

Quartzsite, Arizona

MAYBE THEY DROVE through the mountains and into the desert, listening on the radio to the big hit of the day, “Jingle, Jangle, Jingle,” by Kay Kyser. Or maybe they took the bus. Either way John D. Hancock and Edna Christine Martin found themselves in Quartzsite, Arizona, on August 7, 1942.

That small town was about ninety miles east of Camp Young in the Desert Training Center. That’s where General George S. Patton, Jr., was training John D. Hancock and thousands more for war. No one knew exactly where they would go, or when, except that it would be hot, and soon.

John D. was 21, the handsome son of East Texas farmers. He had enlisted in 1940 to find a paying job. Edna was 18, the pretty daughter of Oklahoma farmers, lately displaced by the Depression to West Texas.

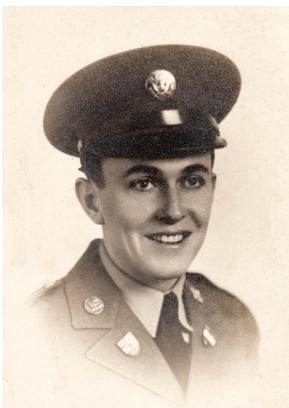
John D. and Edna had been courting for a year, starting in El Paso, Texas, while he was at Fort Bliss. In April, he was shipped to the Desert Training Center. In May, she graduated from Clint High School. She soon followed him to California and stayed with a sister in a nearby town.

They decided to marry in the summer of 1942. Time was short. Everyone knew the men at the Desert Training Center would soon ship out. The choice was clear: Marry now, marry after the war, or if worse came to worst, marry not at all. One practical benefit, if they married now, was that Uncle Sam would pay Edna a spouse’s benefit while her new husband was overseas. Without an income, she might have to go back home, and she didn’t want to do that.

John D. and Edna came to Arizona to marry because that state required neither a blood test nor a three-day wait, as did California, site of the Desert Training Center. The spirit of the frontier still ruled in Arizona. What business was it of the state to stand between a man and a woman who were hot to do the right thing? Better to speed them along than to cool them off for three days.

U.S. 60 snaked through an Indian reservation and a scrubby mountain range, then dropped to Quartzsite in a desert valley. It was the first town on the lightly populated Arizona side of the border. It was an old, largely unsuccessful, mining center. About 1,500 souls called it home—a few merchants and ranchers, last-ditch prospectors, eccentrics who, like Huck Finn, wanted distance from civilization.

Electricity would not arrive until after the war. The local school had eight grades and one teacher, though not every grade had students.



“Jingle, Jangle, Jingle”
And they sing, “Oh ain’t
you glad you’re single,”
and that song ain’t so very
far from wrong.

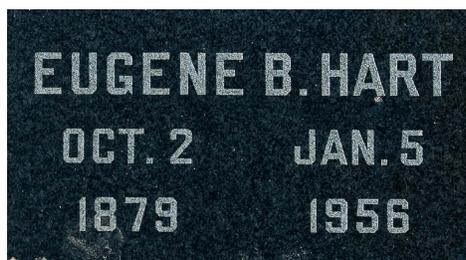
The most famous resident, long dead by 1942, was Hi Jolly, a Greek–Syrian imported to America by the United States army in the 1850s along with a herd of camels. He taught soldiers how to feed, load, and drive the creatures. It was an idea that never quite worked. When the government gave up, the lonely camels wandered off into the desert to dream and die. Mr. Jolly settled in Quartzsite, probably not bothering to teach locals how to pronounce his Syrian name, Hadji Ali.

Mr. Jolly died in 1902 and was buried in a rocky desert cemetery just off Quartzsite’s main street. In 1935 the Arizona Highway Department topped his grave with a four-foot-high stone pyramid. Poking from the top is the metal silhouette of a camel.

Less than a quarter-mile east to the east of the cemetery stood the Tamarack Lodge, a big house occupied by Fred Victor Kuehn, 54, and wife Elsie, with four cabins for rent. Mr. Kuehn’s two brothers, his mother Viktoria, and his father Gabriel were from Germany. Young Fred was born in May 1888 in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The father died soon after the family passed through Ellis Island, and Mrs. Kuehn set out for Quartzsite with her brood to work for an uncle who owned a general store. In time Mrs. Kuehn married Antone Hagley and had two daughters and a son, George Hagley. The hardworking Kuehn and Hagley boys would become Quartzsite’s leading citizens.



