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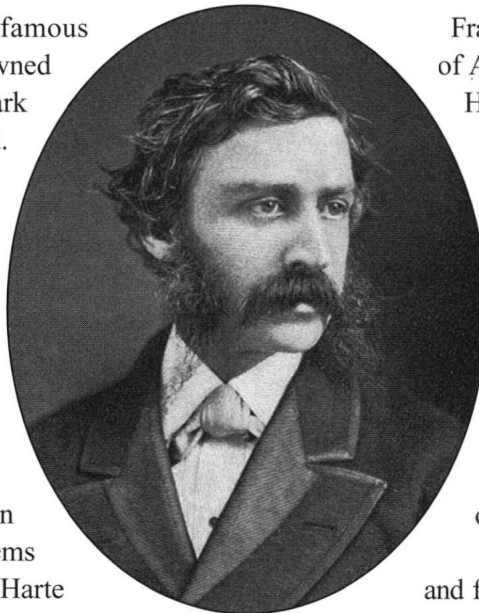
Number 4

FROM POKER FLAT TO WINGDAM BRET HARTE IN THE MOTHER LODGE

by *Bonnie Miller*

When one recalls famous American writers spawned by the gold rush, Mark Twain always comes to mind. Equally, and even earlier, Bret Harte should come to mind. Bret Harte was, during his gold rush tenure, every bit as successful as Mark Twain. The two men shared many similar characteristics. Both were prolific and humorous writers and both carried money problems all of their lives. Both writers even sought fame and even refuge in Europe when their problems exceeded their wits. Unlike Twain, Harte remained in Europe for the latter half of his life.

Twain left his mark, in the form of a frog, on Calaveras County. What is rarely acknowledged is that Bret Harte also left a literary trail here. Yet Harte has never been discussed in the pages of *Las Calaveras*, so in this issue we are going to look at the other author.



Young Bret Harte, circa 1860.

Francis Bret Harte was born on the 25th of August, 1839, in Albany, New York. His parents Henry and Elizabeth Hart found it necessary to move the family often due to Henry's variable work as a teacher. At one point Henry changed the spelling of their name to Harte with an e to differentiate it from another Hart in their town. Another story says that Henry Hart fathered another child out of wedlock, and his son Bret changed the spelling out of embarrassment.

Young Bret was sickly as a child and found himself confined indoors often.

He turned to reading to occupy his mind. In-depth study of the Bible,

Byron, Dickens and Poe fed his imagination and fueled his literary interests. Harte's father died young, and his mother moved west in 1853. Bret's older brother Henry had joined the army and thrilled his brother with stories of fighting Indians and conquering the west. Young Bret and his sister followed their mother to San Francisco in 1854.

Bret and his sister started west in February of 1854 on board the ship *The Star of the West*. The eastern ship left them in Nicaragua. They continued their journey through Panama by wagon, river boat and mule. On the western coast they boarded the ship *Brother Jonathan* for their last leg to San Francisco, but the ship kept breaking down en route. After the ship had been given up as lost at sea, it limped into the harbor. These travel experiences fed Harte's later writing, much as *Roughing It* did for Mark Twain.

Harte toured the gold fields but had little luck at mining and even less at gambling. For a while he worked a claim that yielded little wealth. Unrealized at the time, Harte's wealth was gained from the experiences he had rather than any gold that he found. Destitute, one afternoon he stumbled into a cabin along the Stanislaus River. The cabin was owned by the Gillis brothers, the same who later befriended Mark Twain. Jim Gillis took pity on the hapless miner who dressed like a dandy in patent leather shoes. He fed Harte and gave him money to get "back to the bay" which is all Harte wanted to do. He left the area in 1855, almost exactly one year from when he began his gold adventure. By all accounts, he had prob-

ably completed his experiences in the rugged west at that time, ten years before Twain came to California.

