the exact location of Ramon Ortega's death. "He was a very strong man you know. He could make a horse do anything that he wanted it to. When I was just a young boy, my father took me to Roblar Canyon and told me 'This is where Ramon Ortega died. It's strange that Ramon was off his horse,' my father said. Ramon used to never get off his horse."

Ramon could ride just like a burr in a horse's tail, according to his nephew, Ranger J.D. Reyes of the Pine Mountain-Cuyama neck of the woods. He was the boss of his own saddle and reputedly could not even be thrown by running a horse under a waist-high rope suspended between two trees.

Each autumn Ramon rode in the whooping mountain round-up which brought cattle down from the upper Sespe. They were driven over Ortega Hill through the steep cliffs of Matilija Canyon, across the Ojai Valley and into Stony Flats, now known as Casitas Springs. Even among the colorful Reyes brothers and the cowboys of "Eduardo" Canet, Ramon was considered as the toughest and most daring of the backcountry cattlemen around. Grizzly bear roping was his favorite sport.

Bear lassoing required exceptional riders and horses. Once several vaqueros had successfully immobilized a grizzly with reatas of woven rawhide, the unfortunate creature was either killed or sold for the bullfights. The last grizzly bear to be captured alive in California was sent from Ventura County to the San Francisco Zoo in 1889. Named Old Monarch, he died in 1911 weighing in at 1127 pounds. Bear roping was not as destructive as strychnine poisoning, but it made a contribution to the sad extinction of California's state land animal, the magnificent *Ursus horribilis*.

THE DEATH OF RAMON ORTEGA

On November the 21st of 1978, I began a series of telephone conversations with Mrs. Margaret MacNeil Ortega, the wife of Ventura's retired postmaster. It was Mrs. Ortega who first told me that Ramon's full name was Jose Ramon Ortega. His wife's name was Candelaria Dominguez Ortega. One of his 5 sons was Alfredo, the father of Margaret's husband, Emili Cyprian Ortega. Mrs. Ortega has access to some fairly comprehensive notes which she is compiling for her family. These include information taken from her husband's dictation as he related to her his grandfather's last ride. [These were compared with records from other individuals and the Ventura Free Press also.]

Hell hath no fury like the ending of a dry spell in the mountains behind Ventura, and the winter of 1913-1914 was the proverbial woman scorned. The City of Ventura recorded a rainfall of 26.71 inches, ten inches over the yearly average. The Transverse Ranges tend to get about 50% more rain than the coast, so the figure for the upper Sespe was probably closer to 40 inches.

In some parts of the world, 40 inches of rain is nothing for one year. But the intensity of slope run-off in the Sespe is notorious. The mountain trails which provided for the only travel through the "howling wilderness" were badly eroded. In the spring of 1914, Emilio Ortega got a job working on the trail maintenance crew of his grandfather's nephew, District Ranger J.D. Reyes.

When yet another storm started brewing in late May, Jack Warner, a rancher in the Cuyama Valley, became understandably nervous. He decided to move his stock to higher ground and immediately hired some topnotch help. It consisted of Manuel Lopez, Ramon Ortega, now 83 years old, and Ramon's brother Teodoro.

They rode past Ramon's Sespe homestead and towards the Carpa Potrereros into Mono Canyon. On June the first, the Ortega brothers each took their mounts along different routes. Teodoro continued along below while Ramon began lead his horse up along a high and precipitous ridge. The broken trail which he followed was obscured beneath piles of debris and slippery leaves left by previous storms. It was mid-morning.

Not too long after, Teodoro reached the Roblar Creek crossing, deep in a rocky barranca. When he dismounted to get a drink of water from the small stream, he saw tinges of red in the water. Close by he found Ramon unconscious. Blood was pouring from his fractured skull and one of his legs was broken. His horse lay beside him dead. Above were the silent cliffs from which horse and man had fallen.

Teodoro sent Jack Warner for help and then returned to make his brother comfortable. Warner sped breathlessly to the Reyes Ranger Station some 20 miles away. He arrived visibly shaken, his horse lathered. By then it was two o'clock in the afternoon, and Warner believed Ramon's condition was close to hopeless.

J.D. Reyes organized a rescue party as quickly as possible but by the time they reached the Potrero

Seco, night was bringing on the cold and shadowy clouds which precede mountain downpour. Warner seemed to become lost for a while. When they finally reached Roblar Canyon at eleven o'clock, Teodoro told them that Ramon Ortega was dead.

THE LAST RIDE

Ramon Ortega had spent his life as a man of the hills and the nature of his ending had not come unexpectedly. His only real fear had been of being slung over the back of a mule like a dead deer. He had seen too many men hauled out of the forest jack-knifed over a pack animal and did not consider it dignified for a rider of his stature. And so, at close to midnight with the storm almost upon them, J.D. Reyes and his crew set to work. Several stretcher boards were broken up and lashed around the old cowboy's body to keep it upright. Ramon was then laboriously lifted onto the back of a pack horse in such a way that the ends of the boards fitted into the cargo sacks. Two long ropes were secured around the corpse. J.D. Reyes took the lead with one line while his brother Rafael rode behind with the other.

In this way the man considered the greatest bear roper in the history of southern California began his last ride, swaying erratically in the lassoes of his younger compadres. Ramon Ortega was riding out sitting proudly in his saddle. The thunderstorm broke with a vengeance. Lightning flashes occasionally lit up the macabre expedition and then left them stumbling and blinking.

