



CHAPTER FOUR

U.S. Army Signal Corps at Camp Cactus November 1942 – August 1945

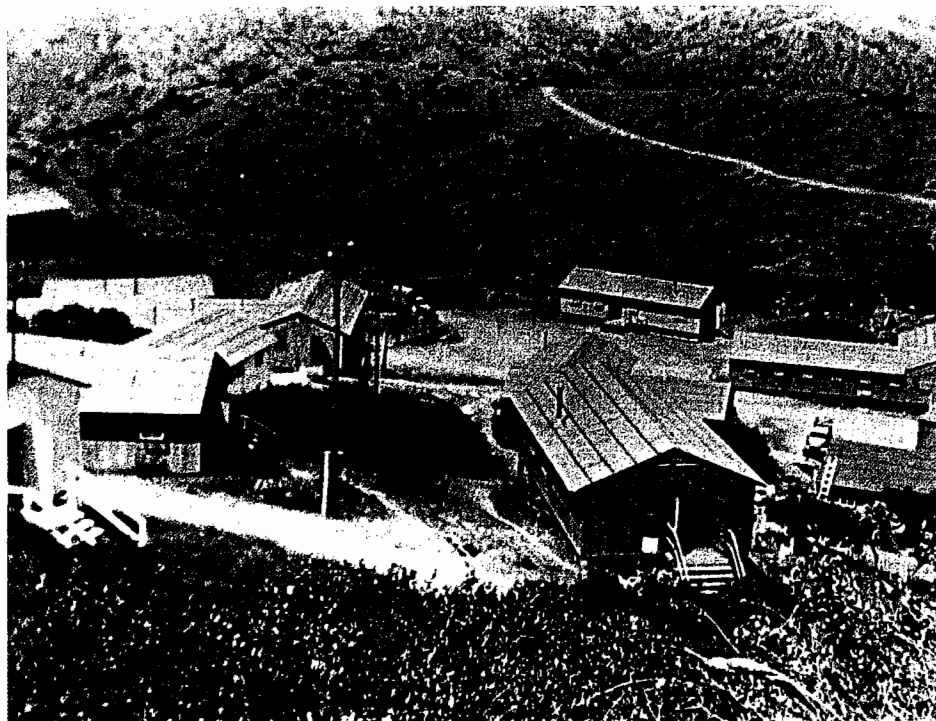
The United States Army also had a strong presence on Santa Catalina Island during the war. Well before the Army Signal Corps officially occupied the acreage for "Camp Cactus," plans were advanced for an installation in the island's interior.

On November 1, 1942, the Army Signal Corps formally leased the site. In a brief history of Catalina during World War II, Dr. William Bushing of the University of California at Santa Barbara wrote that Camp Cactus was started in 1941 and completed by the end of 1942. Standing in a secluded gully high in the rugged interior of the island not far from 1,560-foot Cactus Peak, it was operated by the 654th Signal Corps Aircraft Warning Company, attached to the 4th Army Air Corps. Besides conducting secret radar and surveillance operations, soldiers from Camp Cactus manned gun

emplacements along the mountain slope above China Point and Salta Verde Point. The installation was protected by infantry, anti-aircraft and artillery.

Though Camp Cactus was only about 6 miles from Avalon "as the crow flies," it was 14 miles via a one-lane dirt road that wound up and down steep mountains and narrow canyons. There were six major buildings, among them the company headquarters, a mess hall and barracks. Today all those buildings have either been dismantled or reduced to rubble.

Camp Cactus' mission, to detect the approach of Japanese warplanes or ships, was achieved when installation of radio transmitters, antennas and other equipment was completed in 1942 and early 1943. Once these secret radar systems were operational, there was no place for the enemy to hide far out into the Pacific Ocean. Beyond the south and west facing cliffs of Santa Catalina Island, the next landfalls are in Polynesia. During its peak period of operation, 600 men were stationed at Camp Cactus with 150 to 200 of them in the Signal Corps.



Barracks at Camp Cactus where over 300 military personnel were housed.

Other base activities were strung out across the south central part of the island. High on Mount Orizaba, 2,000 feet above the sea, a tall slender observation tower was erected. Finally, down the long, steep slopes below Camp Cactus, other military installations were dug. On top of a ridge above Ben Weston Beach, the Corps of Engineers built a series of bunkers, tunnels and anti-aircraft emplacements.

