

Mason Menefee was a tall lanky man. He looked totally unsuited for the job he had held during World War II, that of being a test pilot for Lockheed Aircraft corporation. Pilots are usually smaller than average in stature so they fit into a plane's cockpit, but not Mason. He was from a family who raised oranges near Covina, California. He didn't want to be an orange farmer and even though successful as a pilot, usually flying new P-38 Lightning fighter craft, when the war effort wound down he decided to pursue his life's ambition. He wanted to be a cowboy, or maybe better yet, a cattleman.

Mason came over to Kingman and became acquainted with Jerome Carrow. Carrow ranched in the Crozier, Arizona area, a small settlement and railroad water about 30 miles north of Kingman on the Santa Fe line. Mason knew he didn't understand the cow business but he had a little money and wanted a partner. Carrow introduced Mason around Kingman and that is when Flay met him in 1947.

A target of opportunity presented itself. The Gus Duncan Ranch was up for sale. Gus had recently passed away and his wife Sadie decided the best thing for her to do was sell the ranch and move to town. The ranch was situated about 35 miles south of Kingman, east of the road toward Yucca. (Later that road became the Highway 66 alignment and later Interstate 40).

The ranch ranged from the railroad, right beside the highway to the top of the Waba-Yuma mountain the southern part of the Hualapai range. The lower vegetation was creosote, cat claw along the washes, and filaree; higher up it switched to grasses, juniper, and finally some pine trees. The higher country was really pretty rough. Two major dry water courses made their way across the ranch - Walnut Creek and Rock Creek. The main ranch house was on Walnut Creek and the ranch was known as Walnut Creek Ranch. At Rock Creek there was a house also and a well. The house there had been a field headquarters of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which was one of the New Deal agencies. There was even a flag pole and parade ground there.



Figure 1. Hualapai Mountains

The house at Walnut Creek was a classical ranch set up for an isolated place. The house was big, but old. A separate tack room for saddles was in the front yard, an old orchard had been planted there and it still bore some fruit. Across the yard was a big barn with stables and a place to store hay. There was running water in the kitchen sink but there was no toilet in the bathroom. There was an outhouse off to the left near the orchard. The road in to the ranch house was pretty rough in places. It left the main road about 4 miles south of Griffith, a water station off the railroad. Across the desert flats the road was good, but shortly after entering Walnut Creek Canyon, the road came up out of the bottom of the wash to the side hill up an incline called the "Steep Pitch". The Steep Pitch was tough to drive up and doubly difficult if a trailer was being pulled. The road stayed on the side hill for most of the way, then dropped back into the brush at the side of the dry stream bed. The brush was quite thick there. The first ranch structure was a small barn, two corrals and gates on the outside fences of the corrals and in the fence that separated them. You had to stop and open three gates to get through. There was a water trough that serviced both corrals and there were gold fish in the trough.

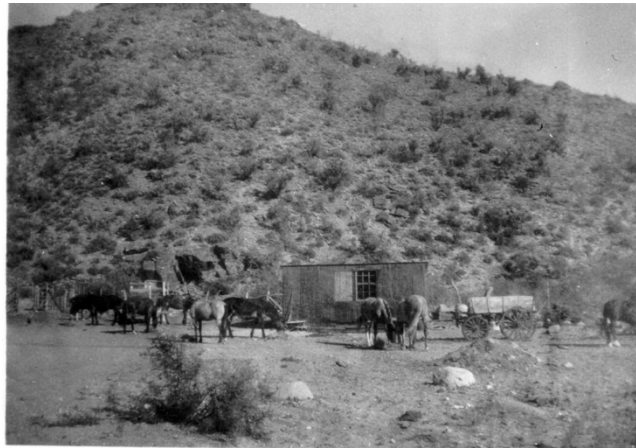


Figure 2. Line shack on the Walnut Creek Ranch, about 1947

Flay and Mason decided they would form a partnership and call it Menefee and Peterson. They were able to float a line of credit with Valley National Bank to buy the ranch and get a loan from Production Credit to stock it with cattle. Production Credit is a cattle financing mutual firm from Phoenix that Flay belonged to. They occupied the ranch in fall 1947.

