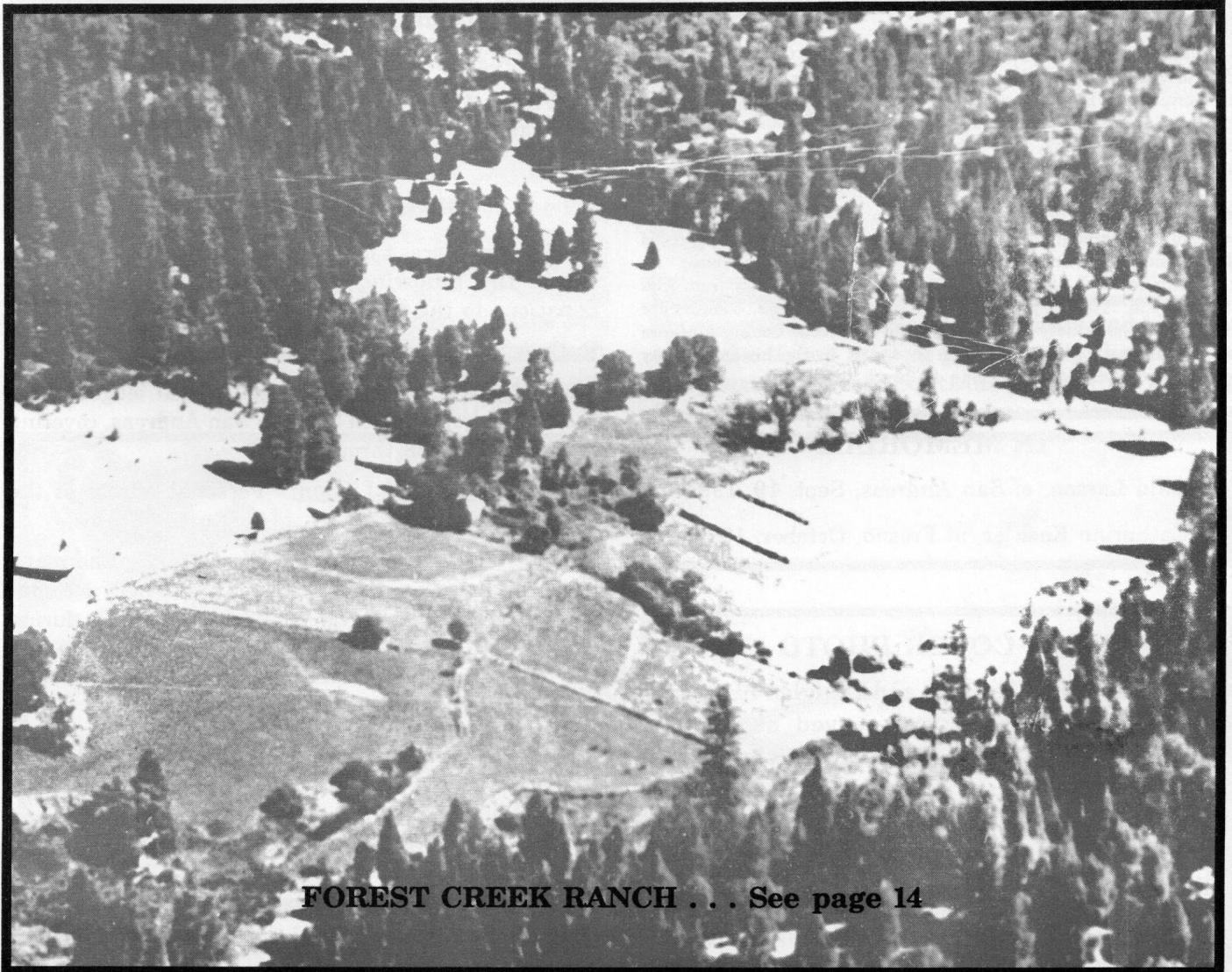


Las Calaveras

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## Calaveras County Historical Society

30 Main Street • P.O. Box 721  
San Andreas, California 95249

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The Calaveras County Historical Society, a non-profit corporation, meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the county, locations of which are announced in advance. Dinner meetings also are announced in advance.

The Society's office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 am to 4 p.m. The telephone number is (209) 754-1058. Visitors are welcome. The Society also operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10 am to 4 p.m. in the historic county courthouse at 30 Main St., San Andreas.

### IN MEMORIAM

Enid Larson, of San Andreas, Sept. 19, 1994

Catherine Koehler, of Fresno, October, 1994

### OUR COVER PHOTO

Surrounded by pine and Douglas fir, this Forest Creek ranch has served as headquarters for summer cattle operations, first for the McQuaides and then for the Fischer family for 127 years. Water carried from the creek by century-old ditch and flume provide pasture for saddle horses and irrigates a lush vegetable garden. This was Dewey Fischer's favorite retreat.

