



THE KEITH RILEY STORY

by Marian A. Long

Thirty years ago about this time a tragic event occurred in Imperial Valley that many people will remember well. Keith Riley, a Ben Hulse School second grader was lost on Mount Signal and was later found dead.

On April 24th, 1969, at 9:50 AM, a group left the Methodist Church in El Centro on the way to Mt. Signal for a Sunday school picnic.

After arriving at the picnic, the adults were busy setting up camp. The children formed little groups and set out to find toads. Keith was with a party of four. They were told to come back in twenty minutes because the picnic spread would then be ready. After twenty minutes, the children returned to headquarters. Mrs. Eleanor Riley noticed that Keith was not among them.

"Why didn't Keith return?" she wondered.

One of the men in the group started out in the direction the children had come from. After fifteen minutes, he returned and organized a search party of children. One boy said he'd heard Keith say he wanted to climb the mountain. Because of the search for toads no one saw Keith leave the group.

The children cooperated beautifully. Each couple went in a different direction and returned in twenty minutes. At one p.m., one of the adults drove to a neighboring farmhouse to call for help. The other children were taken home because they were getting too much sun. The Sheriff's Department was called and in a short time, his men arrived as did many other search groups.

Soon the border planes were working the area. Many Border Patrol jeeps were on the search while the trackers were combing the mountain area. The planes radios had speakers that could be heard, calling to the boy. The Four-Wheel-Drive-Jeep Club was soon called and help began to come from everywhere. The planes kept calling Keith to come out and all those present were amazed when night fell and no trace had been found of the missing boy.

The jeeps kept their car lights on all night and a big fire was kept burning all night. Altogether there were several hundred searchers, including a San Diego Search and Rescue team with bloodhounds.

The dogs tracked Keith's scent about eight and a half miles on a straight line up and halfway down the other side of the mountain before losing the scent in the heat. They began the search next morning again before daylight.

A nineteen year old Brawley I.V.C. student found the body under a bush. Keith had taken off his shoes, put his socks in them and taken off his shirt as if preparing to sleep. The young man found these things and went straight down where Keith had fallen and crawled under a bush. His body was found after a three day search. De Anza Rescue was started because of this search and is still going strong.

Keith had several times before this event said he wanted to climb Mt. Signal. The day of the picnic, he'd asked his mother if he could. Keith's father chose the words for his gravestone: "He climbed the mountain".

The next fall after this happened, Emma Lou Hanson and Mr. and Mrs. Riley collaborated to have a tree planted in front of Ben Hulse Elementary School office.

The first few years after its planting, the tree seemed a little slow in taking off, but now thirty years later it is a giant, majestic shade tree and the value of shade in this harsh climate is well known.

The tree was so valuable now, first for its wonderful location? right where parents and others wait to pick up Ben Hulse students after school and second, for its vast area of shade.

This truly is a remarkable tree. Apparently, so thought Ben Hulse Principal Madeline Willis, who visualized a beautiful platform with benches surrounding the tree and made the dream become a reality.

Kids, waiting to get on buses, parents waiting for kids, use it and there are a host of other uses for this platform in a very large shady area.

Those who knew Keith found him to be a very determined boy. His parents had said when he made up his mind to do something, nothing could stop him.

He made up his mind he was going to climb the mountain and he set about to do just that. He probably never looked back and he apparently did not believe he was lost.

There are many people who remember this tragic day when they look across the valley to Mount Signal.

For those who may be unfamiliar with the area, Mt. Signal is a rugged mountain, sitting on the desert floor. A great deal of the mountain is in Mexico. This story was written by Marian A. Long, Imperial, California, a neighbor and friend of the Riley family at the time of the incident. Information was given to me by Keith's mother Eleanor Catlin and a story written by Jo Cook, another friend of the family, who was in the search party at the time of the incident.