

FROM THE ZEPHYR ARCHIVES

THE 'PROFESSOR' OF PROFESSOR VALLEY

The Eternal Optimist, Wanderer and Dreamer---SYLVESTER RICHARDSON

LLOYD PIERSON

He was known as an eternal optimist, a wanderer, dreamer and sometime impractical pioneer. His name was Sylvester Richardson. The west of the post-Civil War era was filled with ambitious men out to conquer the west, get out of the congested east and make a fortune or at least settle down on some fertile acres and lead a better life. Richardson was one of these and despite his sometimes ineptness and over-blown dreams, he left his mark on several parts of the west—the last being the country to the northwest of the La Sal Mountains in Utah. Professor Valley, Richardson Amphitheater, Professor Creek and the Richardson Post office were all named after him. His nickname, “Professor,” was given to him early in life because his peers recognized his apparent encyclopedic knowledge based on a lifetime involvement in many endeavors. It was said that he always had a book under his arm.

Richardson's life story began in West Camp, New York on the Hudson River, where he was born in 1830. His family had long lived there. His grandfather fought with George Washington during the revolutionary birth of our country. His father, an abolitionist, worked with the Underground Railway, helping Southern slaves escape to freedom in the northern U.S. And Canada.

In his 20's, Richardson's family moved to Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin and he accompanied them. This move seems to have initiated his restless spirit and yearn for wandering as his horizons were widened.

After a few years of teaching school and singing lessons and working as a carpenter, he picked up and moved, with his wife Elizabeth, whom he'd married in 1858, to Denver, Colorado, arriving there in July, 1860. The great gold strikes of the Colorado Rockies undoubtedly lured him westward with their possibilities of fame and fortune.

His time in and about Denver brought him neither. He worked as a teamster and for a while he tried ranching some 22 miles from town. The story is told that rather than go to the forest for firewood he chopped up the ranch fence rails to burn one winter. This was indicative of his ability to run a good ranch operation and he, his wife, and his son Denver, born on 1861, soon packed up and went back to Wisconsin for a while.

tales of mineral wealth and agricultural potential in the Gunnison Valley gathered to him a band of some 20 visionaries, all men, ready to conquer the wilderness.

They set out in April, 1874, and were almost immediately hit with an unseasonable two-foot snowfall just south of Denver. After the thaw some days later, the braver souls pushed on to the Gunnison via Colorado Springs, Ute Pass, South Park and over Poncha and Cochetopa Passes to the site of Gunnison. On May 21, 1874, lots of 160 acres were drawn for until 31 had been passed out. Richardson built the first cabin, a dirt-roofed crude structure, and 20 more were started by the rest of the colony.

Dissention broke out during the summer over the platting of the town and the location of a bridge over the Gunnison River. One third of the men took to the hills to prospect that same summer. The colony struggled along aided by newcomers from Denver and Trinidad and the fertile soil which produced good potatoes and garden crops.

Some of the colony returned to Denver for the Winter and the 20 remaining were scattered over a 30 mile radius. Only Richardson remained of the original founding colony but the future of Gunnison was assured as the Spring of 1875 arrived. The Utes in the region were removed to a new reservation further west and more land was available to settlers.

A post office was established in 1876, mostly for the settlers surrounding Gunnison as only Richardson and a few others remained in the town. By 1877 the county had been set up and elections of officials accomplished. Another mining flurry occurred in 1879 which led to the replatting of the town of Gunnison with the involvement of Richardson. Dissention broke out again that winter with the town split in two; but by 1880 Gunnison grew to a thousand. Many toll roads were built to satisfy the mineral exploitation and agricultural development. The Denver and Rio Grande Railroad built to Gunnison in 1881 assuring its permanence.

Meanwhile, during 1875-1883 Richardson was totally involved in making the settlement work. He was the instigator in getting a sawmill in the area; finished the bridge



By November of 1885 he was broke and his prospects in ruins. He packed his belongings and set out with a wagon and team and a friend, Joseph Harpole, to move to what is now known as Professor Valley, along the Colorado River between Moab and Dewey...His fortunes were at low ebb for it was reported that he only had three dollars in his pocket when he arrived in Utah.

But Richardson had been infected with the western fever and he was soon back in Denver. Talking to many of the prospectors and mountain men who used Denver as the base for their search of the Rocky Mountains for mineral and other riches. Richardson's desires were further honed to make his fame and fortune. They talked of a fabulous country further west, over the continental divide, especially the newly entered but vacant Gunnison Valley.

Opportunity came to Sylvester Richardson in July of 1873 when he joined an exploring expedition of 30 men, 8 teams and pack animals under Dr. John Parsons to exploit and develop the mineral resources of the Elk Mountains in the vicinity of the Gunnison Valley. Richardson signed on as a geologist, evidently having developed some skills in that area somewhere or perhaps talking a “good fight” and selling himself to Parsons. The happy group broke up shortly after reaching the Elk Mountains and Richardson set out to explore the region on his own. By October, 1873, he had walked some 600 miles and covered much of the Gunnison Basin. He discovered important marble, coal and carbonate deposits and most of all land that he considered arable and ripe for settlement.

