

Shoshone Museum Reader

Produced for our Members by the Shoshone Museum Assn.

shoshonemuseum.org

Fall 2025

DEATH VALLEY DOCTORS

(part 2 of 2)



The clinic at Furnace Creek was on the second floor on the left side of the building

Obtaining medical care in remote regions has always been difficult, especially in emergencies. The *Shoshone Museum Reader* is exploring the history of medical care in the Death Valley area. The last issue presented information about the first three doctors known to have medical offices in the area. Dr. Robert Richard Ronan (1882-1943) was first mentioned in 1914 and was paid a retainer by the Pacific Coast Borax Company (PCBC). However, the extent of his duties is not known. During the 1918 influenza epidemic, it was reported that the nearest doctor was 120 miles away. In 1923, when the PCBC built the existing structures at Death Valley Junction (DVJ), a doctors' residence and hospital were included. In the last issue, we profiled Dr. Riley Shrum (1874-1953) who served the area from 1934 until 1940 and Dr. Walter W. R. Schatz (1901-85) who operated a clinic in the area until World War II suspended all services in Death Valley.

After the end of World War II, Dr. Gordon Fredrick Helsley (1889-1978) spent at least two years as the area's medical doctor. He was born in Gonzales, CA, but grew up in Turlock. By 1917 he was living in San Francisco and working as an agent for the California Industrial Accident Commission. He graduated from the Stanford University School of Medicine in San Francisco in 1918 and worked at the Folsom State Prison in Sacramento. He married in 1920, and a son was born the following year. The family moved to Brooklyn, NY, in 1921, and the following year the family traveled to Austria where Helsley took a special course in surgery. While they



Gordon Helsley, MD, 1922
Passport Photograph

(continued on page 2)

Shoshone Museum Association
P.O. Box 38
Shoshone, CA 92384
760 852-4524

DEATH VALLEY ACADEMY SPRING PROGRAM

Another delightful Death Valley Academy program was enjoyed by the community on May 30. The spring program started with student poems read by their authors, followed by skits and musical performances. The room was gaily decorated with spring-inspired posters of flowers with photographs of the students centrally placed within them. The students were assisted by their teachers and classroom aides. The program was followed by an exhibit of student projects illustrating important events in California history and a selection of tasty snacks provided by parent volunteers. We are fortunate to have such a fine school where children can receive a quality education in a caring environment.



A Very Warm Welcome to Eliza Woodall

Our newest museum associate is no stranger to the museum—she was a regular volunteer for more than a year before joining our staff. Originally from the San Francisco Bay area, she has also lived in Germany and most recently in Los Angeles, while her sister was living in Las Vegas. They both really enjoy hot springs and wanted a more relaxed lifestyle, so they moved to Tecopa four years ago. In college she majored in humanities, and she has a keen interest in the history of our area. At the museum she has been mostly concentrating on archiving our collections. In addition to her work with the museum, she is one of the new board members of the Southern Inyo Fire Protection District, which is responsible for providing emergency medical services to the area. We are delighted that Eliza settled here and thank her for her contributions to our community.



MUSEUM HOURS

Open daily from 9 am to 3 pm

The mission of the Shoshone Museum Association is to tell the unique story of the Amargosa region and to preserve its cultural and natural history

DEATH VALLEY DOCTORS (continued from page 1)

were in Europe, their son died and was buried in Essex, England. They then left Europe and settled in San Francisco.

By 1933 two more children had been born and Helsley was teaching at the Stanford University School of Medicine. He had joined the National Guard in the 1920s, rising from lieutenant to major by 1935. By the end of World War II, he was stationed at Fort Greeley, on Kodiak Island, AL, and is said to have served in both world wars.

His tenure as a doctor in the desert areas was apparently quite short. Military records show that he was in Death Valley in January 1948, and later that year he delivered a baby at DVJ. Shortly after that, it was announced that, after serving as the area's doctor for two years, he was relocating to Darwin, CA. However, by 1950 he was in San Jose, CA, where he was a doctor at San Jose State College. He died in San Jose in 1978.