## NEW MEMBERS

The Calaveras County Historical Society welcomes the following new members:

Sandra Buzzini, of Valley Springs  
Mark & Winter Leite, of Burson.  
Rick Forman, of San Andreas  
Craig Nichols, of San Andreas  
Clayre Quick, of Murphys.  
Shoshanah Ryan, of San Andreas.  
Fredda Miller, of San Andreas.  
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Vince Alimenti, of San Francisco.  
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Kristin & John Franceschi, of Murphys,  
Shelly Davis-King, of Standard.  
Walter Coates, of Concord.  
Jalynne Tobias, of San Andreas.  
Carl Bjork, of Valley Springs.  
France Generali, of Mountain Ranch.  
Frank & Jeaniene Romero, of San Andreas.

## MUSEUM DONATIONS

The Calaveras County Historical Society wishes to thank the following persons who recently made donations to the Calaveras County Museum.

Ruth A. Lundy, of Palo Alto: A cash donation.

Michael Arkin, of San Andreas: Seven ledgers from the old Dragomanovich Store in San Andreas, covering the years of 1938 through 1943.

Mary Robinson, of Linden: Personal effects of the Margaret Evans estate.

Pauline White, of Sonora: A 19th century grand piano purportedly used to provide the musical accompaniment for "Swedish Nightingale" Jenny Lind, during her practice sessions in New York City while she was on concert tour in the Eastern States in 1850 through 1852. Jenny Lind did not tour the West.

Barbara Beaman, of San Andreas: A postcard photo of the old mining town of Jenny Lind.

Jack Geary, of Stockton: An iron mercury flask from the Starlight Mine, near Mountain Ranch. The Starlight Mine was owned and operated by the late Jack Ross, of Mountain Ranch.

Carl & Monica Heller, of Angels Camp: Four framed photographs of Melones and Carson Hill.

## THE FISCHER FAMILY CALAVERAS PIONEERS

By  
George Hoeper

Days shortened, snow continued to fall, and specter of the Donner Party tragedy nagged the minds of Martin and Katherina Fischer as their wagons inched their way across granite strewn Sonora Pass that November of 1853. The Bartleson-Bidwell Party had opened the trail in 1841, but only after being forced to abandon their wagons in the Nevada desert. Not again, until 1852, had another wagon train attempted the Sonora Pass route. That year the 75-member Clark-Skidmore group made it over the summit to Columbia, but had to leave their wagons near Fremont Lake.

The Fischers, whose descendants make up one of Calaveras County's prominent pioneer families, traveled on the heels of William Duckwall-George Trahern wagon train which in September, made the first successful wagon crossing, although it was not an easy one. The Fischers were members of the last wagon train to cross the pass in 1853 and in doing so, endured hardships that only a tough, dedicated pioneer people could have survived.

A native of Kassell, Germany, Martin Daniel Fischer as a youth apprenticed himself for seven years to become master butcher and in addition, had served a required two years as a conscript in the German Army. He also had learned from the writings of Duke Paul Wilhelm, German botanist and explorer, of opportunities for ownership of land in America and the fact the Duke planned to promote a German settlement of merchants and tradesmen in California, which at that time still was under Mexican rule.

At age 26, young Fischer with his father and at least one brother, arrived in the U.S. in 1846, shortly before outbreak of the Mexican-American War. He arrived in St. Louis, MO., to find that Duke Wilhelm's plans for a German colony in the West had been delayed. He promptly joined the U.S. Army.

During his enlistment Fischer served as a private in the 3rd Regimental Missouri Mounted Infantry, for which in later years he received an \$8 per month pension that in 1907, two years before his death, was increased to \$20. Discharged from the Army, Martin returned to St. Louis and on June 17, 1849, married Maria Katherina Schneider. A native of Wunderhausen, Germany, Katherina, 27, had come to the

U.S. several years earlier with her parents. She was the 11th of 11 children. She and her sister, Flora, were identical twins.

Marriage did not dim Martin Fischer's fascination with the Far West, but Duke Wilhelm's plans for the California trek to which Martin had subscribed, continues to meet with delay. While waiting, Fischer returned to butchering. He opened a shop on DeKolb Street -- apparently with success -- for when the expedition finally got underway in the spring of 1853, Fischer and his wife had two wagons in the train. Also, since their marriage four years earlier, Katherina had given birth to two children, George Martin, 3, and Lizzie, 18 months. And, as they started their westward journey, she was pregnant with their third child. Throughout the trip Katherina, in spite of her pregnancy, cooked, tended camp and her children and crocheted a bedspread that today is a family heirloom,

Please see **FAMILY**, pg. 16



Roseann McQuaide Fischer and her husband, Martin Daniel Fischer Jr., (seated) with friend, Dick Spence and Martin's sister, Kate Fischer, (circa 1887).

