



## EARLY CALIFORNIA WRITERS

*By Bonnie Miller*

Calaveras County was one of the original eighteen charter counties when California gained statehood in 1850. We were right in the heart of the activity. Some of the oldest Gold Rush-era buildings, artifacts and California's success stories are from right here in our own neighborhoods. What is often overlooked is that some of the best documentation of the miners' experiences came from this area as well.

We can never underestimate the value of a single letter home or the diary of a homesteader. Recently *Las Calaveras* looked at a rich letter home detailing a miner's journey to the gold fields (see *Las Calaveras*, April 2009, regarding John Pattee). In his letter he expressed his interest in returning home as soon as possible, yet he never did. He never expected to become a successful lawman, rancher and founding father in his adopted county. We will continue to explore these documents as they become available. These records are not only entertaining but are invaluable first-hand accounts of actual details of the day.

When one thinks of early California records, what comes to mind may be a sensational newspaper article, a mining claim, or Mark Twain's *Jumping Frog* story. This issue of *Las Calaveras* looks at

three early California writers who wrote more than a decade before Twain when only one newspaper barely existed. What is so unique about these writers is that they all visited and documented their travels in the young county of Calaveras. Sometimes the writer's personal story, or how his writings came to be published, are every bit as interesting as the words he wrote.

### *Felix Paul Wierzbicki*

Recently one of our members and Red Barn volunteer Janet Langton re-discovered a long forgotten book written at the early days of the Gold Rush. What is so unique about this book is that it is believed to have been the first book to have been published *in English* in California. Yes, there were many printed in Spanish, but none in English.

The original of Wierzbicki's book may only be found as a rare book, probably in the Library of Congress. The most recent reprint of it with an introduction by George Lyman was published by Burt Franklin of New York in 1970. Columbia College Library has a copy which is available from any local library as an interlibrary loan. Please enjoy Janet's review of the book.

### **The Forgotten Immigrant, by Janet Langton**

On the brilliant spring day when I took photos at the Mokelumne River I remembered a forgotten immigrant miner who had worked the river in 1848.

He was Felix Paul Wierzbicki, a Polish exile. If he was here in April, he must have been dazzled by the riot of wildflowers on the banks of the river and the wild water plunging over the rapids. Did he recall the landscape of his native Poland, lost to him when he fled for his life?

Felix was born in 1815 to a noble family in Charniawce, Poland. In his youth he and many other young Poles rebelled against the cruel tyranny of Russia. He was five years younger than his countryman, Frederick Chopin who also fled to France to escape the revolution. At 16 Felix was imprisoned for three years when the Revolution of 1830 failed. Fearing for his life, when he was released he emigrated to the United States. There he was befriended by a couple who took him in, then worked as a French teacher until he could go to medical school. He had been well-educated in Poland and was ambitious to succeed in life.

When Stevenson formed his rag-tag regiment to go to California to fight in the Mexican war, Felix joined up hoping to be an army doctor. He was disappointed however, because he was assigned other menial tasks until a position as doctor was available. In California Stevenson didn't seem to remember that he had ever prom-

ised Felix a position as doctor. Felix asked to be released from the army. Stevenson said he wasn't much good as a soldier anyway and that was fine with him so he was discharged. Felix then traveled to Calaveras County where he panned gold on the Mokelumne River, not very successfully.

When he returned to San Francisco Felix began practicing medicine. He did not believe in the common remedies of the day: opium and mercury, preferring instead the healing powers of water, hydrotherapy.

What Felix really did for the Gold Rush in 1849 was to write a book, *California As It Is and As It May Be: A Guide to the Gold Region*. This book was the first book to be published in English in California and west of the Rockies. It sold like hotcakes! A second printing was soon sold out as well. It contained the unvarnished truth about California and what was going on there at the time: advice to miners, health, ranching and geography, everything a newcomer needed to know. It also deplored the lack of women who he believed would cement and crystallize the wild and brutal society. Although Felix wrote other articles, apparently they have been lost.

His early impression of the Calaveras area was favorable for mining:

*"The Mokelamy diggings are distant from Sacramento City about from 50 to 60 miles—a wagon road leads to them. The banks and dry diggings of the Mokelamy have been rich in gold, and may be so still; some diggers passed last winter there [1848–1849], and were not sorry for so doing. This summer there have been many digging, but their labors have been disturbed by hostile Indians. We think there may be yet rich diggings there."*



**'A Ball in the Mines' by J. D. Borthwick**

In the winter of 1860 Felix fell ill with a fever. A doctor prescribed medicines for him, but because of his aversion to using such harsh remedies, he instead took a steam bath and felt better. Then he relapsed and after another steam bath died alone on December 26, 1860. He was only 45.

