

# Harry Oliver original desert rat

"I never did learn how to spell—but I did learn the typesetter's rule—'Set up the type as long as you can hold your breath without turning blue in the face, then put in a comma. When you gape (sic), put in a semicolon and when you want to sneeze, that's the time to make a paragraph.'"

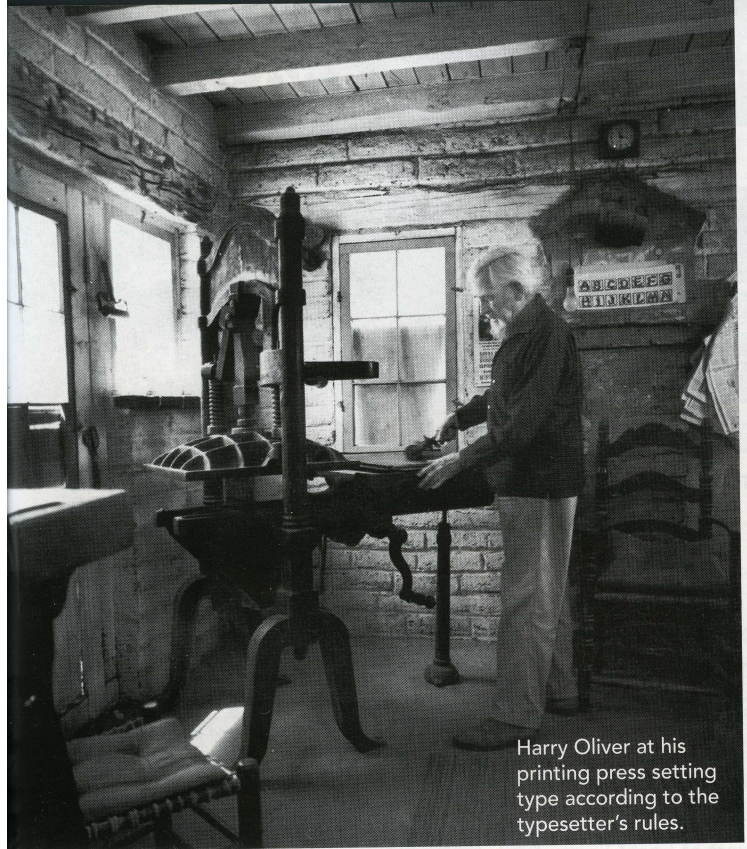
And with a firm understanding of such, Harry Oliver set out to make the "Desert Rat Scrap Book." It was an unusual newspaper. Whenever he had collected enough stories, procured some poems and had a good cartoon from a friend, including Walt Disney, he would issue the diminutive little pouch of amusement. All in all, he made some 44 such publications (and several more books). The masthead of the "Desert Rat Scrap Book" heralded it to be the "smallest newspaper in the world...published at Fort Oliver...four times a year." Oliver prefaced that with the admonition that, "This paper is not entered as 2nd class mail. It's a first class newspaper." And indeed its subscribers were all over the world. He also cheerfully added that the offer of subscription "expires when I do."

Oliver had a very successful career before he became a newspaperman and desert humorist. He had been an Academy Award-winning set designer and art director, had built multiple adobe houses, designed the windmill corporate logo for Van de Kamp's bakery and in 1935 designed the largest concession at the San Diego World's Fair (California Pacific International Exposition) called Gold Gulch, an impressive 21-acre confection of a mining camp and ghost town which would later inspire Knott's Berry Farm. And in 1946 Oliver designed the Arabian Nights Stage at the National Date Festival fairground in Indio.



Harry Oliver in front of the Desert Rats Liars Club at Fort Oliver.





Harry Oliver at his printing press setting type according to the typesetter's rules.

But his interest turned to aphorisms, humor and his newspaper about the desert. He homesteaded a place on the desert in 1929 in Thousand Palms, where Ramon and Varner roads are today. He built his adobe castle with the clay from the surrounding ancient hills and named it Fort Oliver. He explained in 1948, "When you've been here in the Desert a few years you find yourself talking to yourself...After a few more years you find yourself talking to the lizards...Then in another couple of years you find the lizards talking to you...When you find yourself stealing their amazing tales you are about ready to start a desert paper."