Ervin Basse Wallace, 1932
Ohio State University
College of Medicine

By 1950 Dr. Ervin Basse Wallace (1902-60) had become interested in establishing a practice in the desert area around Death Valley.

He was born in Bethaire, PA—his father was a Presbyterian minister and his mother was from Illinois, the daughter of German immigrants. When he was

a teenager, his family moved to Baltimore, MD, where he attended Polytechnic High School and participated in theatrical productions. He graduated from the Ohio State University College of Medicine in Columbus in 1932. He married later that year and moved back to Baltimore where he served as the coroner in that city—his investigations were frequently reported in the local newspapers. In 1942 he enlisted in the military, eventually reaching the rank of major, and served in the 78th Army Field Hospital in Europe until 1946. After his discharge, he obtained a Nevada medical license but also worked in California,

where he was reported to have considered Caliente, CA, and Tonopah, NV, as potential sites for his practice. He eventually settled in Beatty, NV. In Inyo County there were reports that he treated two miners injured in an accident and the victims of a serious traffic accident at Towne Pass in Death Valley. The 1950

federal census found him working at the hospital in DVJ, and Death Valley Scotty was one of his patients. By 1954 he had moved to Las Vegas where he again took care of Scotty during his final illness and death. In the mid 1970s, Kenneth Duke Reynolds, DC, (1921-99) moved to Tecopa, CA. He was born in Pittsburg, PA, and had moved to Los Angeles with his mother after the death of his father in 1931. He attended Los Angeles High School where he played football, was a member of the swim team, and served as captain of the gym team.



With the outbreak of WWII, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served in Alaska and at the Great Lakes training ground. After his Navy service, he married, and a daughter and son were born in 1946 and 1951. He attended the Los Angeles College of Chiropractic, obtained his California license in 1953, and opened a practice in Los Angeles with another chiropractor. After a divorce in 1973, he moved to Tecopa, where he married in 1977 and where another son was born in 1979. He established a practice and served the community for many years. He died in 1994 and is buried in the Tecopa Cemetery.

The hospital and clinic at DVJ closed in the 1950s. After that, a nurse was located in Furnace Creek and another one in Shoshone/Tecopa to provide care to the local population and visiting tourists. About this time, several doctors in Lone Pine held regular clinics in the Death Valley area. Initially Doctors Winfred B. Zimmerly, Raymond George Auvil, and Donald Christianson scheduled weekly office hours at Furnace Creek. Doctor Zimmerly also came to Shoshone and, working with nurse Pat Gardelius of Tecopa, held regular clinics and established protocols so that Pat could handle minor problems between his visits. They were later joined by Dr. Milton "Ben" Jones, who served the area for many years. At the present time, obtaining medical services requires travel to Nevada.



Dr. Zimmerly (L) and Pat Gardelius (R) examining a baby in Shoshone

Echoes from the Archives

by Susan Sorrells



The Shoshone Museum has remained open seven days a week throughout this summer and has served the important role of providing lifesaving advice to visitors who are unfamiliar with the challenges, and dangers, of the summer heat in Death Valley. While these visitors are at the museum, the staff takes the opportunity to introduce them to the fascinating human and natural history of the Amargosa and Death Valley regions as interpreted by the museum displays. As a result, visitors leave with important travel and safety information as well as a deeper appreciation of the land and its people.

The history articles in the *Shoshone Museum Reader* also engage new and longtime supporters of the Shoshone Museum by documenting the fascinating stories of the area based on primary documents. These stories are further enhanced by our readers who have personal knowledge of these events that they share with the museum. An example of this involves the young boy, David Lowe, who was mentioned in the part I segment of *Death Valley Doctors* as having been treated by Dr. Riley Shrum for kerosene ingestion. Lowe, after reading the article, wrote the museum a long letter describing the incident in detail. His fascinating account of the events surrounding the episode will be entered into our archives so that researchers studying the history of Death Valley Junction will have a personal account of life there in the 1930s. The Shoshone Museum welcomes information from anyone who has knowledge about the history of our communities.