Mourned by his friends who found him, he was buried at Lone Mountain Cemetery

which fell into ruins and his grave was lost for many years. In 1933 George D. Lyman was asked to write an introduction to a reprinting of his book by Grabhorn Press, but neither he nor the publisher knew anything about Wierzbicki. Lyman was lucky enough to find the location of his grave by contacting N. Gray and Company, funeral directors since before the Gold Rush. However, the cemetery had fallen into ruins and Lyman and the cemetery caretaker had to dig to unearth the lost grave. On his gravestone was the inscription:

“Highly esteemed by all who knew”

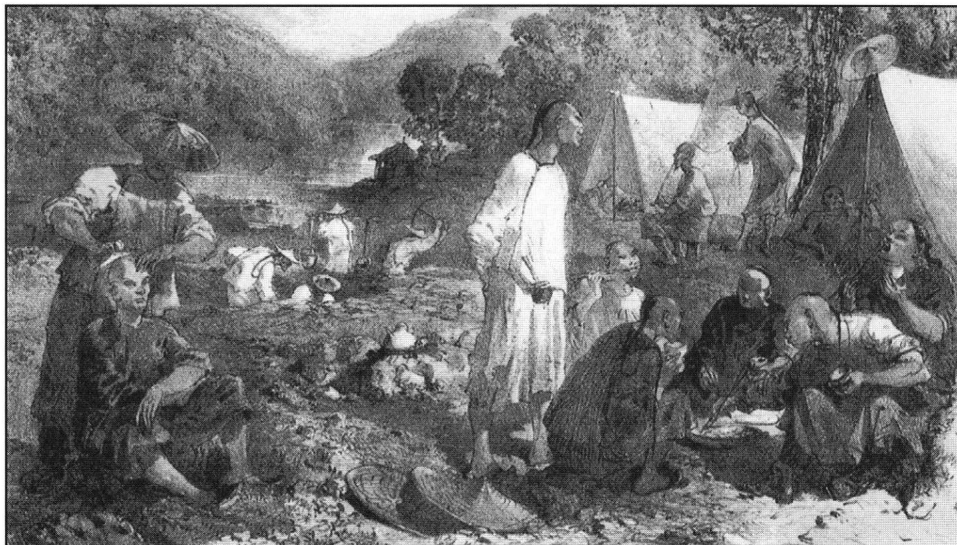
If you are on Highway 49 between San Andreas and Jackson, turn on Electra Road at the border of Amador and Calaveras Counties and drive along the Mokelumne River. While there give a thought or two to an exile who mined the gravel banks of the river and made a fine contribution to the history of our state in the upheaval of its coming of age.

Author’s Note: All of the old pioneer cemeteries have disappeared from San Francisco, the coffins having been moved to other locations and the land used for building sites.



### **John David Borthwick**

Our second exploration into early writers is another look at J. D. Borthwick’s book *Three Years in California*. Unlike our miner John Pattee mentioned before, Borthwick did return east home.



**‘Chinese Camp in the Mines’ by J. D. Borthwick**

While he was in California for his allotted three years he kept a detailed diary.

Borthwick was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1824 to a gentleman’s life where he received a well rounded education which included schooling as an artist. He received a healthy inheritance when he turned 21 which allowed him to travel the world. His first stop was Canada in 1847. While travelling the east coast of the United States gold fever caught him and he diverted his travels westward via the Panama route.

Borthwick had an observant eye and loved to record things in detail. He also had a wonderful sense of humor. Whether by accident or design, he traveled nearly all of the gold country that was actively mining during his time in California. He made a point of attending festivities, chasing rumors, visiting attractions and experiencing everything obligatory a miner in California must do. Despite his approximate itinerary, he was often sidetracked in search of a rumor or another adventure. He clearly wanted to see it all and get it all down in expressive detail. And a fine job he did of it at that. He accented his diary with eight fine drawings of the events he witnessed, such as the Bull and Bear fight in Moke Hill previously reproduced in *Las Calaveras* in July of 2008. His drawings of Gold Rush life are famous and rich in detail.

In the spring of 1853 Borthwick grew restless with his California experience and felt ready to move on. There were accounts of gold being discovered elsewhere in the world, so he chased those rumors and sailed on to Australia to continue his world travels. It was not until 1857 that he returned to Scotland that

he produced his book *Three Years in California*. He wrote several magazine articles about his travels as well. At the age of 34 he retired to a life of painting.

Please enjoy what he had to say about Calaveras County.