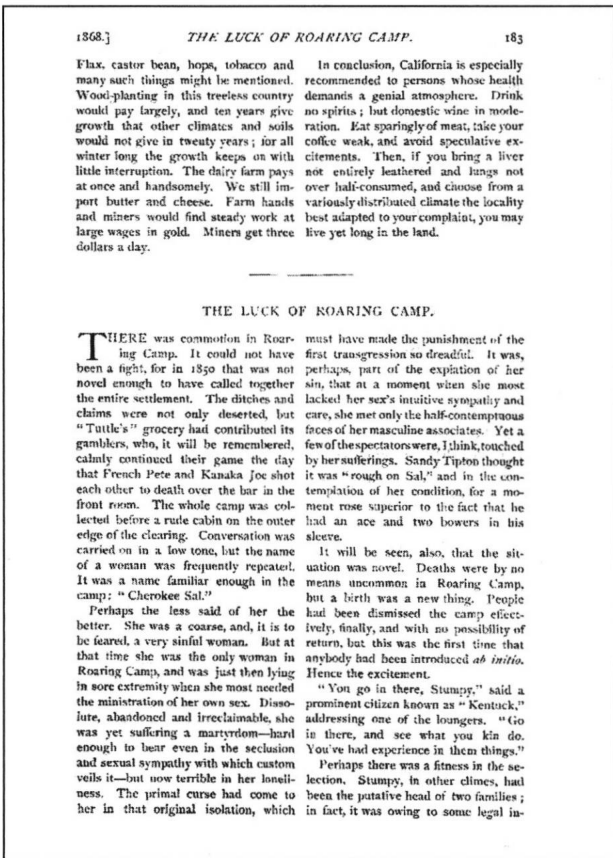
Harte only spent one year in the gold camps, yet it provided him with material for the rest of his life. "To me it was like a strange, ever-varying panorama, so novel that it was difficult to grasp comprehensively. In fact, it was not till years afterwards that the great mass of primary impressions on my mind became sufficiently clarified for literary use."

Harte tried his hand at a variety of jobs over the next two years. He worked as a pharmacist, a teacher, a private tutor, and as a clerk in a law office. He may have served a short time in the military, including as a reserve in San Francisco during the Civil War. For a time he worked as a guard, riding shotgun on stages for the Adams Express Company. Two weeks after he lost that job his replacement was shot in a holdup. It was the job as a typesetter and printer that finally oriented Harte to a future in writing. In 1867 he finally landed a job with the Northern Californian, a newspaper produced in Union, later Arcata. He did typesetting as well as contribute minor pieces.

A theme in Harte's writing was his general discontent and the disgust he held regarding the abuse he witnessed upon minorities. He was offended with the way the white settlers used the labor of Chinese and Mexican immigrants to their own advantage. When he truthfully reported a massacre of Indians while editing the newspaper up north, he was run out of town. He had said: "Today we record acts of Indian aggression and white retaliation. It is a humiliating fact that the parties who may be supposed to represent white civilization have committed the greater barbarity."

Ten years later he wrote a poem "The Heathen Chinee" about a wily Chinese man in a gold camp. The poem admires the cleverness of the Chinese man. To Harte's horror it backfired and fueled public discontent against Chinese. It became one of his most famous works.

After being run out of town up north Harte returned to San Francisco where he worked for various newspapers and magazines. In 1862 he met Anna Griswold and they were married. His income was barely adequate to support them, so he sought additional employment. He applied for and was appointed the Secretary for the United States Branch Mint in San Francisco in 1864, and held the position until 1870. He conducted his secretarial duties during the day, and pursued his literary passions during his slack hours. He started to write under the pen names Bret or The Bohemian, which was



The first printing of "The Luck of Roaring Camp" appeared in the second edition of the *Overland Monthly*.