Early in 2002, the writer hitched a ride with Chuck Liddell, islander native historian, born in 1947, to visit these locations. Tangled lengths of barbed wire and clumps of cactus surrounded the rusting metal roof of the largest bunker. With the roof only a foot or two above ground level the only entry was down a narrow steel ladder. In the darkness below were two sizable rooms connected by a debris-filled passage – hardly more than a crawl space. The bare concrete walls and rubble-covered floors gave no clue to the rooms' appearance or use during World War II.



U.S. Army Infantry, anti-aircraft and artillery military personnel stationed on Santa Catalina Island standing in front of barracks at Camp Cactus during WW II.



John Christian Mock receiving his military haircut at Camp Cactus.



Camp Cactus was located in a secluded area in the rugged interior of Catalina Island.

When John Christian Mock first tried to enlist in December 1941 a few days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he was told, "Sorry, you are too old for the Army." Although he would be 40-years-old on his next birthday – well beyond normal draft age – he wanted to serve. He "stuck to his guns," and eventually his draft board relented.

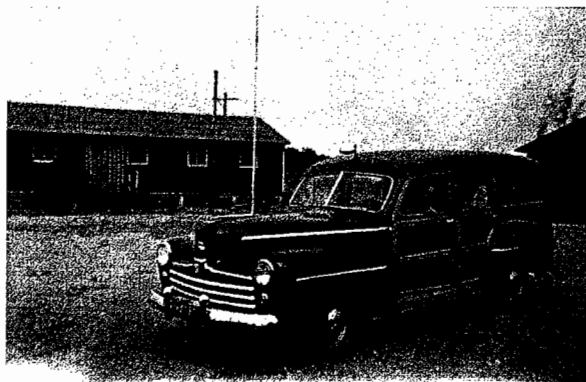
Mock, originally from Homestead, Pennsylvania, was sent to a radar school in Toronto, Canada where Canadian and American military personnel were being trained. His first duty assignment was at Camp Cactus. He served on Santa Catalina Island from early 1942 until the later part of 1944.

Mock rose to the rank of buck sergeant during his tour of duty at Camp Cactus. When the company commander found out that Mock had been a newspaper man for 25 years and could type, his newly discovered skills earned him the position of company clerk in addition to his radar operations duties, for the duration of his stay at Camp Cactus. In an interview with author Charles Hillinger in 1976, Mock said, "Radar was very hush-hush at the time. There were 550 of us out there, 125 radar operators and the rest light artillery, anti-aircraft and infantry guarding the installation."

John Mock had gone on to another military assignment by the time the war ended, but he chose to return to Catalina after VJ Day. He lived in Avalon the rest of his long life. Like most folks in the resort town, he generally had "more than one iron in the fire." He was at various times, the city of Avalon's street superintendent, city manager and purchasing agent and worked for the island tour concession. He was also a Freemason, a member of Eastern Star, and a three-time past commander of the American Legion Post 137, of Avalon.



Sergeant John Mock at the anti-aircraft gun. The "fécruit" aiming the gun bears a striking resemblance to entertainer Danny Kaye.



Orval Liddell and Roy Marin inspected Camp Cactus, World War II military facility at Catalina Island, years after the facility closed. The above photos were taken in 1950.

Late in his life, in an interview with the *Catalina Islander*, he said the reason he came back to Catalina after the war was simple. On his first tour of the island aboard a U.S. Army truck, “it was love at first sight.”

Mock returned often to Camp Cactus - at least two or three times a month. Most G.I.s are happy to forget their old military bases, but Mock always remembered Camp Cactus fondly.

