

The Champion Sparkplug Mine



Pam Vaughan, the author, on her hike to the mine site in 2010.

Photo submitted

(Editor's note: The second part of a two part series about Dr. Joseph A. Jeffery with his Jeffery Ranch and the Champion Sparkplug Mine. The mine was constructed at the top of Dry Creek Canyon, now called Jeffery Canyon. The ranch was covered in the author's previous contribution in the Sept. 26 edition of The Inyo Register.)



PAM VAUGHAN
COLUMNIST

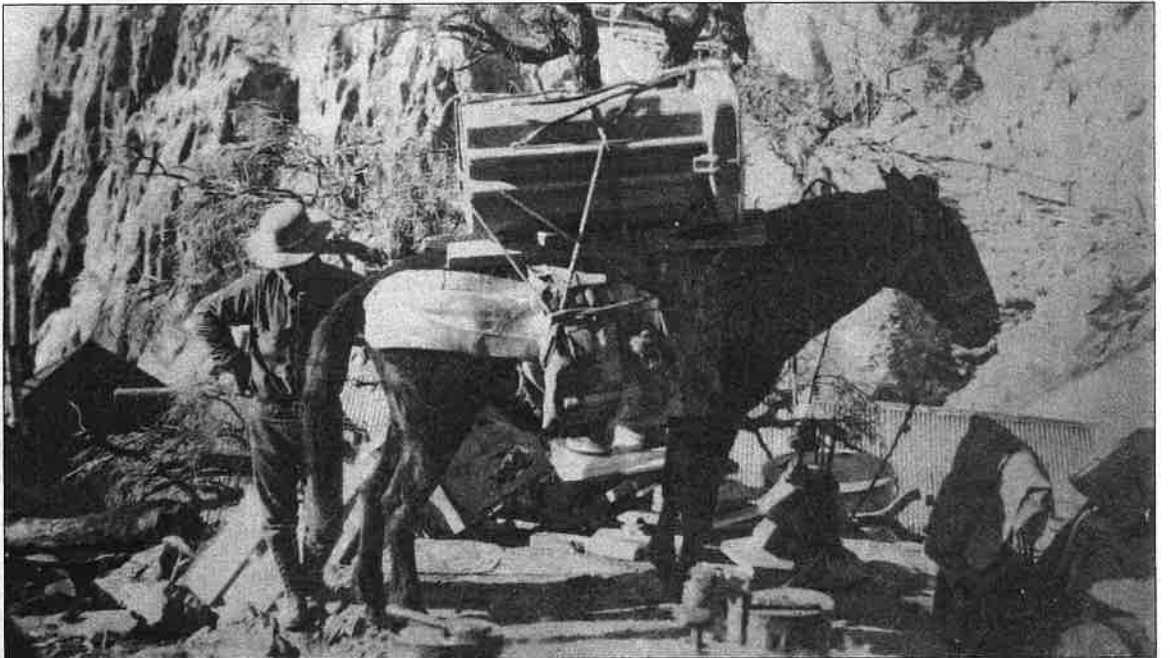
After staking his claim to the sillimanite deposit, Dr. Joseph Jeffery began building the infrastructure supporting the mine. The newly purchased ranch had to be expanded, power had to be in place, and a road built. The sillimanite, a form of andalusite, is a heavy, dense material used as a heat shield. For sparkplugs, it could be used as the non-bubbling insulating material along the wires. The material was named after Professor Benjamin Silliman of Yale University. It is not in much use today, but sillimanite is quite rare and found in few locations.

Charles Douglas Woodhouse, Jeffery's son-in-law, was initially appointed as superintendent of mine development. He first set out to oversee the building of a mule trail on the south slope of the canyon with its 3,000-foot vertical drop, so there had to be many tight switchbacks. Mules didn't look down anyway. Mules hauled everything in. Michelle Woodhouse, Douglas' daughter, recently related the story of Ole Maude. "She was a mule and part of the team of mules that brought the ore down from the mines. When they were building the infrastructure for the mines, everything had to go up on mule back, including the transformer. Now Ole Maude was probably wiser than anyone else because as she struggled up one switchback after another climbing up the steep slope, she had a better idea. She stopped, looked up, and then instead of following the switchback trail, she just clambered straight up the slope transformer and all! She was rewarded for her ingenuity by my grandfather officially retiring her, and she

became a pet for the children."