Sunrise over the Resting Spring Range from near Shoshone

LELAND JOHN GRITZNER

(1922-87)

Leland Gritzner was a beloved teacher and minister in Shoshone and Tecopa. He was born to Charles and Hazel Gritzner in 1922 in the agrarian town of Plainfield, IA, the second of four children. His father was a mail carrier for the postal service. Little is known of his early life, although newspaper reports state that at age 11 he won first place in the Guernsey division at the Nashua, IA, county fair and went camping with a 4-H group.



Mason City, IA, Globe-Gazette, 1961

LELAND GRITZNER

In 1941 he completed a two-year normal (teacher) course at the Upper Iowa University (UIU) in Fayette, IA. He continued his studies there until the following year when he joined the 14th Armored Division of the U.S. Army. He was stationed abroad in 1944-45 and was discharged in November 1945.

Shortly after his discharge, his car was stolen. He reported the theft, and it was soon recovered in a nearby town. Several days later, while he was driving it, he was picked up for possessing a stolen vehicle—apparently it had not been removed from the list of stolen cars!

He earned a master's degree in education administration as an elementary school principal in 1955 from UIU. By 1963 he was the assistant superintendent of schools in Osage, IA, when he announced that he was accepting a faculty position with the Death Valley schools in California. That fall he was an elementary teacher in Shoshone, and the following year he taught at the Francis Elementary School in Tecopa.

He was politically active, and in 1968 and 1972 he and Pat Gardelius (a practical nurse in Tecopa) co-chaired the committee to reelect Howard Way, a Republican California senator and president pro tempore of the state senate.

He became a minister in the Tecopa Community Church, delivering well-received sermons and conducting services for deceased parishioners. His inspirational messages were even published in the Nashua, IA, newspaper. In 1966 he began publishing a newsletter, *Desert Breeze*, that chronicled local happenings, and is still great source of information.

In 1987 he was in Covina, CA, visiting some relatives from Iowa when he suffered a heart attack. He was hospitalized in Covina, but died two days later. The residents of Tecopa, deeply saddened by his death, produced a final edition of the *Desert Breeze* that focused on his life and planned several memorials to honor his commitment to the community.

Upcoming Events

Tecopa artist group presents:
 James Davis: The Fire Within & others
 opening reception Sunday, October 26 2-5 pm
 Tecopa Hot Springs Resort
 Live music ****most**** Fri and Sat evenings, sunset -10 pm
 weather permitting, Tecopa Hot Springs Resort

Ongoing Death Valley Natl Park events: <www.nps.gov/deva>
 Get Outdoors Nevada volunteer opportunities
 <www.getoutdoorsnevada.org>
 Road Scholar Program, Death Valley Natl Park
 <www.dvnh.org/programs-events/road-scholar>
 Ash Meadows Natl Wildlife Refuge events information
 <adrienne_mcgill@fws.gov>
 Tecopa Hot Springs Campground (music, hikes, and more)
 <<http://www.tecopahotspringscampground.com/>>

****** please call Tecopa Hot Springs Resort ([760\) 852-4420](tel:7608524420))
 for updated music schedule

*Please contact the Shoshone Museum for more information
shoshonemuseum@gmail.com 760 852-4524

Shoshone Museum Association Membership Form

(Annual Dues)

Individual	\$25	Name: _____
Family	\$35	Mailing address: _____
Business	\$50	_____
Nonprofit	\$35	_____
Mtn Lion	\$100	Email: _____
Mammoth	\$500	Donation: \$ _____
Senior	\$15	Amount enclosed: \$ _____
Student	\$15	New <input type="checkbox"/> Renewal <input type="checkbox"/>

Make checks payable to Shoshone Museum Association
 Mail to: P.O. Box 38, Shoshone, CA 92384 or
 pay by phone using VISA or Master Card 760 852 4524



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