#### **J. D. Borthwick:**

After witnessing bear fights at a fourth of July celebration in Columbia, Borthwick decided to see if a rumor of a "natural bridge" over Coyote Creek were true. He boarded M'Lean's Ferry and hiked up the creek to see for himself. He was awestruck by what he saw, but managed to give a very accurate account of the Natural Bridges.

*"In any part of the Old World such a place would be the object of a pilgrimage; and even where it was, it attracted many visitors, numbers of whom had, according to the established custom of snobhood, acknowledged their own insignificance, and had sought a little immortality for their wretched names by scratching them on a large smooth surface by the side of the entrance to the cave.*

*While I was there, an old Yankee miner came to see the place. He paid a very hurried visit—he had not even the time to scratch his initials; but he was enthusiastic in his admiration of this beautiful object of nature, which, however, he thought was quite thrown away in such an out-of-the-way part of creation. It distressed him to think that such a valuable piece of property could not be turned to any profitable account. 'Now,' said he, 'if I had this here thing jist ten miles from New York city, I'd show it to the folks at twenty-five cents a-head, and make an everlastin' pile of money out of it.' "*

In one of Borthwick's adventures he travels from Volcano to Moke Hill. Imagine yourself walking this route from Clinton, south of Jackson on the Mokelumne River. Let's follow in his footsteps:

*"I struck the Moquelumne River at a point several miles above the bridge where I had crossed it before.*

*The river was still much swollen with the rains and snow of winter, and the mode of crossing was not by any means inviting. Two very small canoes lashed together served as a ferry-boat, in which the passenger hauled himself across the*

*river by means of a rope made fast to a tree on either bank, the force of the current keeping the canoes bow on. When I arrived here, this contrivance happened to be on the opposite side, where I saw a solitary tent which seemed to be inhabited, but I halloed in vain for some one to make his appearance and act as ferry-man. There seemed to be a trail from the tent leading up the river; so, following that direction for about half a mile, I found a party of miners at work on the other side—one of whom, in the obliging spirit universally met with in the mines, immediately left his work and came down to ferry me across.*

*On the side I was on was an old race about eighteen feet wide, through which the waters rushed rapidly past. A pile of rocks prevented the boat from crossing this, so there was nothing for it but to wade. Some stones had been thrown in, forming a sort of submarine stepping stones, and lessening the depth to about three feet; but they were smooth and slippery, and the water was so intensely cold, and the current so strong, that I found the long pole which the man told me to take a very necessary assistance in making the passage. On reaching the canoes, and being duly enjoined to be careful in getting in and to keep perfectly still, we crossed the main body of the river; and very ticklish work it was for the waves ran high, and the utmost care was required to avoid being swamped. We got across safe enough, when my friend put me under additional obligations by producing a bottle of brandy from his tent and asking me to 'liquor,' which I did with a great deal of pleasure, as the water was still gurgling and squeaking in my boots, and was so cold that I felt as if I were half immersed in ice-cream.*

*After climbing the steep mountain-side and walking a few miles farther, I arrived at Moquelumne Hill, having, in the course of my day's journey, gradually passed from the pine-tree country into such scenery as... characterizing the southern mines.*

*I went on the next morning to San Andres by a road which wended through beautiful little valleys, still fresh and green, and covered with large patches of flowers. In one long gulch through which I passed, about two hundred Chilians [Chileans] were at work washing the dirt, painful by painful, in their large flat wooden dishes...*



*A few miles in from San Andres I cross the Calaveras, which is here a wide river, though not very deep. There was neither bridge nor ferry, but fortunately some Mexicans had camped with a train of pack-mules not far from the place, and from them I got an animal to take me across."*

Borthwick did not think favorably of San Andreas:

*"If one can imagine the booths and penny theatres on a race-course left for a year or two till they are tattered and torn, and blackened with the weather, he will have some idea of the appearance of San Andres. It was certainly the most out-at-elbows and disorderly-looking camp I had yet seen in the country."*

One day while in San Andres he expressed great regret at having missed a lynching in Moke Hill.