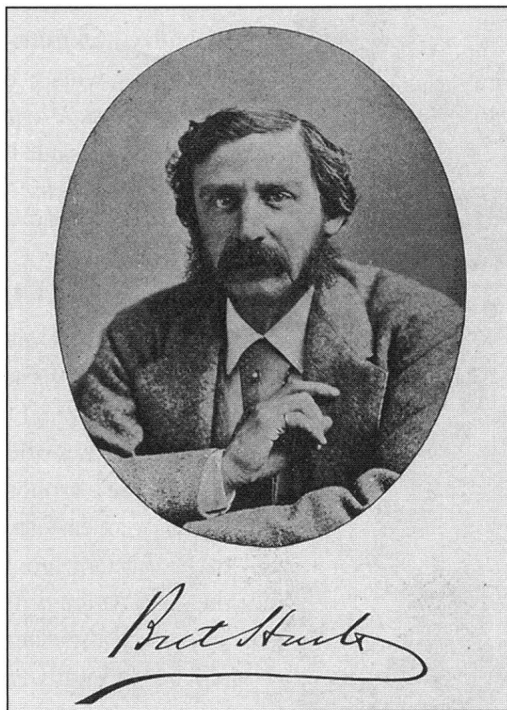
a common moniker for reporters and journalists of the day. Through his writing he was able to meet other literary figures. He was befriended by Jesse Frémont, the wife of the famous cartographer John C Frémont. Charles Dickens became a fan and ardent supporter of Harte's.

Harte worked on the San Francisco magazine *The Californian*. It was while working there in 1866 that he met Mark Twain. Although the jumping frog story had been published a month earlier, it was not until Harte published it in *The Californian* that Twain gained recognition and fame for his story. Harte always vividly recalled the first time he met Twain. He described him as

"a young man whose appearance was unmistakably interesting. His head was striking. He had the curly hair; the aquiline nose, and even the aquiline eye... His dress was careless, and his general manner was one of supreme indifference to surroundings and circumstances." Yet despite his odd first impression, Harte went on to admire Twain. He always fondly recalled the first time he heard the jumping frog story, orally before it had been written down. *"...it will never be as funny to anybody in print as it was to me, told for the first time by the unknown Twain himself, on that morning in the San Francisco Mint."*

For a while Harte fancied himself a literary critic. His unfairly harsh reviews made him unpopular with other writers. Regardless, in July of 1868 Harte was selected as the best candidate to head a new magazine, the *Overland Monthly*. It was considered to be California's first literary journal of high quality, intended to rival the *Atlantic Monthly*. Harte himself designed the magazine's logo, a California grizzly bear with its paw holding down a railroad track. The logo symbolized Harte's disdain for the encroachment and abuses of the railroad.

When Harte proposed the story "The Luck of Roaring Camp," it met with cool acceptance in the west. He published it reluctantly in the second issue of the *Overland Monthly*. As editor, it was his impression that this classy new literary magazine was only



Bret Harte and his signature, circa 1870

getting conventional submissions, and nothing about their rich surroundings. Harte found it strange that *"not one of the writers had felt inspired to treat the fresh subjects which lay ready to his hand in California."* Then an eastern magazine picked up the story. Publication of his story "The Luck of Roaring Camp" had vindicated him and he was quickly propelled into fame. Thereafter readers from both the east and Great Britain were thrilled with his heartfelt stories from the west.

Harte's literary creations were fueled by the exciting material of the early gold rush. He claimed that he had come to California with no better equip-

ment than an imagination, one expanded by reading such works as Don Quixote or the story of the Argonauts. He maintained a deep interest in his classical education. When news of Charles Dickens' death reached California, Harte held the printing of his magazine so that he could write a passionate obituary to the man.

Magazines and papers across the country soon offered whatever terms he dictated should he write for them. He was offered jobs as an editor, publisher or columnist. He was regarded as a master of short stories and poetry, but his fame became his undoing.

Calaveras fodder

Most of Bret Harte's stories take place in Calaveras and Tuolumne counties and the area around La Grange. Two stories are believed to have been situated specifically in Calaveras County. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" is alleged to have taken place along the banks of the Stanislaus River near where Lake Tulloch is today. This theory is dispelled when one reads about the terrain described therein. "A Night at Wingdam" is a story of Harte's visit to a hotel in the town of Wingdam, a mythical destination he uses in a few pieces. Years later he explained that the story was based on his own experience at Murphys Camp.

"The Spelling Bee at Angels" is a poem that tells of a fanciful impromptu spelling bee. The contest is held between miners in a saloon in Angels. In two



**Bret Harte pictured at his desk at the
Overland Monthly, circa 1870.**

other pieces he describes a shooting and a lynching that happened in Angels Camp. All of these stories came from his experiences while staying over in Murphys or drinking whiskey in saloons in Angels.