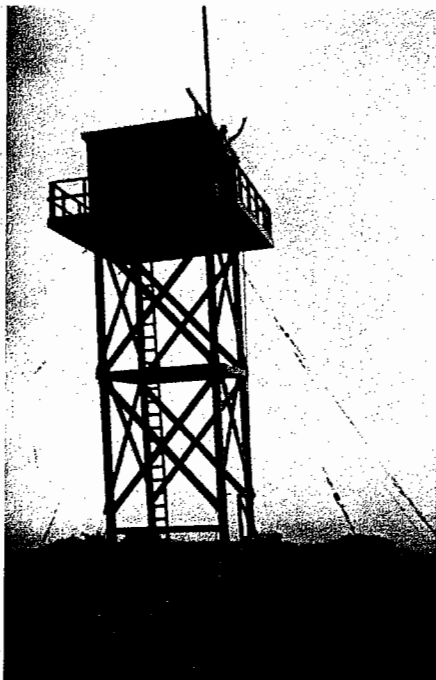
“I loved this place,” Mock told Charles Hillinger. “I had some of the best times of my life here.”

Through the years, Mock watched as the camp buildings slowly surrendered to the ravages of time. Many of the structures were bulldozed before they could completely fall down. The rotted lumber was used for firewood at the island campgrounds.

“I’ll keep coming back as long as I live. Even if there’s nothing left but memories,” sighed Mock in 1976 as he stared at the remains of Camp Cactus. Thirteen years later, John C. Mock died in his Avalon home in 1989 at age 86.



Photo of Camp Cactus barracks and headquarters taken in 1950.



Camp Cactus radar tower was located on the weather side of Catalina Island looking over the Pacific Ocean during WW II.



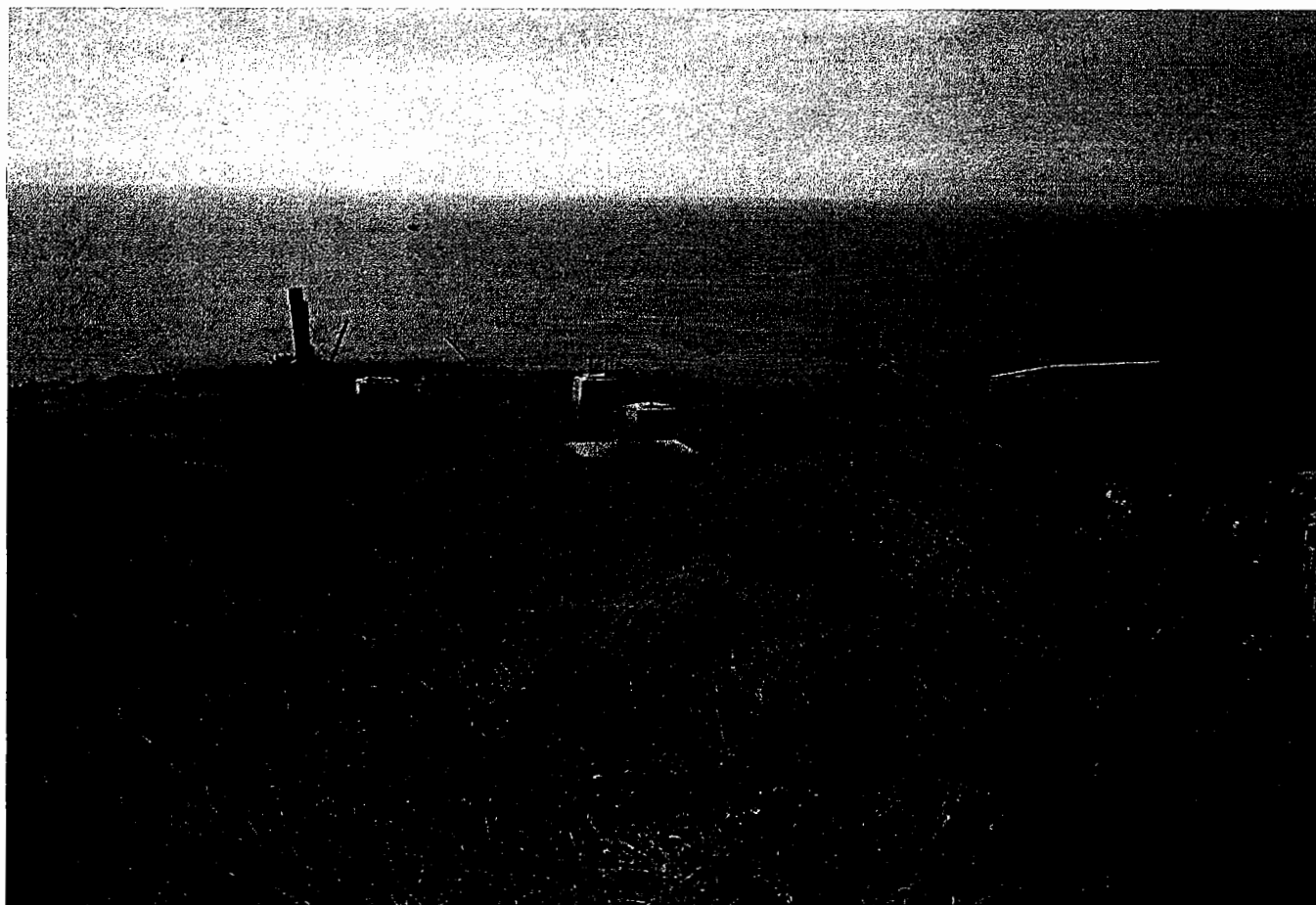
Standing in doorway of Camp Cactus is Project Engineer Orval Liddell in 1950 who worked for Philip K. Wrigley and the Santa Catalina Island Company.