One of Fred Victor Kuehn’s cabins at Tamarack Lodge was occupied by Eugene B. Hart, 62, who signed his name as “E.B. Hart” and went by “Bert.” He was the justice of the peace for Quartzsite and, accordingly, empowered to officiate at marriages. That put him in a position to profit mightily from the business opportunity created by California’s marriage laws, which drove potential customers across the state line, and Quartzsite’s good fortune in being the first stop with a JP on the other side of that line, which attracted customers. By the end of the war, more than 37,000 marriage ceremonies had been conducted in Quartzsite.



That, at least, was the local claim. Most of the weddings were for G.I.s and their fiancées. A few, however, were Hollywood celebrities. Al Jolson came there in 1945 for his fourth marriage.

When John D. Hancock and Edna

Christine Martin showed up at the Tamarack Lodge on that Friday in August, they purchased their license from the clerk, E.M. Kuehn—possibly Mr. Kuehn’s wife Elsie. Then they said their vows before Mr. Hart. Witnesses were Mr. Hart’s wife, Maud, and Mr. Kuehn. How reliable Mr. Kuehn was as a witness might be open to dispute, however. In 1936, he told folks he had found an octopus in his well. Local historian Rosalee Oldham Wheeler wrote that local folks were amazed by the news. As they well should have been.

(Mrs. Wheeler is the source of most information in this essay about Quartzsite.)

Did John D. and Edna then rent one of Fred Victor Kuehn’s convenient cabins at Tamarack Lodge? The record is silent on that delicate question.

The Hancock honeymoon lasted on and off—mostly off—for three weeks. John D. spent his days in the blistering heat and his nights in the chilling cold at Camp Young in the Desert Training Center. The new Mrs. Edna Christine Martin Hancock waited in her sister’s home for weekend passes.



Then he shipped out. On August 28, three weeks to the day after the wedding, John D. Hancock and his unit boarded a train in Indio, California. Edna Christine Martin Hancock stood in the swirling dust as her new husband waved from the window, then disappeared down the tracks toward the coming war in North Africa.

Bert Hart was not reelected as justice of the peace in the November 3 general election. He was 62, and that was a lot older back then, so he probably retired. His successor was none other than George Hagley, half-brother of Fred Victor Kuehn.

Mr. Hagley brought an entrepreneurial spirit to the enterprise, creating what business majors might call an integrated operation. It was also supported by advertising—word-of-mouth that sent thousands of couples streaming to his front living room, aided by point-of-sale advertising: namely a sign in his front yard that said, “Let’s Get Married.”

Mr. Hagley’s wife served as clerk of court and issued licenses. He often interrupted the vows to declare a bride to be particularly beautiful. He would offer his cheek for a quick peck by the object of his compliment, then return to the project at hand.

For newlyweds at a loss about where to go next, he offered room at the Quartzsite Hotel and Boarding House, which he owned. When Mr. Hagley died many years later, he was remembered, quite appropriately, as “the marrying judge.”

Some years after the war Quartzsite lost its comparative advantage in the wedding bidness. The Arizona legislature outlawed quickie nuptials—

so primitive!—and traded away a bit of Old West freedom in favor of modern principles.

The town's fortunes were saved by something else that happened that same year, 1942. A few miles south of town, prospectors found a lode of crystals. Rockhounds converged on the town to get their hands on the beautiful stones, returning again and again, even to the present day. In time Quartzsite also became a destination for snowbirds, retired northerners who flock each winter in their recreational vehicles to warmer climes. Today the Quartzsite population swells in December, January, and February to many times its base of about 3,500.

If you visit Quartzsite, start your tour with Hi Jolly's monument, followed by a trip to the local library and museum to learn more about Mr. Jolly, the marrying judge, and other notable local people, places, and events. Afterward, visit booths along Main Street to shop for rocks, jewelry, chainsaw sculptures, pictures of camels, and cow skulls.

Nowhere, sadly, will you find traces of John D. Hancock or Edna Christine Martin, the young couple that came here in August 1942 on their way to marriage, war, and life beyond. All that remains, other than the memories of descendants, is a copy of their marriage license in the records of Yuma County, Arizona.

Copyright 2011 Darrell Hancock / All rights reserved