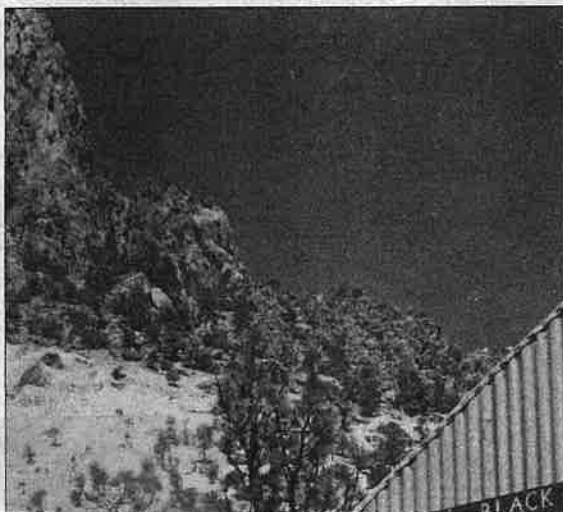
Jeffery first gave the packing contract to Len Leidy who arrived with his stout mules. The next pack outfit was run by Wendel Gill. And finally Spray Kinney along with his son, Ernest. Some of the early packers that worked for them were John Bacoach, Albert Summers, Ferris Heedick, George Brown, and Anacelto Torres. The camp was located where the lower parking lot is today. Once the mining operations got underway, each mule would carry 400 pounds of sillimanite down the trail to be loaded into a truck at the pack camp. The truck would then head for Shealy (train) Siding to be loaded into ore bins and then onto the Carson and Colorado. It would then be taken south to Owenyo to be switched to the standard gauge rail and off to the factory in Detroit. The cement slabs for the ore bins can still be seen on Highway 6 today.

After Woodhouse, George Clarkson was chosen as manager of both the ranch and the mine. He initially was hired to electrify the mine and the ranch with hydroelectric power. A small dam was erected inside the canyon. Penstock was then added to bring the water to the hydroelectric plant at the ranch. Power poles had to be erected from the plant to the mine. George Clarkson Jr. recently related the story of his father and a big Swede named Nels, "When they were working in the canyon, purple clouds began turning black. Nels said, 'We'd better get outta here.' They jumped in the pickup and drove



Leonard Leidy awaits help to aid him in unloading a transformer from a mule at the Upper Camp circa 1930.

Courtesy George and Sue Clarkson



Dr. Joseph Jeffery stands on a dam in Dry Creek Canyon.

Courtesy George and Sue Clarkson



George Clarkson, Jr. and his wife, Sue at the dedication of Black Eagle Camp, also called Lower Camp.

Courtesy of George and Sue Clarkson

down the canyon as fast as they could. For 45 minutes, the rain came in torrents and the debris flow carried boulders as big as the pickup through the canyon. The flood took out several sections of the brand new flow line including an expensive pipeline trestle (catenary,) but Dad, Nels, and the pickup were safe."

At any given time, there were eight or nine miners working the deposit. They had to climb tall ladders on the cliffs to get to the dozen or so adits (mine entrances.) No one was ever killed or had serious injuries. It was tough work, and the weather could be brutal with those frequent thunderstorms. In the winter, work came to a stop because of snow, and the miners would leave the White Mountains. There was a cook at the camp, however, that made their lives a little easier, and the cook was almost always Chinese. The kitchen was a complete one; the commercial-size stove and walk-in fridge were brought to the camp piece by piece on mule back.

Dr. Jeffery died in 1944. The mine closed around 1945. In the July 13, 1945, *Inyo Register*, there was a

piece titled, "Champion Sillimanite, Inc. Detroit, Michigan," which stated, "Operations of the Jeffery Ranch and the Sparkplug Mine in the White Mountains northeast of Laws suspended mining operations on July 3. George W. Clarkson, superintendent said he has a reserve stockpile that will meet production requirements for the next 5 years."

It is not an easy journey today to get into this mining area, which involves hiking. There have been dedicated volunteers over the years who have helped preserve its legacy. Black Eagle Camp (Lower Camp) still is intact, and there is even a small museum on site. Thanks to George Clarkson, Jr. for his contributions to this bit of Eastside history.

(Pam Vaughan is the photo archivist at the Laws Museum. She and her husband, Brendan, are the authors of "Images of America: Bishop." Pam taught high school history for 37 years and was the recipient of Fulbright and National Endowment for the Humanities grants. She is the great-granddaughter of Owens Valley pioneers.)