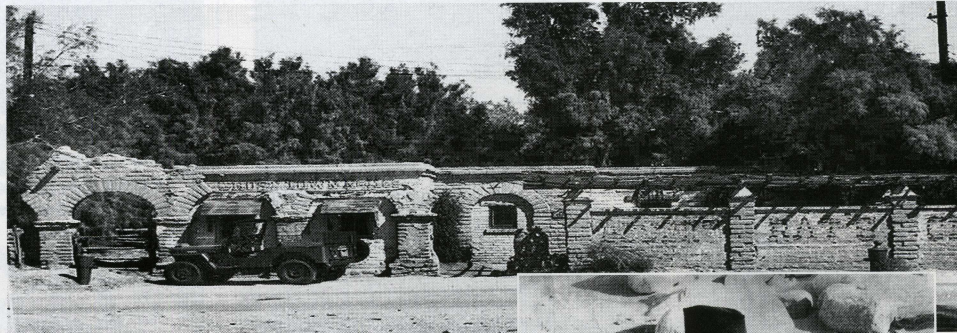
The "Desert Rat Scrap Book" featured some of the most prominent literary figures of the time and snappy, interesting essay titles. "Will Rogers Says," "Harry Oliver's Argument Starters," "Desert Rat Ten Commandments," "Gold Is Where You Find It," "Rip's Jumpin' Cactus Drink," "Hermit Business," "Pay Dirt, Old Prunes," "Two Damns and a Hell," "Salton Sea Scrolls," "Mule Decides to Quit Army," "Tall But Short Stories from Death Valley," "Nuts to Daylight Savings," "Smart Animals and Stupid People" and "Harry Oliver Swept Here" were among the many stories penned by the Desert Rat himself.

Famous personalities and authors joined the fun like, "How to be a Desert Rat and Like It" by John Hilton; "Dog Eater" by Charles M. Russell; "Mischievous Burros" by Erle Stanley Gardner; "My Devoted Friend" by William Randolph Hearst; "The Purple Knight of the Salton Sink" by California Governor Goodwin Knight; "Old Harry," a letter to Walt Disney from Mrs. Clifford Henderson of the founding family of Palm Desert; "Pipe Dreams" by San Francisco columnist Herb Caen; and "Death Valley Scotty's Record-Breaking Dash on the Coyote Special" by Los Angeles columnist Lee Shippey. Oliver had



written for multiple other periodicals by the time these titles were gracing his own little paper. He noted ironically that his writing "wasn't in demand until I became my own publisher."

Olivier's whimsical nature is perhaps best illustrated by his long-running prank of carving and weathering peg legs and scattering them around the desert hills so that tourists would be excited to find the remains of Peg Leg Smith and feel they were on the track of his famous Lost Gold Mine. The story went that Peg Leg Smith had struck gold but lost his way and couldn't find his mine again. Many articles in the *Desert Rat* perpetuated the rumor of the Lost Mine and the eccentric one-legged prospector who had discovered it. Oliver and his Hollywood friends, along with Borrego Springs and Thousand Palms homesteaders, had begun the Peg Leg Smith Liar's Club years earlier. Oliver defended his scattering of souvenir peg legs all over the desert as analogous to the government stocking fish in a pond. The continued mystery of the mine at-



The Fort Oliver adobe in Thousand Palms made of the clay from the surrounding hills.

tracted visitors to Fort Oliver, along with visitors from far-flung places who wanted to see the famous humorist and see the setting for the amusing stories they read in the little newspaper.

The picturesque adobe was intriguing to travelers and locals alike. Oliver diligently reported, "The wildflowers at Fort Oliver were so thick this spring that you could hardly see the discarded beer cans." Doubtless another Fort Oliver attraction!

—TRACY CONRAD



Harry Oliver panning for gold.