



FIRPO OF SAN DOMINGO CREEK RANCH

by Bud Ponte

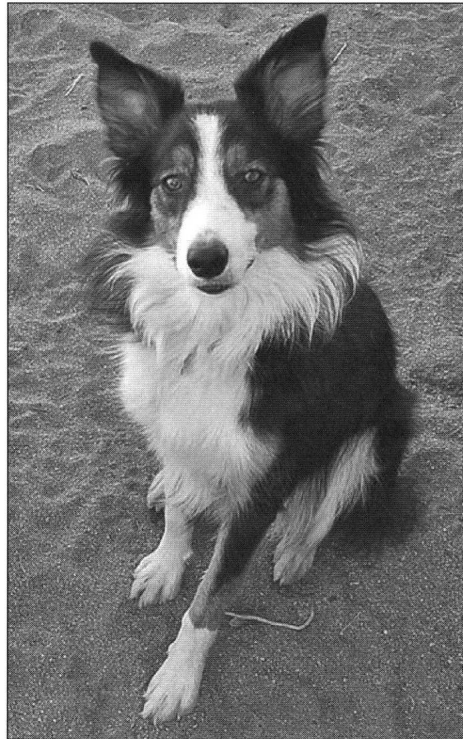
Editor's note: *The border collie or shepherd dog has long been a favorite working dog and companion of Mother Lode ranchers. In this reminiscence Bud Ponte explained the importance of the dog in the life of a ranching family. He also gave us a thoughtful window on the daily lives of early Calaveras County residents in the 1920s. Through his memories we can learn much of the details of the norms or hardships of that life.*

Gloyd A. "Bud" Ponte was the eldest of Louis and Mabel Ponte's six children and a third generation Ponte in Calaveras County. The Pontes were among the early gold rush settlers in this area. Bud was born at the San Domingo Creek Ranch in 1917 where his family ranched. He attended the Esmeralda School with his brothers until the sixth grade. He then lived with his aunt and uncle in Salem, Oregon and later completed his education in

Washington. Eventually he and his wife Eloise returned to the area. He liked to say that his family had had the same neighbors for over 150 years.

But Ponte served two terms as President of the Calaveras County Historical Society from 1987 to 1989. During his tenure he worked to successfully expand the Calaveras County Museum. He was particularly proud of his part in preserving the only one-room brick school building remaining in the Mother Lode area. He also served as an advisor to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC on replicating an early California miner's cabin for exhibition.

Bud Ponte wrote this story in 1992 for his grandchildren's entertainment. It was found by his family years later among his papers. Las Calaveras is grateful to Dana Dee Carragher for submitting this to us for consideration. Bud was well respected and today we fondly miss him. He passed away in 2007.



The collie shepherd is a favorite among ranchers for their hard work and loyalty. The dramatic black and white coloring attracted young Bud Ponte. Share image.

Firpo of San Domingo Creek Ranch

Sometimes in the evening after the day's work is done I will sit and think of the times of my youth.

It was my privilege to be born three quarters of a century ago on the family ranch on San Domingo Creek. It was then a large working ranch with several families, all related, in residence. Older members of the family had lived there since 1851, sixty-six years before my birth.

On the world scene it was a quieter time. California was comprised of mostly regional communities with few large cities. Many families lived on farms and ranches that were nearly self supporting. We went to town perhaps twice a year. Radio, television and electricity on the ranch were far in the future. Because of this, my whole life consisted of the ranch and its happenings. That remained so until I became a student at the Esmeralda Grammar School.

Our livestock was diversified. There were horses, cows, goats, sheep, pigs and many types of fowl. Cats and dogs stand out in my memory. Dogs and cats were not usually kept on as pets on ranches those days. They were expected to perform duties. Cats caught rats and mice and hunted ground squirrels and gophers in the field. Dogs guarded or herded the livestock and since they performed various assignments a number of dogs were kept.

When I was just a little boy, the ranch dogs were Mertoo, Airdale, Dick, Shep, Reno, the goat dog with no name, and Firpo.

Mertoo was a big dog who did not work the stock. His job was to patrol the barns and pens where stock was kept and protect them from coyotes, foxes and other varmints. Sometimes at night when I was tucked in bed, a coyote would howl way up on Thompson's Ditch. Mertoo would answer him with a long howl and barks, letting the

coyote know that harm would befall any coyote entering the barnyard.