In 1870 Harte wrote the humorous poem "To the Pliocene Skull" which was published the following year. The poem pokes fun at scholarly men who are duped by the Calaveras Skull. A fellow involved in the skull ordeal was a man by the name of Coon from Angels Camp. He is believed to be the same Coon of Angels Camp that told Twain the jumping frog story.

In all, Calaveras County is mentioned twelve times in Harte's work. He also had a character named Brown of Calaveras who was prominent in many of his poems. By contrast, Twain only mentioned Calaveras twice ("Roughing It" and the jumping frog story) plus his autobiography.

The best and most productive period of Bret Harte's life were the days spent in California. It was here that he discovered his literary skills and found fame. When he left the west to embark on a lecture tour he disappointed his audiences by often being late to or missing performances. When he did get on stage, it was said that his performances were lackluster as he often just read from prepared material. Although he couldn't

verbalize it in front of an audience, he recalled his gold rush days with a bitter-sweet wistfulness. It was "a kind of crusade without a cross, an exodus without a prophet," he said. He summed up early California by saying that it was "...a life of which perhaps the best that can be said is that it exists no longer."

Moving east and beyond

The new University of California at Berkeley opened in 1869 and offered Harte a literature professorship. He taught there briefly, then turned away seeking greater offers for his skills. In 1871 Harte was offered the astronomical salary of \$10,000 per year to write for an eastern literary magazine. In exchange for the exorbitant fee, he was to submit twelve stories in the year. At the time it was the highest fee ever paid to an American writer. Harte jumped at the money and moved his family east, back to his home state. By now his family consisted of Anna and two young boys. Harte sorely disappointed the magazine. His submissions were dull, often late, and did not contain the excitement and flair his readers had come to expect. Fame had killed his success.

Harte probably suffered from addiction to alcohol. He never went on stage without fortifying himself before a performance, and he was known to sleep with

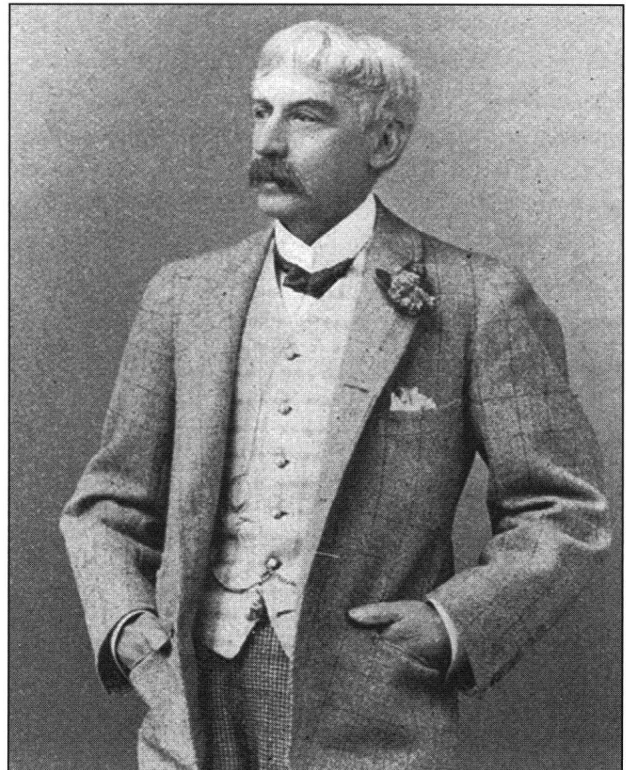


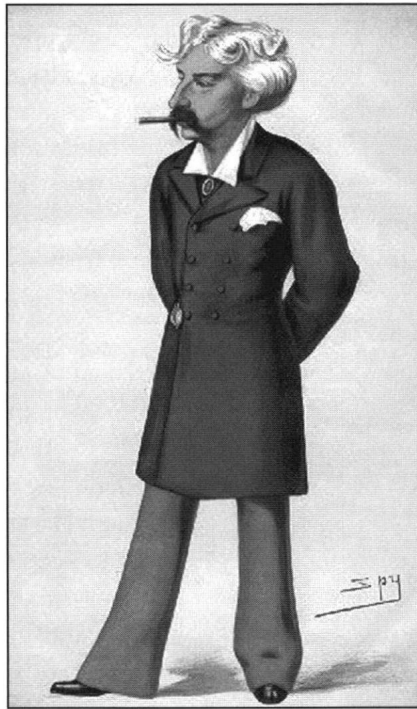
Photo taken in London for *McClure* magazine, 1894.