Fred Rice, associate of Orval Liddell, standing in front of the radar technical center 1950.

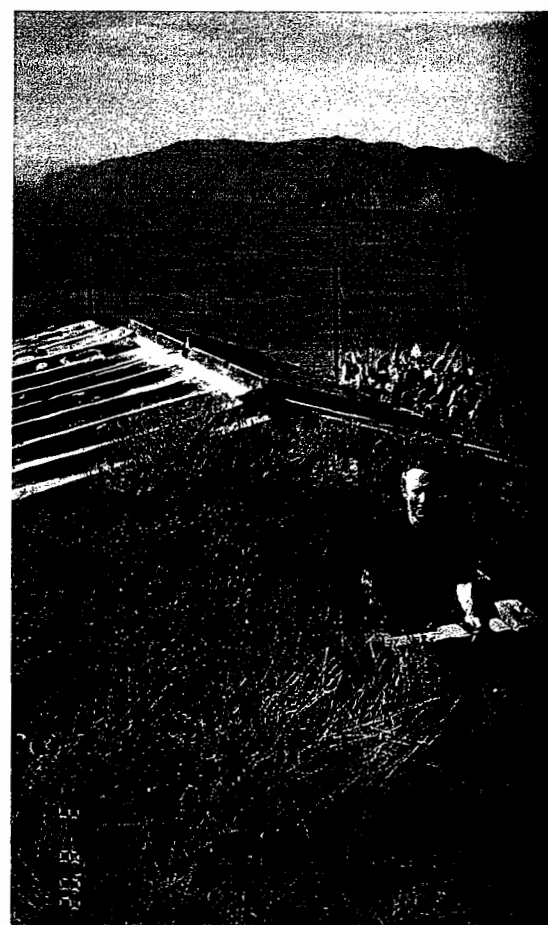
On the mountain slopes above China and Salta Verde Point was the radar and lookout tower overlooking the south side of Catalina Island. The radar and lookout tower were manned 24 hours a day, keeping a close watch on the open sea for signs of Japanese invasion ships and submarines.

Although Camp Cactus was a very secret camp, the importance of this operation was extremely high. With the new radar detection and lookout capabilities of this base, this was a key intelligence information platform if an invasion were headed for the Southern California coastline.



View of the cement base remains of the artillery gun foundation near Ben Weston Point on Santa Catalina Island in 2002.

The outlook of the Pacific Ocean at Ben Weston Point was the site chosen for the artillery guns because of its vantage point and clear view of an incoming invasion. With this strategic position, the Camp Cactus guns would be a powerful stronghold in the successful defense against enemy aircraft.



Steve Tice at the top of the ladder entrance to the bunker near Ben Weston Point in 2002.

This fortification was built in 1942 by the Mackey brothers using island workers from the Saldana and Lopez families. Installation was closed down immediately after World War II ended.



In 2002, the author located the site of Camp Cactus and took these photographs of the bunkers, barracks and artillery sites. As you can see, the old barracks and headquarters are falling apart and some have completely collapsed.

The importance of Camp Cactus and its secret radar, played a very vital role in military strategy for the protection of Santa Catalina Island and the West Coast of the United States.