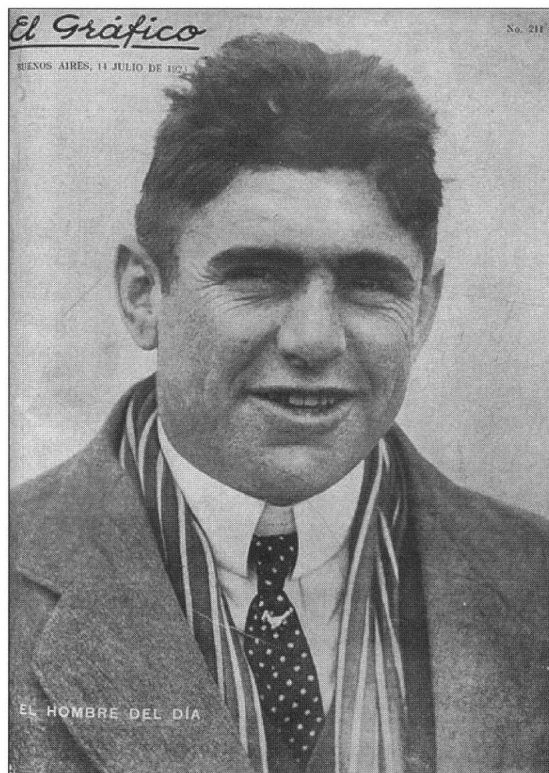
Airdale was a cattle dog. He was a herder which means that he worked cattle from the front. In contrast, Dick and Shep were heelers, working from the rear. They nipped the cows' heels or pulled their tails so that they would move forward. With Airdale in front and Dick and Shep behind, stock of all kinds could be easily moved about the ranch.

My grandfather was quite old but very active. His work day included moving some distance in overseeing the ranch. Reno was acquired to be his companion. He was at Grandpa's side or heel at all times. Should an accident occur somewhere on the ranch, Reno would be sent for help. If there was a pet dog on the Ranch, it was probably Reno. If an accident had occurred, Reno would have done what Grandpa told him to do.

The goat dog remained with the goat herd at all times. He was not allowed to come to the Ranch House or be petted. He was taken from his mother before his eyes were opened and nursed on a goat and grew up with their kids. The goats accepted him as a member of the flock and he no doubt thought of himself as a goat. He was given food at the goat corral each evening. He guarded the goats on pasture all day, brought them to the corral in the evening to get his food and remained guarding them throughout the night.

In those days, everyone living on the ranch had work assignments. The men worked the fields or with livestock, the women in the homes or gardens, with teenagers helping wherever assigned according to their interests and capabilities.

Young children from four to seven years old were allowed to play in designated areas, checked on from time to time by the adults. Domesticated and wild animals were present in the pastures used as play areas. Not all animals could be trusted around small children. Years before, a seven year old boy, a family member, was



Luis Angel Firpo of Argentina gained fame in the United States when he fought Jack Dempsey in 1923.

struck in the back and killed by a sheep ram. Parents were especially concerned about the danger of mean animals, snakes, and old mine shafts. A well trained dog serving as a companion and guard added a great deal to children's safety. It was for that reason that Firpo came into my life. This is his story.

Firpo's mother and father were owned by my aunt and uncle who also lived on the ranch. He was a collie Sheppard mix and had he not been selected for me, he would have become a stock dog on some ranch. My parents took me to see the litter about two weeks before the puppies were ready to wean. Dad said that I could select a puppy for my own when the time came to wean them. That would be in another two weeks. Those were the longest two weeks of my life. Dad reserved the right to overrule me if he did not agree that the puppy selected would be trainable to serve as a child's companion-guardian. Dad was a very good dog and horse trainer.

When the time came, I was a four and a half-year old standing before the litter prepared to make a selection. It was not easy because the puppies all looked good. Dad probably encouraged me in making the proper selection more that I knew but finally Firpo was selected and taken home. The bright black and white color won out. We did not name him for a long time. We just called him Pup, but when he was finally named we called him Firpo. About that time there was a heavy weight boxing champion from Argentina fighting in this country whose name was Firpo. Dad was a boxing fan and knew all about him. He was called "Firpo, the wild bull of the Pampas". Our puppy was named after him. Unlike the fighter, our dog was always quiet and sedate, gentle in all respects. That is, unless he felt that danger was eminent. When the circumstance presented itself, he would immediately assume his protective role and act accordingly. He was my protector friend and companion for many years.