**FAMILY**, cont. from pg. 15

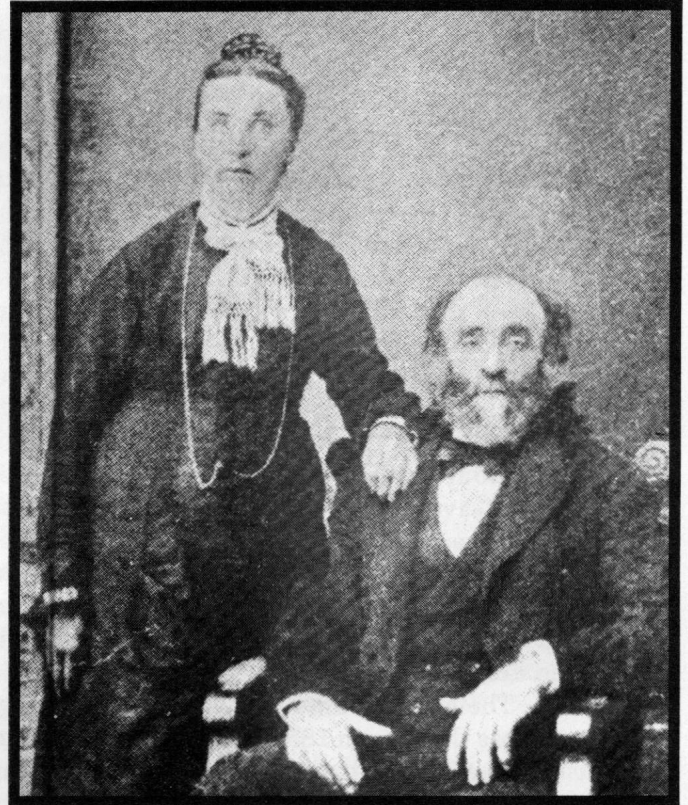
They left Weston, MO., (near St. Joseph) near the end of May, late for a start to California. However, its leader expected to make good time in the improved summer weather and, because they used mules expected to travel faster than ox-drawn wagons. In addition to the Fischers, members of the Zwinge and Phortner families who would ultimately settle in Calaveras County, were also on the train.

But, despite their best efforts the wagon train lagged and did not make good time. Livestock forage along the trail was scarce, fed off by earlier travelers. It was well into October when the train reached the Humbolt Sink. When they finally arrived at Rag Town, on the Carson River, they met a mountain man who recommended against trying the Donner or Carson Pass due to the danger of being trapped by storm.

He offered to guide them South to the Sonora Pass which he said might offer better weather conditions. Feeling they had little alternative, they agreed, turned to parallel the Eastern Wall of the Sierra and added another 100 miles and nearly two weeks to their journey. The trail -- it could hardly be termed a road -- led through the rugged Walker River Canyon, following much the same route as the Bartleson-Bidwell trip more than a decade earlier. Near the junction of the Walker and Little Walker rivers the emigrants turned due West to enter some of the most forbidding terrain in the Sierra Nevada. The Sonora route had been used by a number of wagon trains earlier that year but it still was only a primitive roadway.

Traveling even with reduced loads, for they had jettisoned everything deemed non-essential, the wagons started up the steep, tortuous track that led to the nearly 10,000-foot summit. Now it was November and to make matters worse, they had hardly started to climb when it began to snow. The snowfall worsened as they crossed the summit and turned into a blizzard. As they began their descent of the Western slope the storm pummeled them, made travel perilous, separated and stalled many of the wagons.

Gradually the storm abated. Critically short of food, the travelers halted to rest and regroup with the scattered members of the party. Under the overhang of a cliff that formed a shallow cave Martin Fischer built a bark hut to provide shelter for Katherina and the children, and a stone shelter to protect his own goods and cargo. He then began hauling goods for other members of the group whose wagons had broken



**Andrew McQuaide and his wife, Bridget McSorley McQuaide, in their latter years.**

down or stalled while coming down the mountain.

While Fischer was gone, engaged in the hauling operation, Katherina in her bark hut, somewhere near the present site of Pinecrest, went into labor. It was a difficult birth but help arrived in the form of the Indian woman who was traveling with their guide. As his mother's condition worsened, four-year-old Martin George had struggled through the snow to the guide's camp for help, and the Fischer's third child, Marika, (Mary) was brought into the world.