Mason's wife was named Hazel and she wasn't really wild about leaving California. Sometimes she came to Kingman and for a while they rented a house. They had no children and that was sad because they wanted kids. Hazel had ailments mostly because she had only herself to think about. Mason at times camped in the shack behind the house in Kingman, sometimes lived at the ranch. Across time, Flay and Mason branched out into other things, particularly dabbling in mining stuff.



Figure 3. Hazel Menefee at McConnico, about 1957

Flay's brother, Leonard, moved to Kingman and for a time before Len and Leona's youngest son, Lloyd, started school Mason and Flay hired him to live and work at Walnut.



Figure 4. Leonard Peterson

The ranch was not particularly well watered, so the first big projects were to develop more water so the cattle could utilize the range better. Reworking the ranch house access road around the Steep Pitch was another priority, which was the first improvement finished. South of the Walnut Creek road was a spring. The men worked on this first. They dug out the spring and built a spring box. The flow was increased so they piped the water about 4 miles to the south west and built a trough and dug a dirt tank and fenced the new water lot. The spring provided adequate water but the dirt tank was on fairly porous soil so they had to find some clay and spread on the

tank bottom. After the cattle used it for a season tromping down the clay when they waded out into the tank to drink the dirt tank held water much better. The spring did OK in a normal water year but was weak if it were rainfall was short for a year or two.



Figure 5. Cowboys on Walnut Creek Ranch, about 1947. Unknown rider on left, Len Peterson on right.

At Rock Creek, they deepened the well and replaced the windmill. The gear box was completely worn out and the tower was too short. They took the easy way out in taking down the old tower. They cut it off at the bottom with an acetylene torch and toppled it over. There was no salvage value had they climbed up and taken it apart with wrenches so they merely had now to pull it aside. With the old tower gone they did not have drill a completely new well but did use a brand-new windmill. It was an aero-motor brand.

Walnut Canyon, above the ranch house, when through a tight spot called the Narrows. Above the Narrows, the canyon was not as steep sided and in fact quite wide. Flay and Mason hired a well driller by the name of Ray Gorman to take his rig up there and drill a new well. He had some trouble negotiating the road but was able to find a suitable spot to set up. The drilling was tough and slow but at about 30 feet he found a water zone. The water stream coming into the well was adequate but didn't fill the well very deeply. Flay asked him to deepen the well in hopes of finding another water bearing zone and to develop more of a reserve in the well for pumping. Gorman tried but ran into a hard granite zone and was unable to develop more water there. Considering the shallowness of the well, it was a poor well and dried up in years with little rainfall.

In about 1952 a would-be rancher, Van C. Lee leased Jim Herring's pasture, a small place which bordered to the north of Flay's McConnico pasture located on the far eastern side of the Valley Ranch. Lee was not in the best of health but after some real difficulty with his stomach and a bad bout of appendicitis, his health improved. His wife, Helen, was a first-class hypochondriac and never did get over her ailments. Lee didn't stay in the cattle business very long and about all he got out of it was a burro named Tobacco. However, Van had a real talent for finding bargains in real estate. He would scour delinquent tax notices, examine estate sale documents and come up with property which could be purchased quite cheaply.

Van found in Oatman patented mining claims that were being abandoned by their former owners and were being sold for taxes by the county or the owners had died and the estate was disposing

of the claims. Flay formed a handshake partnership with Van, his brother Ben, Mason Menefee, and Flay's brother Len. They purchased four patented claims south of Oatman for taxes. Their names were the Vivian, the Mitchell, the Whaleback, and the Release. They, except for the Vivian, were originally part of the Leland Mine group which straddled a prominent hill known as Leland Butte. About 1903 a narrow gage railroad was constructed between the Mitchell and Milltown, the site of an ore mill located near the Colorado River about 20 miles away. The railroad was used for about 3 years, then sufficient water was procured from the Mitchell shaft, a mill was constructed there, and the railroad abandoned and the track salvaged. The Mitchell mill was operational until the 1942 government order shut it down.¹ There were two tailings ponds, one quite large and when tested showed residual gold values missed in the original milling process. The rail bed made the best road for traversing the rough hills between the Vivian and the Mitchell.



Figure 6. Flay Peterson panning for gold at the Vivian mine, December 1959.