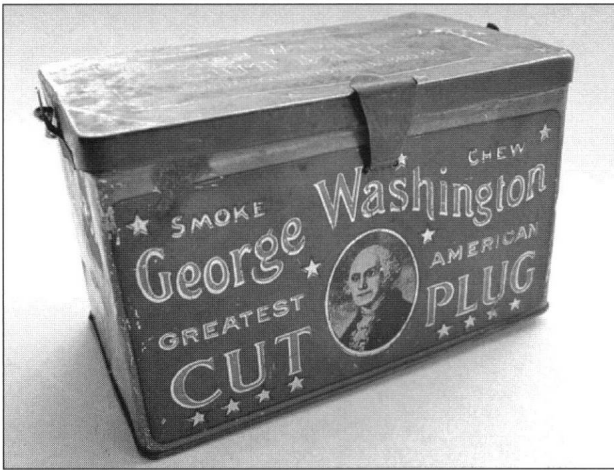
During the latter part of April or early May each year, children shed their shoes and went barefoot until the fall months. Boys and girls went barefooted to school and it would have been unusual to see children wearing shoes. The soles of our feet became like leather and we could walk miles over rough ground without being hurt. There were dangers though, the primary one being rattlesnakes. Snakes shed their skin each year and during part of the shedding time they are partially or totally blind. They are



The well camouflaged rattlesnake has long been a threat to Mother Lode ranchers, even if they are partially blinded when they shed their skin.

highly unstable during the shedding and will strike at anything without warning. Snakes are cold blooded animals and respond to hot and cold weather. When it is cooler they love to stretch out in the warm dust of a trail and sun themselves. There is a danger of bare feet stepping on them during this time. A rattlesnake bite is always a serious injury and can be fatal. Firpo always walked ahead of us on the trail and on at least two occasions saved us from being struck by snakes. The first time a large snake had swallowed a wood rat and was lethargically lying in the dusty road digesting his food. Since he was not moving and blended with the dust so well it was hard to see him. We would have stepped on him if Firpo had not blocked our way. He would block our way by turning sideways in front of us and not allow us to pass. We knew something was wrong and when we looked closely the snake could be seen. Firpo received many hugs and pats for saving us. He was a dog that loved to be loved.

The second time that Firpo saved me from a rattlesnake was on a part of the ranch called Gold Hill. The coyotes had been bothering the goats and I was sent out with the band to protect them. Firpo and I were following the goats along a narrow mountain trail. The trail passed a rocky ledge which was the home of a big rattlesnake. Mr. Snake was perturbed with all the goats passing, their bells ringing and probably struck at them several times. Because of all the noise created by the goats, I did not hear him buzzing, but Firpo did. He blocked my path and dashed forward, causing the snake to strike at him and allowing me to observe his whereabouts. Had Firpo not taken this action I would almost certainly have been struck. Being very young



The George Washington lunch pail was popular with young children in the 1920s, but was actually a tobacco tin covered with advertisements.

and small at the time, and a long way from home, there is good reason to believe that I would not be here today to tell this story if he had not taken the action that he did.

Firpo and I first visited the Esmeralda School one year before we were actually enrolled. Each year Miss Moore's students presented a Christmas program to the entire neighborhood. Each one of the students received a dictionary for participating. The candy and cookies were excellent and even a gift was received. My part in the program was to relate the story of the Fox and Goose. Firpo and I both seemed to like the school and I looked forward to going the following year.

During the first year the walk was easy for me as my older cousin, Cecil, who was 12, walked with me. The walk to school was over mountain trails and about a mile and a half each way. Firpo went along and played with everyone at noon and during recesses. When we were in class, he slept on the door mat at the front door. The school was moved at the beginning of my second year, from High Mountain to Esmeralda. My older cousin had graduated and Firpo and I were left to walk to and from school alone. Firpo became even more important to me as I was only six. We followed an old Indian trail from the ranch to the school. It led over the mountain through a part of Pozar's pasture.