The half-cave where the Fischer child was born was for many years afterward known as birth rock.

Meanwhile, help for the stranded emigrants arrived from Stockton. Businessmen from that booming supply center, made aware of their plight, offered them opportunities in Stockton, where the business community had been depleted by the rush of merchants to the gold fields.

Martin Fischer unearthed his cached equipment, although a bear had gotten into it and scattered parts of his sausage grinder, and with his family, headed for Stockton. There, with a man named Waggner, they



**Dewey Fischer, as a young rancher, built miles of fence along the Calaveras River Canyon.**

quite successfully operated the Waggner-Fischer Butcher Shop on or near Stockton's Main Street. Katherina was delighted. She had a nice home with all the amenities of the day and help to care for the children, but the lure of gold and excitement of the gold country gripped her husband.

Reports of rich diggings on Calaveras County's Jesus-Maria Creek near its junction with the North Fork of the Calaveras River were reaching Stockton with increasing regularity. News of the discoveries fascinated Fischer and he longed for the gold country, if not actually to mine, to at least be there and cash in on the easy money that flowed from the mines. In addition, Katherina suffered from asthma and he felt the valley dampness and tule fog acerbated her condition. She and Martin hoped the dry foothill climate would be better for her.

The Fischers remained in Stockton little more than a year. In late 1854 or early 1855 Martin Fischer sold his interest in the Stockton butcher shop to Waggner and moved his family to the mining camp of Jesus Maria. Members of the family quoted Katherina as stating in later years: "he wanted to find wagon loads of gold and I found wagon loads of work."

Although they settled in the roistering mining camp on Jesus Maria Creek, Martin Fischer did not take up mining. Instead, with a man named Gebhardt, he

prudently opened a butcher business. He also started a freighting operation, hauling meat to various other mining camps then made a profit by hauling other freight on his way out. His daughter, Katherina, (later Anglicized to Catherine) was born in Jesus Maria in 1857 and two years later Martin Daniel Jr., their seventh and last child, was born in 1859.

Martin Fischer Sr. had a sharp temper and once, in a fit of anger after he had overly imbibed, chopped the legs off a kitchen table with a sabre he had brought home from the Army. But, he was a highly industrious man. In addition to his butcher business he continued to expand his freighting operation and hauled bricks and stone used in construction of several buildings in San Andreas, including the county courthouse.

Meanwhile, as the Fischer children were growing up, depression brought on by decline in gold mining hit the Mother Lode. Placer mining was giving out and the deep quartz mines had not yet come into their own. Martin Fischer found his business operations shrinking and then to make matters worse, one of his debtors fled the county owing him \$11,000. A second debtor whose business failed, deeded Fischer property overlooking the North Fork of the Calaveras River that became known as Bedrock Ranch. It was that

Please see **FAMILY**, pg. 18



**Cattleman John Fischer, still active at age 97, lives in Mokelumne Hill.**

**FAMILY**, cont. from pg. 17

transaction the launched the Fischer family into the livestock business.

Although times were not easy, all the Fischer youngsters attended the Fischer District School and continued their studies through the Ninth Grade.

Gradually, the butchering and livestock operation expanded. Martin Fischer, now helped by his family, every fall, butchered and processed as many as 100 hogs each week. The swine were purchased in the valley and herded to the Fischer Ranch. They improved the cattle herd by bringing in blooded stock, including bulls driven from Western Nevada, across the Sierra to their own ranch.

Martin George Fischer, Martin Daniel Sr.'s and Katherina's eldest son, had married Amelia Radcliffe, of San Andreas, and one of their children was Hazel Fischer, who taught in Avery most of her life, and for whom Hazel Fischer Elementary School in White Pines, is named.

Elizabeth Fischer (Lizzie) married into the Reinking family and their home was located near where La Contenta Clubhouse now stands, beside Highway 26, South of Valley Springs. Marika (Mary) married John Meyer of Jenny Lind. They had eleven children of their own, plus two of Meyer's from a previous marriage. Frank Meyer Athletic Field at Calaveras High School, is named for one of their sons who became a prominent local banker.

Catherine Fischer married Henry Raab and their son, Leland, an engineer, was the designer of the massive cables the suspend the Golden Gate Bridge.

Martin Daniel Jr., youngest of the family, married Roseann McQuaide, whose father was Andrew McQuaide and mother was Bridget McSorley McQuaide. Andrew McQuaide came to America from Ireland's County Cork in the 1840's, during that country's potato famine, found work in a shoe factory in Lowell, Mass., and met and married Bridget McSorely there a short time later.