Nineteen-year-old Emilio was sent ahead of the group with a light, but it did no good. Pouring rain brought such darkness that they tied a white sheet over the back of an experienced mule and allowed the animal to lead the way. The miserable funeral procession forged ahead. Ramon's body made the long ride which took him through Cherry Canyon, down into the Matilija and into Casitas Springs, a tiny fleck of civilization at the end of the highway from Nordhoff [now called Ojai]. *This ends Cary's story.*

FRANK FELT ARRIVES IN THE SESPE

Later that same year, 1914, J.D. Reyes rode into the upper Sespe with Frank Felt, who sought a place to live where his ulcers would heal. He built a cabin at Chorro Grande and lived there for 43 years, becoming known as the poet of the Sespe. His books of poetry can still be found second-hand.

Two notes of interest – Cary Sterling wrote his 70-page book on the upper Sespe, “The Coming of the Road”, which includes the above story, in 1979, while living at Frank Felt’s homestead at Chorro Grande, adjacent to Hwy. 33.

Cary himself passed away in Ojai in 2005 at the onset of a massive winter rain storm that drenched the county. We plan to print more of his writings about the Sespe and the Chumash in later newsletters. Our thanks to Cary’s widow Christina for permission to reprint Cary’s writings.



An undated photograph of Ramon Ortega.

PLEASE CONTINUE TO SUPPORT KSWC!

You, our readers, are our only source of support. Please continue to send donations to KSWC in the remit envelope that came with your newsletter.

Or, you may now contribute via Paypal! Go to: https://www.paypal.com/cgi-bin/webscr?cmd=_s-xclick&hosted_button_id=9XBSGSFHHQFKS

NEW THREAT TO NATIVE HABITAT - PREVENTION IS THE BEST DEFENSE.

You won't have heard of this beetle yet, but it is spreading around Southern California rapidly, and the first ones locally have been found in an insect trap set in Ojai on Old Baldwin Road, off Hwy.150. They are also in Santa Paula. They are known as the polyphagous shot hole borer, or pshb (there's a web-site of that name at www.pshb.org). Polyphagous means all-consuming - and that's what this beetle is. It came from South East Asia, and it's been at the L.A. Arboretum and the Huntington Gardens for a while now, living on over 300 different tree species!

This makes it quite different from other new pests such as the citrus psyllid, where the pest's host trees are limited to citrus. The pshb beetle carries with it a fungus that it gardens, so to speak, after it bores a tiny hole into a tree. It eats this fusarium fungus, but the fungus goes on to kill the part of the tree beyond the location of the borer beetle's hole. If the entry point is low on the trunk, that may mean the whole tree can die. If the entry point is higher up, only that one branch may be infected at first. Each beetle is smaller than a sesame seed.

Trees can be divided into those not attacked by the pshb beetle (someone's gotta come up with an easier name for general usage - how about tree killer beetle?), those infested but not used for the beetle's reproduction - and those where it both lives and reproduces.

These last 130 species are the trees we need to be concerned about at this point. They include acacias, avocados, big-leaf maples, Ca. sycamores, castor bean coast live oaks (the one commonest in this area), mimosas, palo verdes, valley oaks (the taller deciduous native oaks in this area), white alders (the ones along local creeks), cottonwoods, willows, and many more as well. As you can see, if these beetles get into our backcountry via the native oaks, cottonwoods, sycamores, alders and willows, there will be no stopping their onslaught in places beyond the reach of tree crews and chippers.

The pshb beetle is so new in Southern California that state and federal agricultural agencies have as yet produced no guidelines for spraying the beetles or for any other preventive steps that may be taken. While there is a drastic need for more research, and soon, there are still steps that may be taken to slow the beetles' spread. In South East Asia they are

Keep the Sespe Wild
P.O. Box 715
Ojai, CA 93024

Address Service Requested

U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
OJAI, CA
PERMIT NO. 306

Printed on Recycled Paper

All Sespe T-Shirts \$16.00

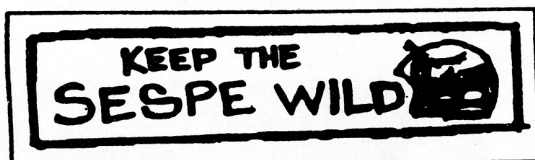
Our original T-shirts are light blue with the Keep the Sespe Wild logo in five colors.

Our newer T-shirts are white with the same five color logo on the back, and with an additional, pocket-sized logo in blue on the left front.

Please state white or blue with your order. Sizes are S, M, L, XL and XXL.

**All 100%
cotton.**

**Bumper
Stickers \$2.00**



All prices include tax and shipping. Please include address and a phone number. Allow 2 to 3 weeks for delivery.

**Send your order and check, made out to KSWC to:
Keep Sespe Wild, PO Box 715, Ojai, CA 93024**

more in balance with their natural environment, and research into potential parasites that may control the beetles, and into other fungus that may feed on the fusarium fungus that the beetles carry, will have to be centered there. Eventually some form of control will most likely be found, but since there are no such answers now, prevention is the best defense.

Here are the sensible steps to be taken by concerned residents right away, to slow the spread of the pshb beetles before they get established:

(1) Cover piles of firewood cut from this point in time with a tight tarp, placing boards along the ground so as to leave no gaps. This will slow the beetles' spread.

(2) Chip all the wood and brush on site when you have tree work done; chipping branches and logs into one-inch pieces kills most beetles in that wood.

(3) Do not move any firewood, as this spreads the beetles around faster than they move on their own.

(4) In future, seek out pine and eucalyptus firewood – these seem not to be favored by the beetles.

(5) Municipal mulch may also carry live beetles – cut back on this until better standards of composting are in place that will kill the beetles and the fungus.

COMING UP! The court case to keep open the trail to Matilija Falls goes before a judge soon.