¹ These gold mines were active producers until 1942 when the U. S. Government declared gold mining a non-essential industry with respect to the war production for World War II. The price of gold was being held at an artificial \$35.00 per ounce and mining costs had continued to escalate. It was generally not profitable for a big mining company, with overhead costs and highly paid workers to reopen the closed down mines. Another issue was that the county had not been wise with their property tax policy. They had taxed the inactive mills the same as if they were still operating and the response of the mining companies was to tear down the mills, move the equipment and machinery to war effort mines and cut their tax bills to zero. The cost of rebuilding the mills made restarting the industry doubly tough.

Flay and his partners built a small cabin which Van and Helen moved into and they put cover over the main Vivian shaft and installed a pump jack. There was probably more water in the Mitchell shaft but it was 400 feet down; at the Vivian it was only about 90 feet to the water line. Enough water could be pumped to provide domestic needs and to run a little mill.

After the purchase of the Vivian, Van found an estate sale for the un-patented Atlas group of claims. An old miner, John Breen, died and was buried at county expense. The county was selling the claims to recoup its costs. Flay brought these for a pittance. They mostly covered a little hill about a mile to the north west of the Vivian and fit nicely into the ground between the Vivian and the Mitchell. After that the partners located claims on the rest of the open ground surrounding the Vivian and covered the big sand wash to the east with four placer claims.² There eventually were 15 un-patented and 4 patented claims in the group³.

Flay acquired part ownership in a manganese claim, located in the far southern end of Mohave County in the Alamo District. His partners here were Elmer Harrison, George Lewis and Mason Menefee. The Korean War was raging and the world's supply of manganese used to harden steel was in short supply. There was a considerable interest from a steel company and they actually bought a small shipment of ore to examine it for mineral content and to assess its suitability for milling. The war wound down shortly thereafter and the foreign producers geared up and the price spike abated. Menefee and Harrison dropped out in late fall 1958⁴ but Flay and George carried on for five or six years, with each paying half the costs of the assessment work.⁵ In 1959 there was another flurry of interest in manganese and more ore was mined and shipped.⁶ After George Lewis moved off to Alaska, Flay abandoned the claims and they were finally declared vacant when the government put in a dam on the Bill Williams River and made a lake and national recreation area at Alamo.

The forays into mica, tungsten, and uranium happened about the same time in the early 1950's. There was a demand for mica in the electrical industry for insulation material in large wattage light bulbs and in radio tubes or other applications. Of course, uranium was needed for the military bomb making activity. The mica was of mediocre quality, so Flay with his brother Len did not spend much time pursuing that avenue. There was much more excitement in the other

² A placer claim grants to the discoverer of valuable minerals contained in loose material such as sand or gravel the right to mine on public land

³ When a claim was patented, it must have been surveyed and shown to have mineral value. The government then gave a deed, called a patent, which including mineral rights, to the new owner. A full claim was six hundred feet by fifteen hundred feet containing about 20 acres of surface area.

⁴ Deed Elmer Harrison and Mason Menefee to Flay Peterson and George Lewis dated November 10, 1958. Mohave County Arizona Recorder's office Book of Deeds 94 pp 393-394 and Peterson Family Archive File Folder xx, Item yyy.

⁵ Assessment work was required by the Mining Law of 1876, calling for 100 dollars worth of improvements on each un-patented claim each year. Usually a Proof-of-Labor Affidavit was recorded in the public records of the County Recorder's office certifying the labor had been performed. The manganese claims were not patented.

⁶ Manganese ore shipping records -Peterson Family Archive File Folder xx, Item yyy

minerals particularly uranium. Flay and Mason purchased a small Geiger Counter used to detect radiation sources and a battery powered black light. The black light would illuminate florescent rocks, revealing minerals not detectable in natural light. It was useful to find and assess tungsten deposits. Mason was more caught up in the uranium search than Flay. There were a few hot spots of radioactivity around Mohave County, but none had any commercial value. Golden Roundy, Blanche's uncle, living in Bluewater, New Mexico, got rich off from uranium. His worthless lava-flow covered land had several hot spots for uranium ore. When Flay and Mason dissolved their partnership, Mason took the Geiger Counter and Flay took the black light.