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## A lost story of Montezuma Well emerges

*Digging up Back Family Ranch Historic District*



Steve Ayers  
Staff Reporter



Bill Cowan shows off the historic smokehouse on the property. William Beriman Back had a pig farm that was once located beneath a travertine ledge on the side of Montezuma Well. Sometime, most likely in the 1890s, he built the smokehouse to smoke hams. It is believed to be one of the oldest buildings in the Verde Valley.

When the American people purchased Montezuma Well in 1947, they acquired one of America's most unique water features, along with remnants from 2,000 years of human habitation.

As a companion to Montezuma Castle and Tuzigoot national monuments, the well was seen as an additional site where visitors could learn of the prehistoric people who once called the Verde Valley home.

But along with the ancient homes tucked away in its cliff walls and the scatter of Sinaguan artifacts, was another story waiting to be told -- that of the Anglo settlers who began arriving 140 years ago.

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In spite of the fact that these early families had left as much a mark on the landscape as the Sinagua, including houses, farm fields and artifacts of their own, their tale has been largely forgotten.

But that is changing, thanks to a new attitude on the part of the NPS staff who oversee the monument and one very enthusiastic historian.

"The focus at the well has always been on the prehistoric structures," says Park Service archaeologist Matt Guebard. "Everything we do to interpret the monument, from the interpretive signs to the brochures, is centered on its prehistory.



The Back family took visitors on a guided tour of the well for 50 cents each. The trip included a boat ride out on the bottomless lake and a walk through the old ruins.

"I'm not sure why that is, but I believe that early on no one cared about the farming and ranching that took place in the late 1800s and early 1900s because it wasn't all that long ago. And because no one cared, a lot of the old structures were bulldozed or just moldered and fell over."

About two years ago, Guebard and Superintendent Kathy Davis decided that ignoring the old buildings in the pasture, the artifacts that had been lying beneath a lip of travertine and some mysterious features that begged answers, was only telling half of Montezuma Well's story.

One of their mandates as part of the National Park Service is to periodically evaluate structures or landmarks on the property that are over 50 years old and determine their eligibility for the National Registry of Historical Places.

Guebard identified two structures that he felt qualified, the house that was once the home of William Lester Back and an old smokehouse built by his father, William Beriman Back.

"Typically we bid this kind of work out to contractors from other places. But we felt with this one that we wanted to get someone local who knew the history and was going to be able to spend a lot of time out on the monument property," Guebard says.

In deciding who would do the work they both agreed their first choice was Beaver Creek's resident historian, Bill Cowan.

At the time Cowan was assembling a book that would tell the story of the Verde Valley in photographs. And in trying to find photos that

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were available at a reasonable cost, he just happened to have targeted the NPS archives at Tuzigoot.

"The timing just happened to be right. I knew he was coming by so I ask him if he would be interested in preparing an application for the National Registry of Historical Places. He got excited. Then he just blasted off and went with it," Guebard says.

Cowan soon realized was that there was a lot more at the Well than met the eye and that focusing on just two buildings would not do justice to the story.

"I talked to some people I knew at the State Historic Preservation Office, and they suggested we apply for a historic district," Cowan says. "I thought, why not, how much harder can it be?"

And thus was born the Back Ranch Historic District project in early 2010.

Almost two years of research has uncovered a tale that spans more than 75 years, five families, two generations of another and the debunking of at least one commonly held notion, all beginning in 1870.

That was the year Wales Arnold, a former army scout, military post trader and farmer settled on 160 acres next to the well. It has been commonly assumed by most local history buffs that the Arnold's Montezuma Well Ranch included the well itself.

But Cowan's research has shown that Arnold never owned the well, but instead owned much of the floodplain south and west of the well.

"I went through the old deeds and began to map what was his. I was surprised by what I found. His land includes what became Rimrock Ranch and Hobby Horse, but never the well itself," Cowan says.

The property the well is on, according to Cowan, wasn't settled until a man named Sam Shull moved there in 1883.

The well, Cowan says, changed hands several times, being bought and sold at both a profit and a loss in the price range of a single horse to \$2,000, depending on the state of the valleys' economy at the time.

Then in 1888, William Beriman and Margorie Dickinson Back purchased the well property. It didn't take them long to realize that along with the wonderful farmland the well had an additional value as a tourist destination.

Their timing couldn't have been better.

"I can't prove that Bill Back ever met Edgar Mearns or Cosmos Mindeleff, both of whom put the valley's ancient ruins on the map, but I believe it is unlikely they didn't.

"This was also the time when Charles Loomis showed up and eventually dedicated an entire chapter on the well in his hugely successful book 'Some Strange Corners of our Country.' All this and

eventually the automobile made Back prosperous," Cowan says.

According to Cowan's research, Back bought the Arnold property in 1892.

"Bill Back was an ambitious SOB. He raised vegetables, fruit and pigs. He'd haul hams and produce to Flagstaff on a regular basis and rent out his wagon when it wasn't being used.

"He didn't charge to camp on his property but he sold food and hay and whatever else visitors might need. His wife Marjorie truly loved guiding people around, telling stories of the Indians and the history of the area. They made it a destination, and people came in droves," Cowan says.

William Back died on 1929 just months after his huge home burned to the ground, and the property passed on to his five children. One of them, William Lester Back, took over where his father left off, expanding the tourism business and building a museum.

"He had this shtick going where he would put horseshoes or two bottles wired together in the creek. The travertine waters would mineralize them and then he would sell them as fossilized horseshoes or a pair of binoculars," Cowan says.

Guebard say it is his hope that, with all the information he has turned up, Cowan eventually will turn his research into a book.

"The agreement we had was straight forward, but he keeps collecting," Guebard says. "I tell him you don't have to do that, you've fulfilled the contract portion of our agreement. But he's so excited he just keeps going about it.

"He has proven there is a lot more here than meets the eye and that it is a totally different place today from what it was when the Back family was here. Thanks to Bill's work, a forgotten story is beginning to re-emerge."



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## Reader Comments

Posted: Sunday, November 27, 2011

Article comment by: **Greg Back**

I first met Matt and Kathy on one of my visits to Montezuma Well. I was asking for access to the archives for doing genealogical research on my great grandfather Wm. B. Back. They were very friendly and arranged for a one-on-one tour where I saw the smokehouse for the first time.

Months later Bill and I met and I shared with him what I knew about the Well and the family. I learned more about both from Bill than what I gave him. He has a wealth of knowledge and it is my privilege to call him my friend.

Posted: Wednesday, November 23, 2011

Article comment by: **Nice Work**

Hats off to Kathy, Matt, and especially Bill for doing this detective work and uncovering such a rich story. And to Steve for reporting it.

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