Like most newcomers to America during that period, the McQuaides had heard of California, and most of all, they wanted land. Also, the McQuaides were pacifists and in 1860, as civil war threatened, Andrew McQuaide and his brothers headed West, via the Isthmus of Panama. Short of money, Andrew left his wife and three children in Lowell. She remained there until 1863, when with the children and her brother, Hugh McSorely, they came by clipper ship "round the Horn." In order to help finance the trip Bridget sold her wedding ring. Later, from gold mined on their ranch, Andrew presented his wife a new one.

Upon reaching California in 1861, McQuaide settled in the Toyon-Central Hill area, west of San



**Dewey Fischer hauling ore for the Rindge Mine during the early 1920's.**

Andreas, known as The Crossing. In 1871 he moved his family to a North Fork of the Calaveras River homestead, abandoned by brothers Ike and Jim Jackson. There, Andrew began developing what became known as the River Ranch. He allowed a company of Chinese to mine the river there on shares and then the Jackson brothers, even though they had abandoned the land, returned to lay claim to it. A potentially deadly situation arose which included the threat of gunplay, but the Chinese armed themselves, came to McQuaide's assistance, and the Jackson brothers hurriedly fled.

Bridget and Andrew raised six children; Michael Edward, 1856; Hugh Alexander, 1858, and Roseann,

1860, who were born in the East. Andrew and Arthur were born at The Crossing in 1864 and 1865, and Jack was born in 1871, the day his parents moved to their cabin on the River Ranch.

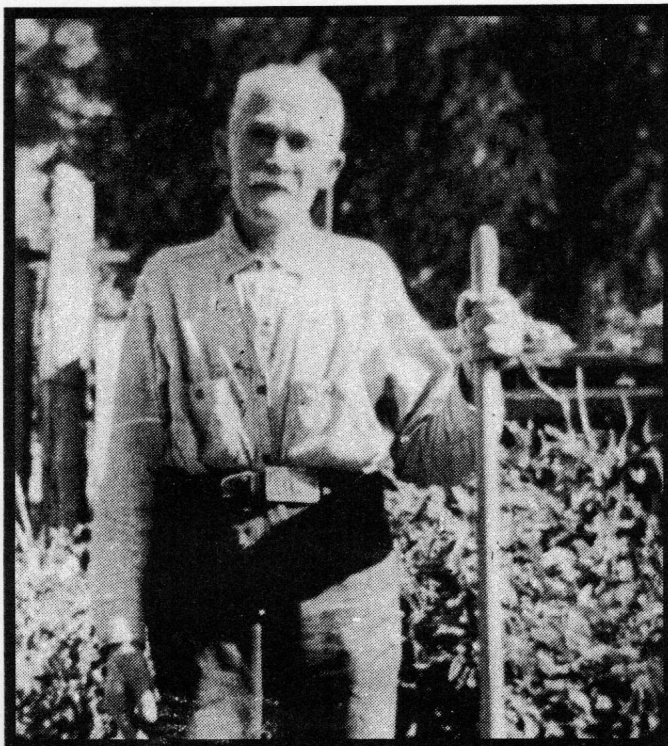
The Fischers and McQuaides were becoming increasingly involved in the cattle business and in 1877, with the foothills gripped in a devastating drought, Andrew McQuaide and his sons drove their cattle to the mountains where there was adequate water and forage. They summered the herd in the Forest Creek drainage and today, the Fischer family still owns land there. They also range cattle there under a U.S. Forest Service grazing permit.

Martin Daniel Fischer Jr. married Roseann McQuaide in 1888. Martin and his bride lived on the Bedrock Ranch, River Ranch, then on their own Nobb Hill Ranch. He worked with his father butchering, but predominantly, operated their freighting business.

Much of Martin's freighting involved hauling mill concentrates from the Sheep Ranch Mine to Milton where it could be shipped by rail to the smelter. For a time he and Roseann lived in Sheep Ranch and their sons, John, born in 1897, Dewey, born in 1898 and Fred, born in 1901, were brought into the world in Sheep Ranch.

In 1902 Martin and Roseann were living on their Nobb Hill Ranch, near the other family ranches, but Roseann cared little for ranch life. She had gone to school in Mokelumne Hill, boarded at the O'Neil home, and much preferred town life. In 1904, Martin purchased the LeVette house in Happy Valley, on the eastern edge of Mokelumne Hill and moved his family there. The youngsters included Martin James Fischer, Aloysius, Andrew, Katherine, John, Dewey and Fred. As the children grew they worked in the family's expanding cattle and freight business and help their father furnish timber for the mines. Dewey, age 6, when the family moved to Happy Valley, lived all the remaining years of his life there. Martin Daniel Fischer Sr., the family patriarch, died in 1909. His wife, Katherine, had died in 1877.

