

Homesteaders Jim and Catherine Reidy

In 1912 Jim Reidy moved with his parents from New York City to southern Arizona as a nine year old boy when his Irish immigrant mother was told that if she wanted to survive her tuberculosis, the Arizona desert would be the best place for her to live.

In 1924 Catherine Chapman took the train to Tucson from southern Illinois as a young woman because of poor health. The two of them met at church in Tucson and in 1927 were married. Catherine loved the outdoors and read of land available through the Homestead Act.

Catherine and Jim established a homestead in the Tortolita Mountain foothills. They lived in a small adobe house on 40 acres just west of the intersection of La Cholla and Moore Road. The rest of their land was where parts of the La Cholla Airpark, Rancho Vistoso and Stone Canyon Golf Course are currently located. They accessed the homestead area either from a trail leading north from Oracle Rd at the Steam Pump Ranch, or from the Casa Grande Highway (now I-10) taking Camino de Mañana northeast to Moore Rd.



Catherine was very interested in the birds and wildlife in the surrounding desert. One of the other homesteaders knew a lot about tanning and curing rattlesnake skins, so he taught Catherine. The skins were used to make wallets, belts, hat bands, vests and other items. She developed a formula to bleach the bones of the vertebrae very white and made jewelry from them. The heads of the rattlesnakes were packed in pickle jars and shipped to a zoological supply house, the meat was shipped to a Florida company to be packaged for sale, a Chinese pharmaceutical company in San Francisco got the snake gallbladders and the fat was turned into snake oil for the railroad engineers and brakemen who got stiff necks watching out the engine windows. The snake oil is not a joke. It was great for massaging out the stiffness

and was very popular among the trainmen. Some of the rare types of rattlesnakes were sent to the Museum of Natural History in Chicago and are still displayed.

The family lived on the homestead from 1929 through 1934. They moved to town when the older boys, Jim and Dan, were school age. The business continued to grow after they came to town. Catherine became known as "The Rattlesnake Queen of Arizona" after a Movie Tone News reel was made and shown in theaters all over the world. People came from all over the world to meet her and see the snake pit with live rattlesnakes in the backyard. She was one of Tucson's major tourist attractions until her health broke down again and they had to close the business.

The couple had three more children, Pat, Cathy and Roxy and after 52 years of marriage Jim died in 1979 and Catherine died in 2000.

Photo and story provided by daughter Roxy Johnson, Feb. 2008