*"I unfortunately did not know anything about it [the lynching] till it was so late that had I gone there I should not have been in time to see the execution : not that I cared for the mere spectacle of a poor wretch hanging by the neck, but I was extremely desirous of witnessing the ceremonies of an execution... and though I was two or three years cruising about in the mines, I never had the luck to be present on such an occasion. I particularly regretted having missed this one, as, from the accounts I afterwards heard of it, it must have been worth seeing."*

A one-sentence observation about Moke Hill characterized mining in general in the Mother Lode, and foretold California's woes for generations to come:

*"The want of water was the great obstacle in the way of mining at Moquelumne Hill."*

In an 1857 edition of Harper's Weekly he summarized the growing society of western life in California:

*"Woman, too has not been unmindful of her mission in California,... hard-featured, harder-working Western woman, who boasts that she does more work than her laboring husband, and whose daily routine of household duties comprise a work-list that would appall any but a California woman. These are the real pride and hope of the country, and to their noble presence is due the thousands of comfortable cottages, or humble cabins, where*

*the miner repairs with a light heart after the healthful labors of the day. These are the true homes of California, whence is springing up the finest and most robust generation of children on this continent."*



## **John Doble**

Our last look at one of our early writers is a little unusual. As explained earlier, we can never underestimate the value of a diary. John Doble was born in 1828 in Indiana. He was a blacksmith by trade who came west after serving in the Mexican War. Doble was a "common-educated" man by his own admission, but well-read with an interest in the classics. He was also a compulsive diarist. With no supplies to be found in the early days of the Gold Rush, he was often writing home pleading for new blank diary books to be sent to him. Apparently he wrote on anything he could find. At times he wrote only short notes on a "daily diary" and expanded them to a full journal later when the luxury availed itself.

Doble attempted to pursue the California experience but stayed primarily in the Moke Hill, Volcano and Jackson areas. He served as Justice of the Peace in Volcano when it was still part of Calaveras County and for several more years thereafter. Among his achievements he was an accomplished Notary Public, a member of the Odd Fellows, ran for judge of Calaveras County, and was appointed Deputy Sheriff in Amador County. For three years he carried on a robust letter writing campaign with a woman he never met (a cousin of his sister in law). It was almost understood that they would marry should he convince her to come west. He never did, and she married someone else, and they broke off their affectionate correspondence soon thereafter. He died a bachelor in 1866 in San Francisco at the young age of 38 leaving a prolific 200 volumes of personal journals.

Unlike our two previous authors, Doble never intended for his work to be published. Yet, his writings are considered one of the best early accounts (and most accurate) of the Miwok Native American lifestyle before soiled by the miners' arrival. He also accurately documented the early mines along the Mokelumne and Cosumnes Rivers. His hardworking sidekick Tom that he wrote about almost daily

was not a person but a Long Tom sluice box. Let us look at what he had to say about early Calaveras County.

### John Doble:

Doble walked from Double Springs toward Glencoe where he eventually staked a claim. At his first sight of the Moke River he said:

*"...on the road we passed in sight of the Moquolumne River which was about 1800 feet below us... we passed along the side of the Mountain next the River which looked from that height like a large serpent winding along among the Mountains"*

In January of 1852 Doble wrote a detailed account of his first day as a miner:

*"The next day after I arrived the Men all went to their work & I boug [bought] some tools which were an Iron shovel for 2.00 A small pick with handle 2.50 1 Tin pan for washing Gold 1.50 and I went to work sinking a hole on a small flat below Latimers I worked all day but could get nothing but small specks which I did not save I worked very slow as I knew nothing about it & the ground was hard to dig being full of stones by night I got a hole about 3 feet square & 4 feet deep & was very tired at that "*

Working conditions and his outlook didn't much improve in the next few weeks...

*"...during these two weeks we did not make enough to pay our board..."*

*"We are now working on a rotton Granite Ledge which looks verry much like sandstone it being so soft that for several inches we can pick it up with ease we have worked 3 or 4 days & not found any thing worth naming just above us has been a company working all winter & they have taken out several lumps"*



John Doble

However being a miner he was vulnerable to the good times a miner could find in any poor situation:

### *Pleasant Springs February 8th 1852*

*"Yesterday being the 7th was my 24th Birth Day & as some times happens the Boys made me treat pretty freely & consequently we were all last night rather Elevated or in other words somewhat corned as in this country where Liquors are to be had of every description & but little that is made of corn we were at least 1/2 drunk & to day a heaviness in the brain with a curious singing in the Ears & an apparent propen-*

*sity in every thing visible for a rotary motion is a part of the consequences"*

His first wildlife encounter in Moke Hill occurred when two other miners brought home a "cat" they encountered in the flooding waters of the Mokelumne River:

*"They brought up with them what they called a Mountain or California Cat but I think it is really a Martin. It is about 15 inches long from the nose to the tail & its tail is about 18 inches long it[s] feet ears and eyes were like the cats only its eyes were larger & rounder its tail shaped like a cats but ringed with black like the racoon it[s] face & nose shaped nearly like the coons its feet and body shaped like the cats only the legs were a little shorter & the body more slim the color was gray something like the gray squirrel it was very tame & gentle & was not verry wild when caught"*

What Doble had described in perfect detail was the ringtail cat, a cousin of the raccoon. This animal is very tame and came to be adopted by miners in the absence of domestic cats for keeping mice under control, earning the animals the nickname 'the miner's cat.'