Dewey Fischer took over the McQuaide cattle brand in 1917 and operated out of Happy Valley as his home ranch. John Fischer and his wife, Mable, developed their own ranch near Double Springs and Fred, in addition to a career with Pacific Gas and Electric Company, had the New York Ranch, near Jackson. Dewey married his wife, Bertha, in 1935, and the Fischer brothers continued to range cattle each summer



**"Uncle" Jack McQuaide, the family gardener who never visited a doctor until age 96.**

in the Forest Creek Watershed.

The McQuaides remained at their River Ranch and none of the McQuaide sons ever married. Andrew McQuaide, awaiting his wedding date, died as the result of a fall from a tree he was trimming. Three times, the McQuaides lost their home on the river to fire. The third time it burned Jack McQuaide, the brother who had remained there, moved to Happy Valley with the Fischers. He helped on the ranch, became the family gardener and cultivated a huge vegetable garden each summer at the family's Forest Creek Ranch they had acquired in 1876.

At age 96, Jack McQuaide fractured a small bone in his foot and the family insisted he seek medical treatment. The doctor could find no medical record for him. It was the first time in 96 years he had ever visited a hospital. "Uncle" Jack died in 1968 at the age of 98.

All of Martin Daniel Fischer Jr.'s and Roseann McQuaide Fischer's children married. Martin James Fischer's children included Martin Edward and John R. Fischer and Rosemarie; Aloysius' family includes Leland, Ilamae, Alfred, Wes and Marilyn; Andrew's

Please see **FAMILY**, pg. 20

## E CLAMPUS VITUS STILL GOING STRONG

*Much of the text of this article was graciously provided by historian Earl Schmidt, member of Matuca Chapter, of Murphys, and Eleventh Sublime Noble Grand Humbug of the E Clampus Vitus Lodge.*

Contrary to popular belief California's early gold rush days were not filled with excitement and glamour. Gold mining was hard, back breaking labor, cold and miserable in winter, sweltering hot and exhausting in summer. Camp life was dreary and primitive. The glittering dance halls and saloons with the sexy young women of Hollywood "B" movies were non-existent. A day's work stretched from dawn til dark and the young men who populated the ragged tent cities that made up the early gold camps found themselves homesick, leading dull and lonesome lives.

Certainly, the lives of many of those lonely young men were enlivened by the arrival in 1849, of Joseph Zumwalt, of Kentucky, bearing the ritual of the ancient and honorable order of E Clampus Vitus. There are those who claim the Clampers' organization dates back to 450 B.C., but most believe it saw its beginning

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**FAMILY**, cont. from pg. 19

children are Patricia, Andrew, (Jackie); John's son was Thomas Fischer; Dewey and Bertha's include Clifford, William, Kathleen, Rita, Richard and Mike. Fred Fischer's children include Fritz, Rose and Patricia.

Dewey Fischer, who passed away October 10, 1993, at age 94, as a young man worked in the mines, then became involved in cattle ranching. He often told members of his family the happiest days of his life were those summers spent at the Forest Creek cabin on the summer cattle range. His brothers John and Fred, with lifetimes of cattle ranching behind them, still are living.

Fischer sons and grandsons still are actively involved in the cattle industry, many of them on the same ranches their fathers and grandfathers operated. Their cattle still range the Forest Creek watershed each summer as they have for nearly 120 years.

*Much of the information and biography of the Fischer and McQuaide Families contained in this article was provided by Beverly Fischer, wife of Michael Fischer, who is writing a detailed family history.*



**Everything stops when the E Clampus Vitus turns out with banners and band to lead a parade, particularly in the golf rush town of Murphys, where the Lodge annually conducts one of its major conclaves.**

in the middle Atlantic states and in Kentucky and West Virginia. Still others say it was first organized in the gold fields by fun loving individuals, to spoof members of the more sedate bodies such as the Masons, Odd Fellows and Knights of Columbus.

There certainly is reason to believe Zumwalt was a Clamper before departing for the West. He mined with success on the Yuba River, then opened Heness Pass in 1850-51, traveling across the Sierra to Truckee Meadows for supplies abandoned by late traveling wagon parties and apparently moved about the gold country considerably during that period. As he did, under the creed: "Per Cartate Viduaribus y Orphanibusque, Sed Prime Viduaribus," (For protection of Widows and Orphans, but especially the Widows) Zumwalt organized the West's first chapters of E Clampus Vitus. Their motto today remains: "Credo Quia Absurdum," (I believe because it is absurd.)