The Pozars had a young bull in the pasture. He was part Holstein and part Herford. Holstein bulls are known to have fiery tempers and can be very dangerous. That young bull soon found out that it was great sport to scare a young boy and his dog on the way to school. He would sometimes bellow and

paw the earth, then charge us part way and back off. During this display my hair would be standing on end with fright. Sometimes he would stand behind bushes along the trail and as I passed would snort and charge off through the brush. It is said and it is true that should a human be afraid of an animal that the person will exude an odor which tells the animal of that fear. The bull and Firpo knew my fear. Firpo reacted to my fear by being very reserved, perhaps confused, when the bull became more aggressive. The family told me to carry rocks in my pocket and throw them at the bull and show him that I was aggressive. It didn't seem to be a fair fight but I would give it a try. The next time the bull played his game I ran at him, throwing the rocks and yelling. He seemed very surprised and confused by my action. He stood shaking his head without moving and Firpo, taking his cue from me, flew at the bull in a rage. He bit the bull on both hind legs and pulled his tail. They went flying down the trail ahead of me. After that Firpo was especially alert on the trail through the pasture and more than once punished the bull with a bite for his misdeeds.

There were a number of donkeys at the school. Our teacher and some of the students rode them to school. During recesses and noon we were allowed to ride them. The donkeys did not enjoy our game and soon learned to balk or buck us off. Firpo accepted the responsibility to correct their misbehavior by nipping their heels. When we were bucked off he sympathized with us and rounded up the donkey so we could get on again.

Firpo shared lunches with all of the students. We took lunches from home in those days. I carried mine in a George Washington lunch pail. The large tobacco companies sold their pipe tobacco in lunch pails for advertising purposes. Firpo sometimes had a more tasty lunch than I because he received bits of lunch from all the students. Sometimes my sandwich was made with Crisco and sugar filling. Firpo didn't always eat so well at home. Dog food as we know it now was not available. Dogs ate scraps from the table and special foods prepared for them at home. Sometimes our dogs only had boiled potatoes to eat for several days.

During my school years Firpo stayed with me throughout the day, and only one time did he leave me. I was seven at the time, and when we were sent out for the afternoon recess he could not be found. I panicked. The thought of going home along the trail was horrifying. My tears became sobs and my

sobs became wails. My teacher said that that was the loudest noise ever heard in Esmeralda. No one knew why he left me and went home. My parents were concerned when he came home alone and they came over the trail to get me.

When I was in the 4th grade our Angora goat herd numbered over 100 head. Angora goats are quite fragile and require a great deal of care. They often present problems such as not returning to their home corral at night. They like to establish beds in the pasture where they would like to begin feeding the next morning. That is a problem and almost always results in a tragic loss to coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions and owls that like to dine on tender goat meat. Coyotes usually kill one to eat, but mountain lions will kill several during an attack. They think it is great fun. Such losses soon reduce the goat herd and are very costly to the rancher. On those days that the goats did not come home in the afternoon it was my chore to go find them and bring them in. The goats had made several beds about the ranch. Their favorite was on a mountain that we called "the Rocks". One late afternoon Firpo and I were dispatched to bring them in. Just prior to reaching the mountain where the bed was located, we passed along a slope called a bench. On the bench there were several large boulders, one of them being the size of a small cabin. As we walked along the bench we could hear the goat bells ringing. We knew that something was wrong, that something or someone was bothering the goats. They were moving about in confusion and we did not know why.

Firpo was upset. He was growling and pushing against me. We did not think it was a good idea to rush up to the goats not knowing what was causing the problem so I decided to climb the big rock to see the goats from the top. When I climbed to the top and looked at the goats, this is what I saw.

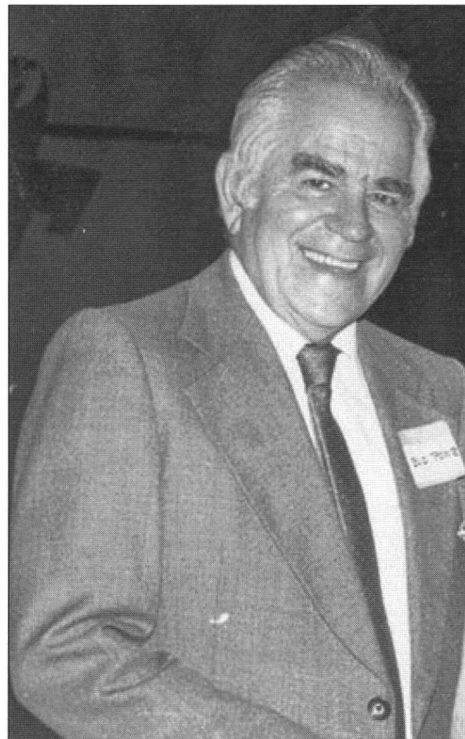
There was an old coyote among the goats. He was acting very oddly. He was whirling around, chasing his tail. He