a bottle of whiskey at his bedside. When aggravated, he would blame others for his failures and threaten to sue anyone who maligned him. He began to fret over his health. Yet Harte was also a charming man and a bit of a fashion dandy. He claimed to possess the wherewithal necessary in selecting the appropriate clothes for talking associates into lending him money. He was never known to repay his debts.

In the fall of 1876 Harte partnered with Mark Twain to write a play. Harte needed money badly and felt that collaboration with Twain would bring greater attention and credibility to the project. The play was called *Ah Sin* about an enterprising Chinese man from the California mining camps twenty-five years earlier. The endeavor soured the relationship between the two writers. They quarreled bitterly over Harte's drinking, womanizing and poor spending habits. The play was only moderately successful, and mostly due to the reputations of its authors than to any real accomplishment.

In public Twain spoke admirably about Harte. Perhaps it was from a sense of obligation as Harte had given Twain his own literary start with the jumping frog story. Or maybe it was out of a sense of shame over their shared failed endeavor with the play. In their early years of acquaintance, Twain had admired Harte and said *"...though I am generally placed at the head of my breed of scribblers in this part of the country, the place properly belongs to Bret Harte."* Regardless of his public image, after the failed joint project Twain wrote about his impression of Harte in a letter to a friend, *"Harte is a liar, a thief, a swindler, a snob, a sot, a sponge, a coward, a Jeremy Diddler, he is brim full of treachery..."*

Twain felt that Harte had fabricated most adventures from vicarious knowledge. Twain felt strongly that Harte's portrayal of the miners' vernacular was not authentic. He questioned, in error, the truth behind Harte's work. Harte experienced much more time in early California than Twain did, and saw different things. Harte's one year of experience in the gold country in 1855 was vastly different from the



Caricature of Harte for *Vanity Fair* magazine, 4 January 1899.

three months that Twain spent there ten years later. Harte admitted that his characters were not exactly one single person, but rather *"...there is not one of them who did not have a real human being as a suggesting and starting point."*

Years later Twain allowed his personal opinion to surface in an interview in Sydney, Australia in 1895: *"I detest him, because I think his work is 'shoddy.' His forté is pathos but there should be no pathos which does not come out of a man's heart. He has no heart, except his name, and I consider he has produced nothing that is genuine. He is artificial."* In his autobiography, Twain confessed: *"In the early days I liked Bret Harte and so did the others, but by and by I got over it; so also did the others. He couldn't keep a friend permanently. He was bad, distinctly bad; he had no feeling and he had no conscience."*

Exile and escape

Readers were no longer interested in Harte. He had a hard time selling his material, or meeting obligations. He was destitute and struggling to keep his family afloat. In desperation, he appealed to his friends in Washington, DC. In 1878 Harte obtained the appointment as consul to Germany. It is widely believed that he fled to Europe to escape creditors and the bad will he had created in his wake. His family had grown with two additional daughters, but he left them all behind. His consul salary was too little to accommodate the family joining him.

Twain felt that Harte was fleeing money problems. In his autobiography, Twain said of Harte's suitability for the foreign post: *"...he was a man without a country; no, not man—man is too strong a term; he was an invertebrate without a country. He hadn't any more passion for his country than an oyster has for its bed; in fact not so much and I apologize to the oyster."*

Harte did not like Germany and was unprepared for the cold weather. He despaired of his failing health. Despite making his office exceptionally efficient, he did not enjoy his work and never realized any increase

WHAT'S A WINGDAM?

Bret Harte's stories were often placed in locations with whimsical names. His stories had their basis in his own factual experience, but he rarely referred to a person or place by their proper name. The town of Wingdam did not and still does not exist. Wingdam is a name Harte used for the Murphys gold mining camp as he experienced it in 1855, but it wasn't too far from the mark.