He returned to Denver in the Fall of 1873 and by February of 1874 he had set up a joint stock company capitalized at \$6,000 to establish the townsite of Gunnison. His

across the Gunnison just south of Palisades; developed and sold coal mines and toll roads; tried his hand at making bricks, terra cotta, and cement; built a stationary and drug store, which served the community as a church, law office, school, political and social gathering place. He put up buildings on many of the lots he owned and he wrote for the local papers, including the short-lived one he started in 1883, and he made speeches and entertained as a musician. However, Richardson's business acumen is best illustrated by his deal with Otto Mears for the Cebolla Toll Road to haul coal to Lake City. Richardson built it for \$2,000 and sold it to Mears for half that. Reportedly a business deal altogether too typical of Richardson.

By November of 1885 he was broke and his prospects in ruins. He packed his belongings and set out with a wagon and team and a friend, Joseph Harpole, to move to what is now known as Professor Valley, along the Colorado River between Moab and Dewey. They came by way of Paradox Valley in Colorado and Richardson settled on what he called Bijou Creek, now the Professor Creek, according to U.S. Geological Survey maps. His fortunes were at low ebb for it was reported that he only had three dollars in his pocket when he arrived in Utah.

Gunnison papers reported that Richardson had founded the first Gentile colony in

Utah. If so, it consisted mostly of Richardson, for he apparently had no family with him until he remarried in the fall of 1886 to Marion Muir, a writer who contributed to the Rocky Mountain News and the Denver Inter-Ocean, whom he met while running his newspaper, the Gunnison Sun.

Richardson established a store at the mouth of Professor Creek. This was built of slabs set in the ground vertically and was only the Dole Ranch property until it burned some years ago. A post office named Richardson was established here on September 15, 1886, with Richardson as Postmaster. Mail came over the trail from Moab until Richardson secured an "established mail route" to Cisco in July of 1888, "a much shorter trip than the present way of circling around via Moab and Thompson."

Richardson also homesteaded a farm/ranch further up the creek on property presently owned by Robin Wilson, the Professor Valley Ranch. Here he experimented with the growing of various trees and plants to see which would do best in the desert climate. During 1887 and 1888 he and his wife continued to submit glowing reports on the agricultural successes he and his neighbors were making in the valley and in "Little Castle Valley" (now Castle Valley) to the Grand Junction News. In January of 1897 the editor of the Grand Valley Times visited Richardson, describing his home and ranch life. He reportedly had an orchard and vineyard under cultivation. Mrs. Richardson was contributing to "leading papers and periodicals throughout the country" as a writer.

Later that year, in April 30, 1897, it was reported that the fruit was in bloom at the Richardsons' ranch. Almonds, Japanese plums, apricots, pie plant (rhubarb,) asparagus and onions were growing there. Today there is a dense grove of trees near the ruins of the homestead where Richardson lived. Among the trees today are honey locust, allan-tha (tree of heaven,) elm, ash, osage orange, apricot, pear mulberry, lombardy poplar, apple, silver maple and others. More than the soil of Richardson's Ranch was fertile, for it was announced in the Grand Junction News that Mrs. Richardson produced a son on February 22, 1888; no name was given.

Grand County was created by an act of March 13, 1890 and separated from Emery County. This created a need for county officers at the county seat in Moab. Sylvester Richardson was appointed prosecuting attorney until a general election could be held that fall. At the general election, Richardson was voted in as a selectman.

He continued his interest in politics during his lifetime as the Grand Valley Times reported in its weekly publication which started in 1896. He served frequently as an election judge for his area and sometimes was on the county Republican committee although he seemed to lean more to an Independent philosophy. In October of 1896 he ran as an Independent for County Attorney and lost, getting only 60 votes.

Richardson, in keeping with the times, was not too fond of Mormonism, although in his reports to the News he mentions various aspects of life in Moab, where most of the Mormons settled, very favorably. He brags about Bishop Stewart's peaches and thanks Postmaster Crouse of Moab for his help. The polygamy problem seems to have been at the bottom of most of the antagonism. However, in 1900 he presided over a girls' oratorical contest in Moab on Pioneer Day, so it wasn't all bad. During the same period he was engaged in a legal battle with his neighbor, Waring, over the water in Professor Creek. It was finally settled in November 1900, with Richardson getting one third of one cubic foot per second as a primary right. Waring got two thirds of a cubic foot per second after this and then the rest of the water was to be divided equally. Inasmuch as Waring settled in the area after Richardson, this seems a rather unfair division.

1900 was a bad year for Richardson, as he was accused by the postal authorities of a shortage of funds at his post office. Friends raised a \$2,000 bond and by the end of the year he had satisfactorily cleared the matter.

The professor died in Morrison, Colorado on May 4, 1902. Over-exposure while locating and surveying oil lands around Cisco hastened his death, according to the papers. The Grand Valley Times said he was 76 years old and that his son, Denver, born in 1861 in Denver, was a conductor on the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad and was the first child born in Denver. It is ironic that Richardson was prospecting so far from home as one of the earliest uranium claims in Grand County was located just across the creek from his home and less than a mile away. Such was Richardson's luck, however.