The following day, March 7, 1852, Doble experienced yet another California phenomenon:

*"Last night we were awakened sometime after midnight by a shock a shaking of the tent & a low short rumbling noise we were all awake at the same time & each asked at the same time what is that but neither got an answer we speculated awhile & concluded it was an Earthquake so went to sleep again"*

Doble's first hand accounts of the Miwok he observed in the Glencoe area (see *Las Calaveras*, April 2007) is often cited by contemporary archeologists and historians.

*"There is a small berry grows here that they dry & pound then licking it off their fingers sometimes making a spoon of the 4 fingers of the hand and dipping the soup with this natural spoon and in a peculiar & comical (comical to me but I suppose natural to them) manner pouring it into the mouth & from thence I will leave it to phisiologists and physicians to tell what becomes of it while passing about the camp I noticed hundreds eating in this way while many were roasting meat by laying it on the fires in pieces of all sizes up to 50 lbs or thereabouts & eating it as soon as cooked or half burned with out seasoning of any kind The squaws as is usual among Indians do all the work while the Men look on & see that it is well done They carry their children whil young bound to a board made of sticks on their backs."*

Despite all the hardships of mining that young Doble encountered, within a short time he had grown fond, if not philosophical, of his new life. On Christmas day of 1853 he observed:

*"This morning frosty the day clear & warm We had a pan of Egg Nog this morning we paid for Eggs \$2.50 pr Dozen A great many of the Miners are taking their Christmas that means getting Drunk I have felt for some months past as contented as I ever have been in life I believe that a person to be happy must take the world as it comes & make the most of it There is no happiness in a continual strife with all that we meet for us..."*

*The easiest way is the best & the mottoe 'Do as ye would that other should do unto you' is the best to follow as near as may be or as circumstances will permit us to do..."*

*I believe that to do nothing to others that you would not like to have done to you is the true definition of the word Honor"*



Readers who are interested in the first-hand accounts of our early pioneers may wish to look further into the three pieces highlighted herein. Copies of these books are usually kept in California collections in good libraries. Doble's Diary can often be found in bookstores in Calaveras and Amador Counties. The other two books may occasionally be found in their reprint form as a classics reproduction in quality antique bookstores.

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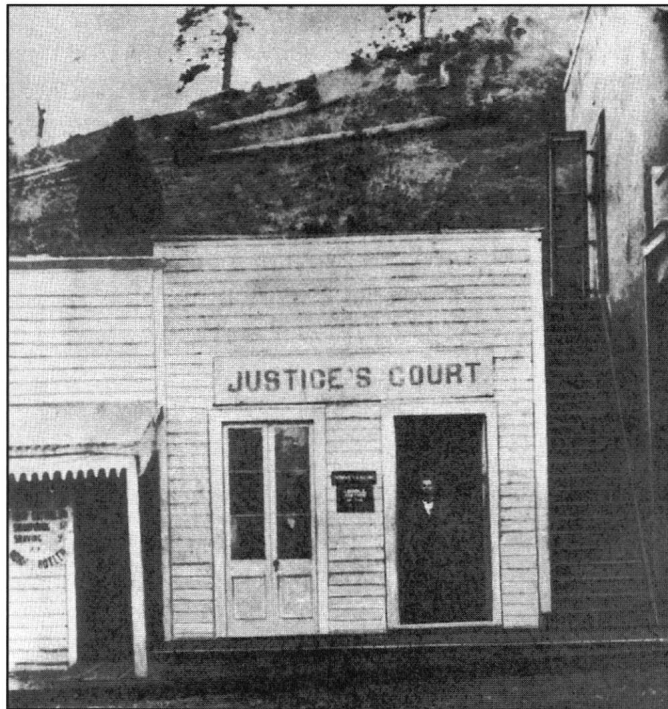
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**John Doble, Justice of the Peace, at his office  
on Soldier's Gulch in Volcano**

# Calaveras County Historical Society

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The Calaveras County Historical Society is a non-profit corporation. It meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the County. Locations and scheduled programs are announced in advance. Some meetings include a dinner program, and visitors are always welcome.

The Society operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 to 4:00 in the historic County courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas; and the historic Red Barn Museum at 891 Mountain Ranch Road, also in San Andreas, which is open Thursday to Sunday, 10:00 to 4:00.

The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museums while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4:00, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058, or contact us at: CCHS@goldrush.com; Red Barn Museum (209) 754-0800.

## New Members

*The Calaveras County Historical Society welcomes the following new members:*

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