Actual location of the first chapter of E Clampus Vitus in California still is in dispute. Both Downieville and Tuleburg (Stockton) lay claim to the honor. However, it is recorded fact that a chapter was organized during a meeting in the Mokelumne Hill Jail in 1851. Laughingly, today's Clampers ask themselves, "was it organized when the jail was filled or empty?"

Originally, throughout the mining towns of the Mother Lode the E Clampus Vitus was created as a fun organization. Its chapters spread rapidly. Each initiate into the lodge was required, accompanied by





The Murphy brothers, John and Daniel, who in 1848 established Murphys Camp that later grew into the Town of Murphys, were commemorated in 1977 by the Matuca Chapter of E Clampus Vitus, who erected this monument on Murphys Main Street, at the Angels Camp Bridge.

fellow members, to negotiate the bibulous journey through "Slippery Gulch".

Early on, the Mother Lode mining camps became home to numerous serious fraternal orders, including the Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Templar and others. Each regularly sponsored social and benevolent functions and paraded in full regalia with flags and banners flying. Taking full opportunity to enjoy the frivolity, the Clampers often joined in and brought up the rear. They carried a hoop skirt on a pole with an ornate sign that declared "THIS IS THE BANNER UNDER WHICH WE FIGHT." Their mascot was a gaudily bedecked jackass or goat which paraded with them as they proclaimed to the world at large, "We Meet the Need!"

But despite its irreverent approach to life and reputation for fun and hoaxes, the E Clampus Vitus had its serious side. The lodge arose to community emergencies, supported and helped those in need, including widows and orphans.

Virtually every mining camp ultimately heard the call of the "Hewgag" as Noble Grand Humbugs

summoned lodge brethren to meetings -- before or after the full moon -- in a growing number of chapters. Chapters of E Clampus Vitus sprang up in Nevada, Colorado, Montana and -- half a century later -- in the Yukon. There were chapters in Sacramento valley communities, and in 1915, the Marysville Chapter was granted corporate status by the State of California to protect the E Clampus Vitus name. The Clampers also led the way in promotion of Highway 49 and its adoption as a state route that linked together the gold producing counties of the Mother Lode. But, the day of the big placer mines was gone. The once roaring mining camps of the former century had become ghost towns, and as the camps faded, so faded the rituals and activities of the Clampers' Lodge.

Throughout most of the first three decades of this century the E Clampus Vitus continued to decline. One-by-one, individual chapters slipped into oblivion as their elderly members retired or passed away.

Then, during the latter years of the 1920's, as prominent California lawyer Carl I. Wheat researched material for a California History book, he took note of the fact that early newspapers carried many references to activities of the E Clampus Vitus. To a Sacramento

Please see **CLAMPERS**, pg. 22



Clamper leaders Horace Albright, second director of the National Park Service and Earl Schmidt when Schmidt served as the eleventh sublime Noble Grand Humbug of the E Clampus Vitus.

**CLAMPERS**, cont. from pg. 21

Bee reporter he remarked that it was disappointing to see such a colorful gold rush organization disappear and such an interesting segment of gold county history become forgotten. The reporter wrote a feature story concerning the threatened demise of the Clampers Lodge and it was reprinted in various north state weeklies. Adam Lee Moore, then in his 90's, read the story in Sierra City, contacted the Sacramento newspaper and then Carl Wheat. Moore was the last living Noble Grand Humbug of Baalam Chapter, of Sierra City. He met with Wheat and brought with him the archives, ritual and regalia of his chapter, which he had preserved.

At the conclave with Wheat and Moore were like-minded history buffs Leon Whitsell, chairman of the state railroad commission and George Ezra Dane, a San Francisco attorney who would later author the history of Columbia, published under the title, "Ghost Town", in 1940. The discussion led to a second meeting with Moore in 1930. They later made a weekend tour of Highway 49, and, while climbing Parrott's Ferry Grade from the Stanislaus River, it was suggested, "why don't we revive E Clampus Vitus?"

Proposed revival of the E Clampus Vitus Lodge was discussed with others at the Pioneer's and California Historical Society and Bohemian Club. In 1931, invited by Wheat, two dozen gathered for dinner to meet Adam Lee Moore. The end result was revival of E Clampus Vitus in 1932 with organization of Yerba Buena Chapter No. 1, Redivivus, at San Francisco. The membership was heavily salted with serious historians who also enjoyed a bit of fun and fellowship with their history. Membership of the new chapter included Professor Herbert E. Bolton, and President Robert Burns of University of the Pacific; Dr. Charles Camp and author Neill C. Wilson.