A wingdam is a real thing. It is a kind of dam that was popular with miners for diverting stream flow. Once diverted, the exposed gravel bed could be more easily mined. The dam didn't obstruct the flow or cross the streambed. Rather, it was constructed in line with the stream so as to just divert a portion of its flow. It looked like a large wing gathering the water in its journey.

Wingdams were used extensively around Murphys at the time Harte was in the Mother Lode. He referred to Wingdam often in his writings, actually meaning Murphys. Today Murphys has a subdivision named Wingdam.

in pay. He wanted to move on. While convalescing in Switzerland he read of his appointment to Glasgow, Scotland. He preferred the second appointment as it afforded him the opportunity to pursue writing and glamour in the London literary circles. Again he did not realize an appreciable increase in pay, and advised Anna that he could not afford to move her and the children to Europe to be with him. But he did regularly send home money for their support.

While working in Scotland he discovered the graves of nineteen US seamen from a shipwreck in 1865. Harte was touched by the compassion of the Duke of Argyll, who saw to their proper burials. He applied for and obtained permission to erect a monument which reads: "*To commemorate their loss and the kindness of their benefactor...*"

In one official report, Harte wrote of an odd discovery whereby Scottish tenants were being sold individual tenement flats. It is probably the first written account of the future concept of shared, or condominium owner-

ship. But Harte's heart wasn't in his work. He preferred the London literary scene. The home consulate began to question his excessive absences from work. In 1885, with the election of Grover Cleveland, political attitudes had changed back home. Not surprisingly, one morning Harte read in the paper that he was relieved of duty. He retired from his foreign service.

Harte moved to London permanently that year. He lived in the home of a consular colleague, essentially a kept man. He devoted himself to his writing and to avoiding his family. In 1898 Anna came to London with two of their children in an attempt to reconcile their family. One biographer noted that although Harte and his wife had no discordant differences to keep them apart, concurrently they held no great passion to hold them together. By this time Harte had begun to entertain the wife of his host.

On the fifth of May, 1902 Harte died in Camberley, England of throat cancer. He is buried in Frimley at St Peter's Church. His burial was arranged by his longtime lady friend. The gravestone is engraved with the message "*DEATH SHALL REAP THE GRAVER HARVEST,*" a line from one of his more famous poems, "The Reveille." Three months after his passing his wife died. Although married forty years, the couple had four children yet had only lived together for sixteen of those years.

Harte had proved to be a prolific writer. In the last seventeen years of his life in London, he produced almost a volume of short fiction material annually. Between 1855 and his death forty-seven years



This image of Mark Twain and Bret Harte was created for an Old Crow Whiskey ad.



This \$5 stamp was issued in honor of Harte's 150th birthday in 1989.

later, he produced eight novels, fifteen novellas, two hundred short stories, and more than one thousand poems and minor pieces.

In a surprising turnaround, Twain wrote a warm and complimentary eulogy upon Harte's passing.

Bret Harte's legacy endures today. At the famous Bohemian

Club in San Francisco, a bronze relief of Bret Harte and his most famous characters is mounted on an exterior brick wall. The private men's club was formed as a place for journalists, artists and musicians to meet. Harte, the journalist who once called himself The Bohemian, is commemorated in the bronze plaque for his contributions to early California literature. The club was founded in 1872 and gave both Harte and Twain honorary memberships. It is doubtful that either enjoyed the benefits of that society as both had left California by then.

Seven schools across the United States are named for Bret Harte including a high school in Angels Camp. When the school was built in 1905, the name was suggested by resident Harry Barden. In 1927 Calaveras and San Joaquin Counties sought a location to build a hospital for tubercular patients. They chose Murphys, and constructed a sanitarium named for Bret Harte. Numerous roads across the country bear his name, and a performing arts center in Angels Camp is named for him. A community in Tuolumne County paid respect to both Twain and Harte and named their town Twain Harte.