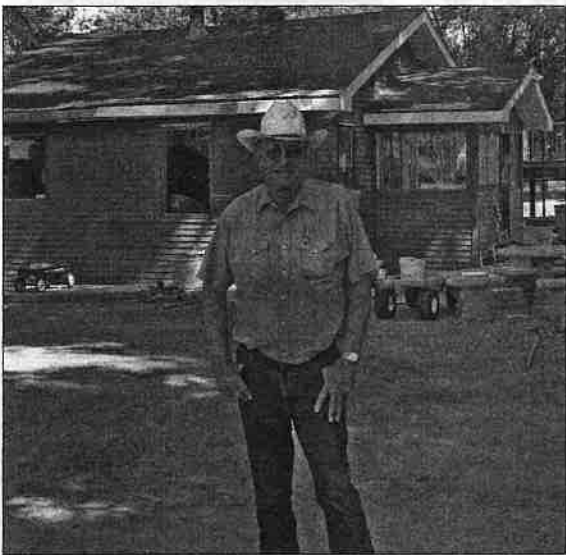
Unknown foreman on the left with George Clarkson Sr. and his wife, Louise, at Upper Camp.

Courtesy of George and Sue Clarkson



Inside one of the holes with ore cart tracks. The adit (entrance) can be seen to the left.

Courtesy of George and Sue Clarkson



George Clarkson Jr. stands in front of his childhood home. It now serves as a home school.

Photo by Pam Vaughan



Rambling Rafters as it appeared when owned by Dr. and Mrs. Jeffery. It still stands today on what has become the White Mountain Ranch.

Photo by George Clarkson Sr., courtesy of George Clarkson Jr.



George Clarkson Sr.
Photo by George Clarkson Sr., courtesy of George Clarkson Jr.
File photo

Dr. Joseph Jeffery and his ranch

Dr. Joseph Arthur Jeffery leaped off the Carson and Colorado Railroad as it slowed down at the Hammil Valley Depot. He had been warned by the conductor that the train did not stop. Jeffery had heard about a sillimanite deposit and purchased the claim but wasn't quite sure of its exact location. He then proceeded to explore the area, camping in a variety of spots, but had no success. One night he climbed into his sleeping bag, and felt a large rock underneath the bag; he pulled it out. Sillimanite!



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The very thing he had been looking for had found him. The rock had fallen onto the spot from the neighboring cliff. The deposit was then easy to locate. From then on, he kept this rock as a souvenir under a glass case.

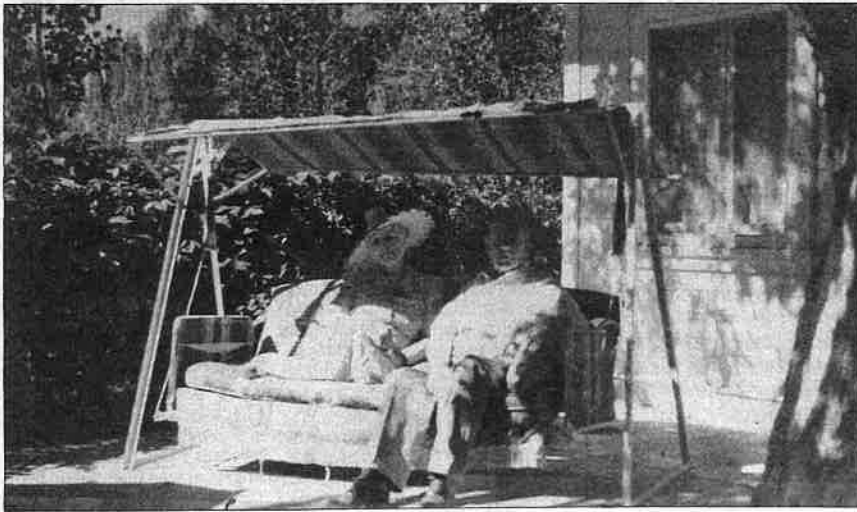
Dr. Jeffery was born in San Francisco and attended the University of California School of Dentistry. With his brother, Ben, he began experimenting with various materials for making dentures. Sillimanite, related to andalusite, was one of the substances; it had a high resistance to heat. It chipped easily, however, so he and his brother, Ben, along with brothers, Robert and Frank Stranahan, decided to try the material out in sparkplugs. It worked. The Stranahans had founded Champion Sparkplug Plug Co. in 1908. The Jeffery brothers with their sillimanite jumped on board in about 1915.