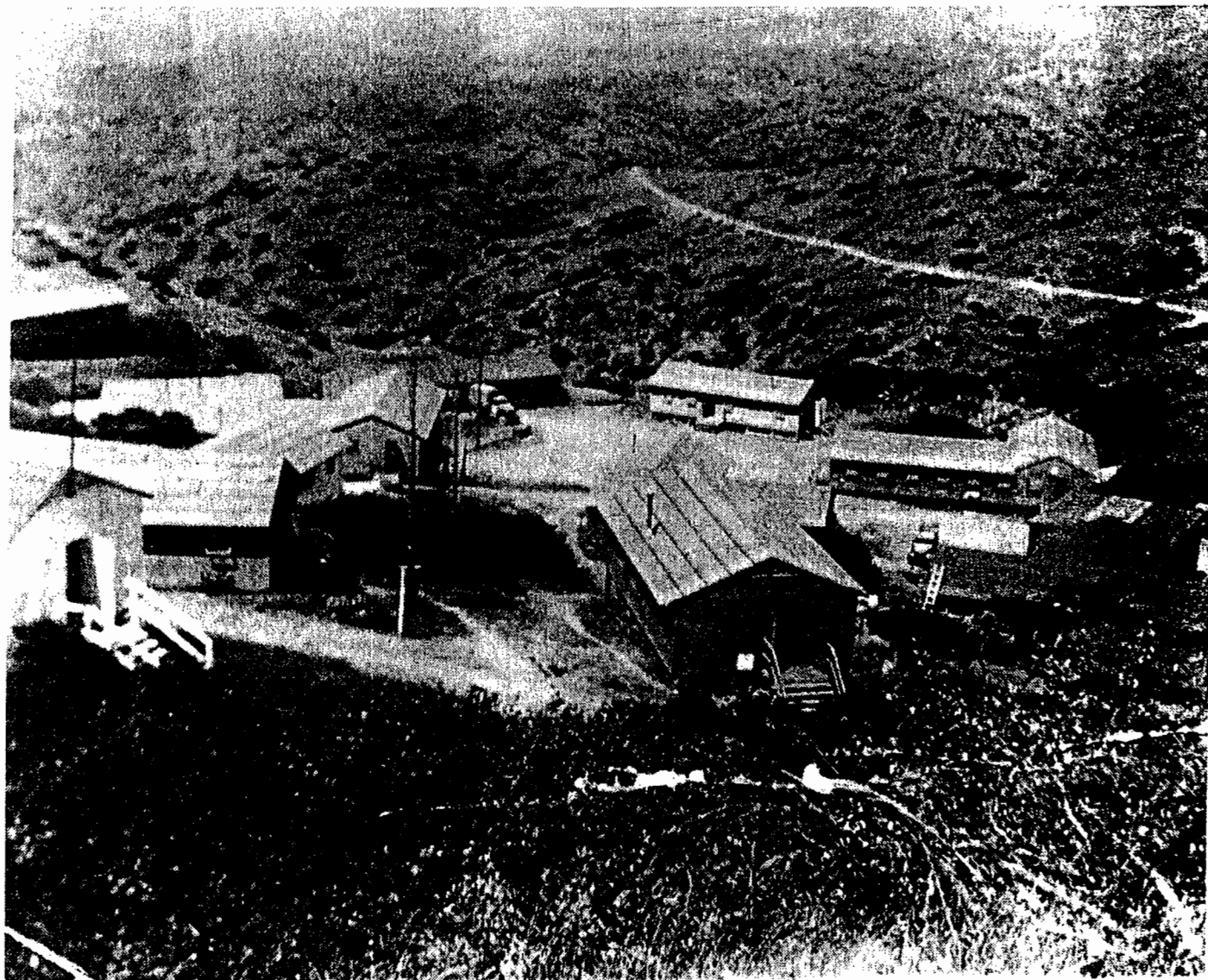
John Mock recalls Camp Cactus days

by Larry Luckett

John was 40 years old when WWII began. He couldn't enlist and the draft board said, "You are too old for the service." That didn't stop John.

