



# A TRIO OF COLORFUL CHARACTERS

State Historian **Marshall Trimble** tells us the stories of three early Arizona men: Bill Esenwein, Marguerito Varella, and Jim Sam.

AS WE CELEBRATE our 100th birthday, it's good to remember that Arizona is a place that lives by its myths and legends. Arizona also prides itself in being a sanctuary for free-spirited outrageous characters.

One of those was **Bill Esenwein**, a writer and prospector around the town of Congress. He was better known as Rattlesnake Bill. He earned the nickname as a result of his rapport with poisonous reptiles. He rescued them, took care of them, and allowed them to live with him. You might say he was the Dr. Doolittle of diamondbacks.

Out on Highway 89, the Arrowhead Restaurant had a small zoo with a snake pit. Bill would drop by occasionally and com-

plain that the snakes weren't getting enough to eat. He conjured up a concoction of raw eggs and raw hamburger that he claimed would fatten up the reptiles. He would climb down into the pit and force-feed them with a tube.

Bill's slithery roommates also acted as burglar alarms when he needed to go into Wickenburg. He placed his valuables on a table in the middle of the kitchen, and the snakes would be shepherded into the room and corralled with chicken wire. Bill claimed he was never burglarized, and nobody ever doubted it. He also claimed he was never bitten, but one day someone noticed his hand was badly swollen. He was taken into Wickenburg, and sure enough, one had nailed him on the finger. Bill always insisted it was an accident and the snake didn't mean to do it. His old cabin still sits near the Octave Mine at Stanton. It's called Rattlesnake Haven.

Over in the wild and woolly town of Clifton, a hard-rock miner named **Marguerito Varella** was hired to build a jail by hollowing out a cave in the side of a mountain. He blasted and drilled, and upon completion was paid in cash. He headed for the nearest saloon, bought a drink, and proudly proposed a toast to the "World's Greatest Jail Maker." When the unappreciative customers refused to raise their glasses, he pulled his six-shooter and commenced to shoot holes in the ceiling. The bartender, who was also the town constable, hauled him off to become the first inmate in the new town jail.

**Jim Sam**, an American citizen, was one of the earliest Asians immigrants to the West Coast. In 1865, he opened a restaurant in Prescott and eventually operated more eateries in a number of mining towns around the territory.

Jim had a knack for making money in the restaurant business, and he staked many a prospector. He was a soft touch for every down-on-his-luck who crossed his path. He kept a record of every dollar he loaned but never ran a total until one day the thought struck him to find out how much was owed. Much to his shock and dismay, the total

came to \$164,000. He decided to go out and locate his own gold mine but after several tries never found that bonanza. His forte was running restaurants and charging the exorbitant price of one dollar per meal.

While running a restaurant in Globe, some of the town rowdies bent on shipping him back to China visited his establishment. Jim Sam stuck a large knife in his teeth, armed himself with two pistols, and plowed into the bunch. He didn't shoot anyone but did beat a couple of them severely about the head and shoulders with the barrels of his pistol. He was an excellent shot with a pistol and often put on exhibitions by shooting the marks out of playing cards from a distance.

One day in Pinal City, a local undesirable from Clifton who called himself Shoot 'Em Up Dick came in and ordered the most expensive dish on the menu. After finishing, he ordered a fancy cigar, lit it, and got up to leave.

"Hey, you forgot something," Jim Sam said.

"No, I didn't forget nothin'," said the errant diner. "I am Shoot 'Em Up Dick."

Jim Sam, who was also known as a good man with a meat cleaver, grabbed a big pistol and said, "So, you Shoot 'Em Up Dick? I am Shoot 'Em Down Sam. You pay up plenty quick."

Shoot 'Em Up Dick paid up pronto, and Jim Sam, was known ever after as Shoot 'Em Down Sam. **✎**