Dr. Joseph Arthur Jeffery in a formal 1937 portrait.

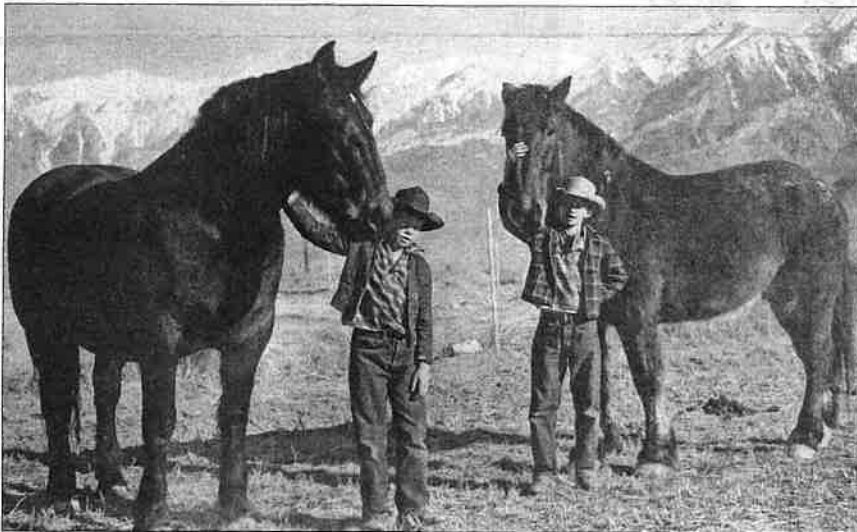
Photo by courtesy Jean McElvogue

After locating the deposit, Dr. Jeffery bought the Perry Ranch (now the White Mountain Ranch) in Hammil Valley at the bottom of the canyon leading to the deposit. The ranch was to provide



Josephine and Joseph Jeffery at the ranch shortly before his death in 1942. She is wearing her ever-present hat. She always was smartly dressed.

Courtesy of Michelle Woodhouse



Don "Mutt," left, and George Clarkson Jr. with a work team.

Photo by George Clarkson Sr., courtesy of George Clarkson Jr.

food for the miners and also earn a profit to help finance the development of the mineral vein. The mine will be discussed in the author's next article.

To manage both the ranch and the mine, Jeffery chose George Clarkson Sr. because Jeffery needed to develop a power supply for the mine. Clarkson had been employed by Nevada-California Power Company that had constructed the Bishop Creek power complex. He had also owned an 80-acre ranch west of Black Canyon. The Clarksons moved to the Jeffery Ranch in 1929, the year their son, George Jr., was born.

The ranch was in three parts: 723 acres at its main location, 750 acres called the Taylor Ranch near Benton, and 400 acres in Watterson Meadows in the Glass Mountains for the summer range. The complex was mostly a hay ranch with about 400 head of cattle; they also raised sheep and pigs. They flood irrigated alfalfa, corn, and potatoes. They sold their surplus potatoes and meat to local markets such as Josephs and Safeway. There were no chickens because Mr. Clarkson did not like these fowl.

The hay production became immense. On the west side of Highway 6, there were three hay barns

that held 550 tons of hay each. Two or three hay trucks from Los Angeles would frequently appear to pick up loads of hay. The ranch also sold hay to local folks and to the Sparkplug Mine's pack camp owned by Ernest Kinney's family. Sometimes an inspector from the California Department of Agriculture would appear. He would randomly push sampling tubes in bales of hay, and the hay was declared the highest quality in the state of California.