would jump up in the air and yelp, fall on the ground and roll around, whining and gritting his teeth. The goats were fascinated by his actions and seemingly in a trance moved continually closer to the coyote. I knew that he would soon select one of the goats for his dinner, so coming down from the rock Firpo and I ran toward the goats. Firpo made a run at the coyote that started away. Firpo jumped on the coyote and as they passed me, Firpo was riding on the back of the coyote. Oddly, the goats did not wish to move or act as they should for some 10–15 minutes. I think that the coyote had them mesmerized. Some older relatives on the ranch were convinced that coyotes could hypnotize animals and have them follow them to their dens where they were killed to feed the coyote's puppies. Some of them had seen coyotes do what this one did and also saw large bones at the dens. I don't know if that is true, but I did see the goats in a state of confusion as they watched the coyote that day.

A cousin watched a large gopher snake charm a bird so that the snake just picked it up and swallowed it. I have saved a small rabbit from a snake and found the rabbit wanting to go right back where the snake was. I have also seen sheep that have been attacked by stray dogs, been saved from them and then if not restrained want to go back to the spot where the dogs attacked them.

Firpo and I were inseparable friends and companions for quite a few years and then one day we moved from the ranch to the State of Washington. Firpo could not go with us so he remained on the ranch in the care of my grandfather. Grandfather took good care of him but he missed us very much. He lived for two years after we left the ranch. During this time he went to school every day and came home alone in the evening. I never saw him again but have never forgotten him either. He is not remembered as a dog but as one of the family.

If there is a dog heaven, I know he is there, a companion to some little boy or girl, walking the mountain trail and that he is happy.



Gloyd "Bud" Ponte was a fourth generation rancher in Calaveras County and served two terms as the Historical Society's President.

Historical Society photo, 1989.

Calaveras County Historical Society

30 No. Main Street P.O. Box 721 San Andreas, CA 95249

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Las Calaveras is published quarterly by the Calaveras County Historical Society. A subscription to *Las Calaveras* comes with membership in the Calaveras County Historical Society for \$22.00 per year. Non-members may obtain copies from the Historical Society office. The original historical material presented in *Las Calaveras* is not copyrighted and anyone is invited to use it. Mention of the source would be appreciated. Contributions of articles about Calaveras County are appreciated and may be submitted to the Historical Society for consideration.

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.

October–December 2013

New Members

Linda & Chuck Turner—Mokelumne Hill
Blair & Diane Jackson—Mountain Ranch
Diane Erk—Copperopolis
Fred & Gayle Gerard—San Andreas
Cheryl White—Sacramento

Donations

The Historical Society appreciates the following generous donations:

Betty Raggio—Cash donation in memory of Faye Fletcher
Steve Cilenti—Spelling Book from Willow Creek School District c. 1935
Carolyn Kenfield & Family—Replica of the Salt Spring Valley School including all furniture, chalk boards, flag pole, and other period pieces
Duane Wight—Medicine bottles, toys, binoculars, hat pins, puzzle, silver cigarette case and matching lighter, fan, watches, magnifying glass, other miscellaneous pieces
Susan Cereghino Schneider on behalf of Martha Cereghino—documents related to family's past ownership of a mine in Calaveras County
Barbara Kathan—photo of Calaveras Cement Plant Softball Team, early 1950s (with most names on bank)
Ireland-Robinson & Hadley, Inc—Plat map of the Heckendorn Mine
Dana Dee Carragher—Cash donation
Herd's Machine & Welding—Cash donation
Don Cuneo—wooden tortilla press
Sharon Marovich—Book entitled *The De Ferrari Family—Memories of Times Past* by Carlo M. De Ferrari
Sandra Wallace—Maps of property in West Point owned by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Howard Folger
Doug & Catherine Mewhinney—Cash donation
William Lafranchi—Framed portraits of ancestors from West Point
Phil Alberts—papers and photos relating to schools