The Stockton Chamber of Commerce developed a map in 1988 called The Bret Harte Trail. It said it was a "MAP SHOWING THE LAND OF ROMANCE AND GOLD, IMMORTALIZED BY BRET HARTE & MARK TWAIN." It noted several points in the gold country that Twain and Harte visited and wrote about. The map covered portions of San Joaquin, Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne, Stanislaus, Merced and Mariposa counties.

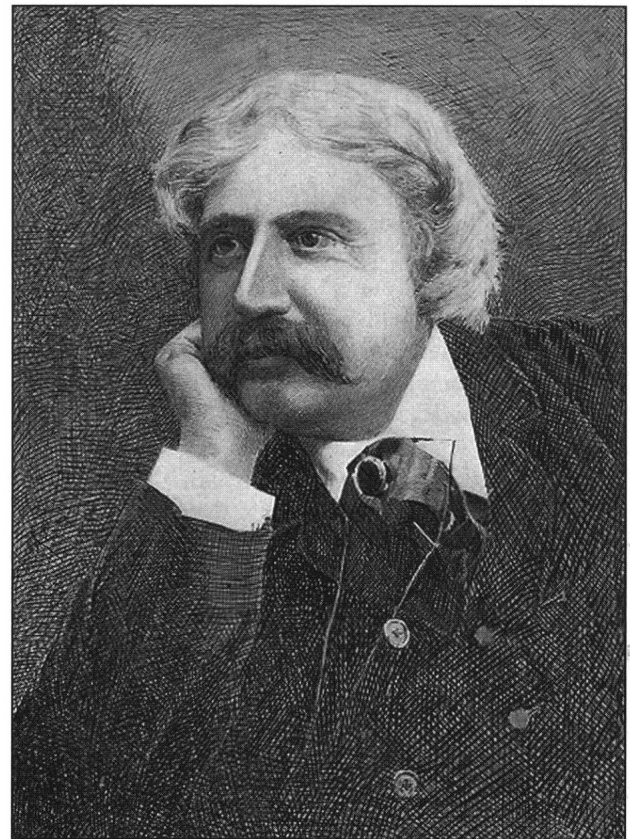
In August of 1989, one hundred fifty years from Bret Harte's birthday, the United States Postal Service honored the author by issuing a five dollar

stamp with his image. The stamp was launched at a celebration held in the gymnasium of the Twain Harte School in Tuolumne County.

The late Coke Wood, esteemed UOP professor and historian of Calaveras County, admired Harte. Harte is featured in several of Wood's small books about the Mother Lode. Former Calaveras County attorney Michael Arkin collects first edition books by Bret Harte. He finds Harte more interesting than Twain. In fact, everyone's library should have a little Harte.

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This drawing was created of Bret Harte from his last known photograph at the approximate age of sixty-six.

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.

April-June, 2011

New Members

The Calaveras County Historical Society welcomes the following new members:

Yvonne Wooster—Copperopolis
MaryLee Levy—Fresno
Mary McNamara—Mokelumne Hill
Phil & Chris Castelluccio—San Andreas
Jeffrey Womble—Stockton

Donations

The Historical Society appreciates the following generous donations:

Judi Bowman—Stenographer machine, Royal typewriter, organ scrolls
Irmgard Temple—Walking stick with emblems from Austria and Germany
Chris Castelluccio—Chinese tea set from 1800s, Hungarian paprika container, embroidered tea towels, brown embroidered purse, women's gloves, black satin shawl, black and gold metal matchbox
Dr. Steven Guemann—photo of Mizpah Manuel Allen and friends on horseback (daughter of John Manuel, Murphys), information on piano on display in music room
Roger Withers—cash donation
Scott Hermann—photos of Grand Opening of Calaveras Cement Plant
Gary Lowe—Cash donation
L.F. Hunt—Cash donation
Marilyn Alice Cutting—pulley and well bucket from home of George and Ellen Folsom, Paloma. The Folsom's lived in the cottage from 1916-1932, copy of letter from June 25, 1905 found in John Randolph Cory's Family Bible. The letter was written by Alice Folsom Louttit Lawson to her sister-in-law, Jessie Louttit.
Charles Maher—cash donation
Mary Lee Levy—cash donation