Richardson was described as over six feet in height and "spare of build." He wore a beard most of his life and was at home in the hills as well as the town. He was a good conversationalist and spoke in a positive manner, which brought him attention. He left Gunnison with good feelings, but not Grand County. His wife, who had moved to Morrison, Colorado, complained to the Denver Post that the Mormon neighbors had interfered with Richardson's endeavors—possibly referring to the water suit. The editor of the Grand Valley Times denied this. Marion Richardson sold the ranch, both parcels, by the end of 1902 with "water rights and ditches."

Today there are foundations of Richardson's buildings and a rocked-up well located north of the grove he planted on the Wilson Ranch. They give evidence of the Professor's dreams and hopes. Perhaps they can someday be studied and preserved, for the Professor deserves some recognition for his contributions to the settlement of the pioneer west.

Former NPS Ranger LLOYD PIERSON still lives in MOAB, UTAH. At 91, as ornery as ever. He wrote this story in 1991.



mazza
MIDDLE EASTERN CUISINE

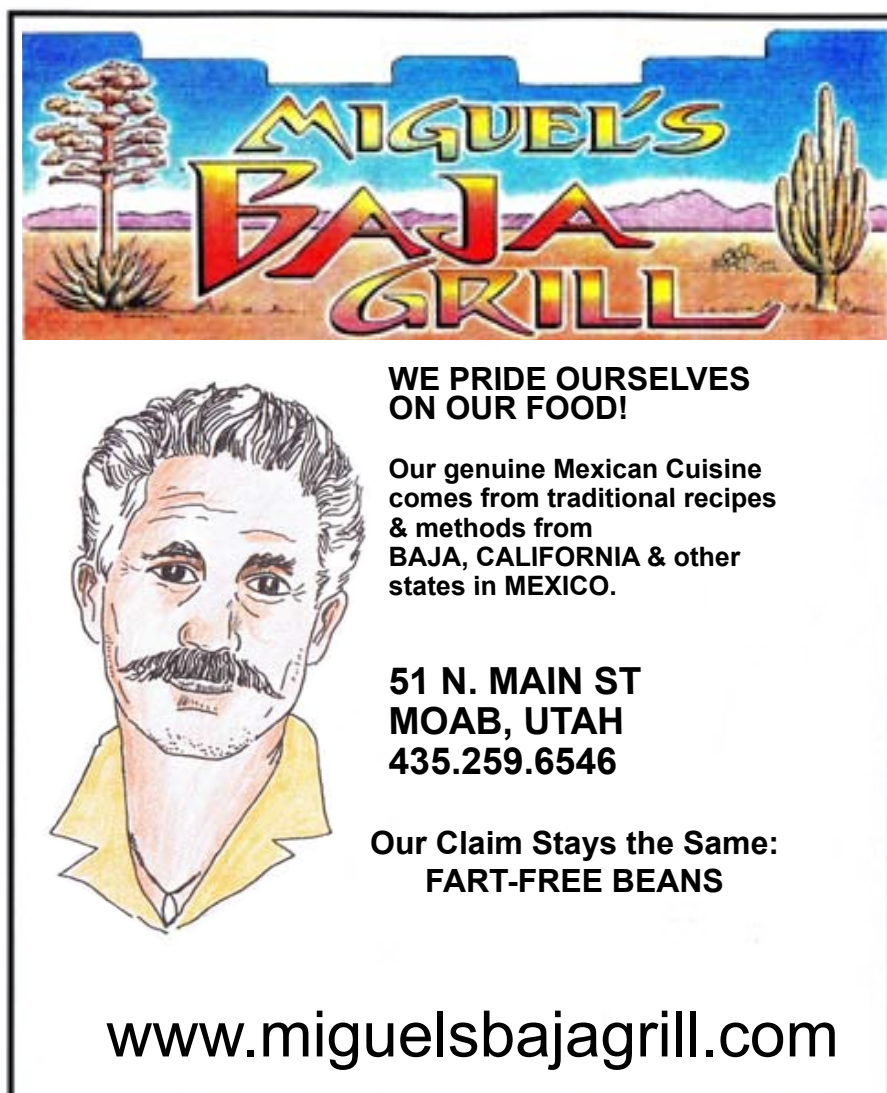
Fresh is the only way to ensure truly delicious Middle-Eastern flavor.

City Weekly Best of Utah

WE HAVE TWO LOCATIONS!
1515 South 1500 East & 912 East 900 South

OPEN MONDAY-SATURDAY 11AM to 9pm
In a hurry? Phone ahead and we'll have it ready for you

(801) 671.2999
www.mazzacafe.com



MIGUEL'S BAJA GRILL

WE PRIDE OURSELVES ON OUR FOOD!

Our genuine Mexican Cuisine comes from traditional recipes & methods from BAJA, CALIFORNIA & other states in MEXICO.

**51 N. MAIN ST
MOAB, UTAH
435.259.6546**

Our Claim Stays the Same:
FART-FREE BEANS

www.miguelsbajagrill.com