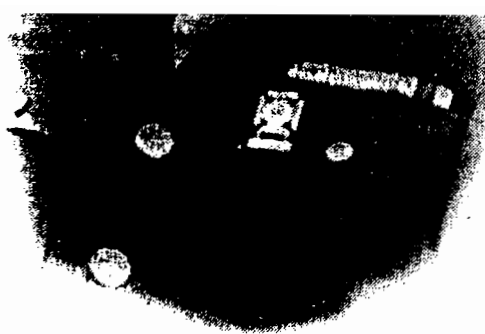
Through connections with his local draft board he somehow managed to get the okay. He was inducted in Pennsylvania and sent to Toronto, Canada for special instruction in factory radar. Assigned to the Signal Corps, he was on his way to the unit located at Camp Cactus, Catalina Island.

When John arrived in Avalon he was immediately transported by Army truck to Cactus. It was then that he made up his mind that when the war was over he would make his home in Avalon. He says, "It was love at first sight."



Camp Cactus as it appeared in World War II.

—from the collection of John Mock



**Corporal John Mock
1942**

He arrived at the new camp with a group of ten from the Toronto radar school. The company commander, in checking John's records, found that he had been a newspaper man for a quarter of a century. Because of his typing skill, he immediately became the company clerk for the duration.

It wasn't long before he was dubbed "Grandpa" by his fellow comrades. The Army facility consisted of approximately 18 buildings and accommodated as many as 300 personnel.

Often, John would travel into Avalon for a night on the town. One of his favorite spots, since the Casino ballroom was closed during the war, was Fisherman's Wharf Restaurant. "Top Deck," as it was called, on the upper floor was a popular spot where soldiers danced to juke box music.

Troops trained at Camp Cactus in such specialties as signal radar, light and heavy artillery, and anti-aircraft.

It is now 45 years later, and although he has slowed down slightly, he's doing fine and continues to wear that friendly smile.

John is a three-time past Commander of the American Legion, Post 137, Avalon. He's been a member for 44 years.

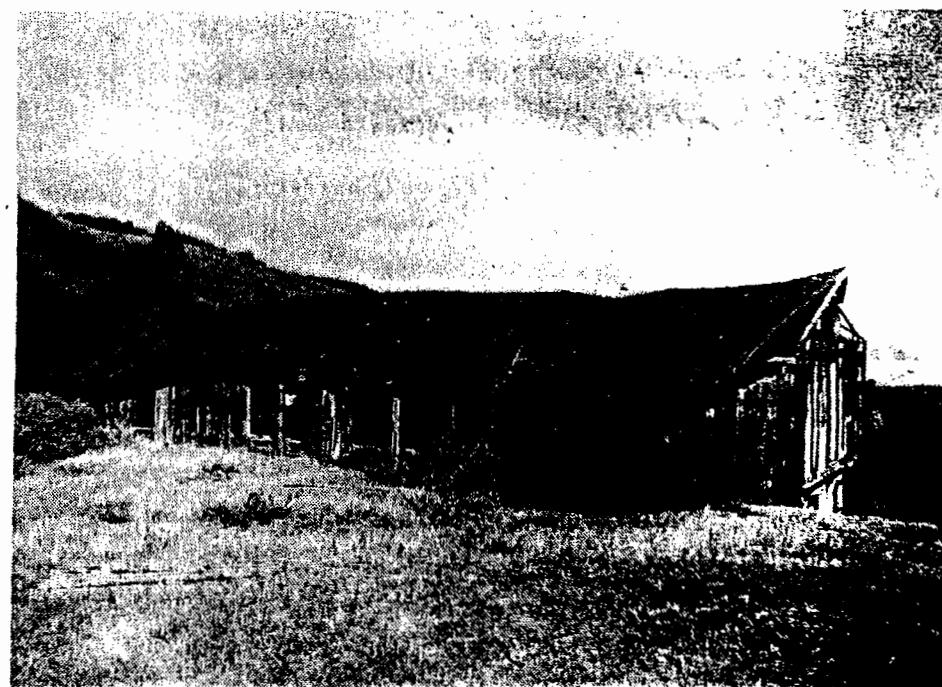
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**Citizen John Mock
1986**



Some of the ruins of Camp Cactus remain. Troops were checked in here at the



The ravages of time and men have left this shell of the former mess hall

—photo by Larry Lockett