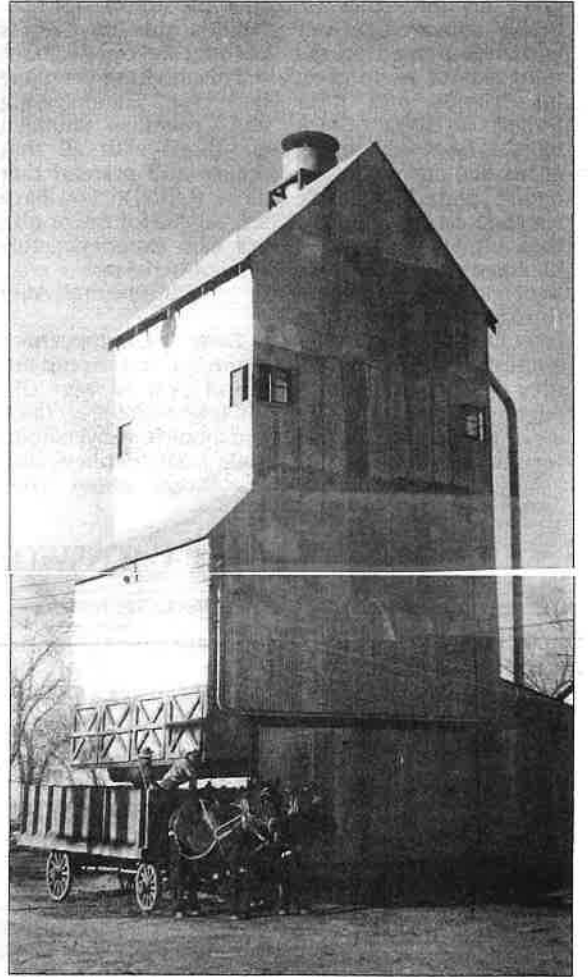
There was a huge feed mill that was state of the art. It ground corn for animal feed that was mixed with cottonseed and molasses. It also chopped hay that wouldn't sell or was water damaged. Bales sold for \$16 per ton and bales sold individually for \$1. Nowadays, it is \$200 per ton or \$10 per bale.

During the summer haying season, there would be 10 men employed on the ranch. They were paid \$5 per day and provided room and board at the boarding house that still partially exists. It was tough working seven days a week from 6:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. During the winter, there were four employees plus a cook. These guys fed the stock, milked six cows, and butchered the steers, pigs, and sheep as needed. It was a

full-time job for one of these cowboys to watch the cattle. During World War II when gas was rationed, Clarkson hired one man at \$2.50 each night to sleep in the back of a pickup with a mosquito net over the top. His job was to keep an eye on the farm equipment that surrounded him, so the gas wouldn't be siphoned from the rigs.

Dr. Jeffery built a big, beautiful house on the ranch that still stands today. He spent a month at the ranch once a year, and sometimes his wife, Josephine, would join him with her chauffeur and maid. She named all her houses, and named this house, "Rambling Rafters." Most of the year, Jeffery lived in Detroit near the sparkplug factory. There was a bungalow for Clarkson and his wife, Louise, and two sons, George and Don ("Mutt"). The author recently spent time with George Clarkson Jr. at what is now the White Mountain Ranch. His old house still stands and functions as a home school.

George Jr. related how initially Jeffery leased Adobe Meadows land for summer pasturage from the Symons family but later purchased land at Watterson Meadows. The cattle drive was a two-day affair that started in April or May depending on the snow. For this event, they hired such legendary



State-of-the-art feed mill where ranch workers ground up old or wet hay and mixed it with cottonseed and molasses for silage. The ranch had many visitors who came to see this facility.

Photo by George Clarkson Sr., courtesy of George Clarkson Jr.



From left, George Clarkson Jr., Richie Minaberry and Vase Cline.

Photo by George Clarkson Sr., courtesy of George Clarkson Jr.

cowboys as Charlie Scott, Vase Cline, Lester Cline, and Richie Conway.

George has many good memories of growing up on the ranch. They had to work hard but had plenty of time for hunting and fishing off the ranch. Game was more abundant in those days including deer and sage grouse. To collect a little pocket money, George and Mutt would kill crows and magpies for the bounty. Louise drove them all the way into Bishop to go to school, stay in town at her sister's, then drive them home in the afternoon. George, being the oldest of the boys, got his license at the age of 14 and transported them to school after that.

By all reports, Dr. and Mrs. Jeffery were kind and generous people. The good doctor drove a Model A, and it was always exciting to have him at the ranch.

Jeffery was good friends with the likes of Henry Ford and J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover had given Jeffery a .38 revolver that the doctor always carried.

Dr. Jeffery died on Dec. 26, 1944, at the age of 71, and Josephine held onto the ranch until 1947. George Sr. was given the option of buying the ranch, but he declined; he passed away in 1970. Josephine finally lived in Santa Barbara where she died. Dr. Jeffery is buried in Colma near San Francisco.

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