Southern California came into the picture with the formation of a chapter, and chapters of E Clampus Vitus were revived in Mariposa, Placerville (Hangtown), Sonora, Murphys and throughout the Mother Lode. State legislators were initiated into the ancient and honorable order, led by the late Sen. Swift Berry, of El Dorado County. The organization adopted a uniform comprised of red shirts, black hats and black pants with suspenders. Roisterous Clampers paraded on Treasure Island during San Francisco's 1939 World Fair.

But, as the rejuvenated lodge grew, gaining new



**Adam Lee Moore, of Sierra City, who preserved the Clampers Ritual and at age 93, was instrumental in rejuvenation of the Lodge.**

membership and chapters, it also began assuming a new responsibility. From simply a fun-seeking group of revelers, stepped forth leaders who also saw their lodge, with its roots on the gold rush era, as a legitimate history gathering and preservation organization. By 1949, on the brink of California's Centennial Year, a Clampers' encampment in Death Valley spread word and interest in the order. The lodge's corporation papers were transferred to a grand council of representatives from various chapters. The council now meets annually in the town of Murphys to grant charters, set chapter boundaries and respond to general business matters. The council also supports archives maintained at the University of the Pacific, the Harrison Center at the University of California at Davis and at Huntington Library.

## A LITTLE BIT OF FRANCE ON THE CALAVERAS RIVER

By  
Judith Marvin

Only a few stone and adobe buildings mark the site of the Esperanza Ranch and Store, settled by Frenchmen during the early 1850s on the north branch of the Calaveras River. The first written record of the store appeared in 1854 when it was assessed for \$2000 in personal property, probably merchandise, in a tent store at the same location. At that time it belonged to Augustine Vian & Co. Vian, a native of France, was engaged in mining enterprises near Whiskey Slide, as well as with the store and ranch.

By 1856 Eutrop Hermand, a Belgian, had become a partner in the firm of Vian, Hermand & Co.; that year the business boasted \$600 worth of improvements. By 1857 the property was assessed for \$2000 worth of improvements; undoubtedly the ranch and stone store which were noted in 1859. Victor Portron, also a native of France, had become a partner by 1860, the year that the census taker noted Hermand, Vian, Portron, and seven laborers, carpenters, and miners (all natives of France) living on the property.

In 1867 Vian sold his one-half interest to Portron; the total consisting of 160 acres, a house, barn, fences, orchard and vineyard, maintained only by Portron and a gardener. By 1876 Portron's assessment was for a dwelling, stable, fence, horses, furniture, wines and the ubiquitous dog. He had switched from mer-

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During recent years much E Clampus Vitus activity has centered around the research and preservation of gold rush history. And, as a result of that undertaking, the lodge today can take credit for the setting up of more than 2,000 monuments and plaques recognizing historic gold country sites or memorializing various happenings or events. In addition, the Clampers have aided in the establishment of many official state landmark signs in California and Nevada.

Presently, there are 39 Clamper chapters: 34 in California, three in Nevada, one each in Arizona and Utah, and the lodge still is growing.

The innermost secret of the order is the meaning of its name, E Clampus Vitus. Not onto even the most Sublime Noble Grand Humbug throughout the long and illustrious history of that organization, has it every been revealed.



**This stone and adobe structure was once the center of a thriving French enterprise on the North Fork of the Calaveras River.**

chandising to farming and was growing cherries, figs and walnuts, as well as producing wines. Irrigation was provided by a water-right of 400 miners' inches from the Calaveras River. In addition to his own wines, Portron imported Champagne from France for the enjoyment of his brethren. By 1880 his only companion was a French miner who boarded with him, a testament to the decline of placer mining along the river.

Born in France on March 3, 1819, Victor Portron immigrated to America in the early 1850s with the intention of mining for gold. As often occurred, however, he found a more prosperous life in merchandising and farming. From a booming supply camp in the 1850s to a successful orchard and vineyard, Portron managed his property well. His obituary, written after his death from consumption on February 21, 1896, mentioned that his extensive orchard and vineyard was a favorite site of picnics as people came from miles around to visit the garden spot. Portron was buried on his beloved property, with a large contingent of friends and acquaintances in attendance.

Knowing that death was near, in 1894 Portron deeded his property to fellow Frenchman Aime Laidet and J. Edmond Lemerchie for \$400 with all livestock, furniture, and everything connected with it on the condition that it was to remain in his possession during his lifetime. Laidet cared for Portron until his death two years later, and then moved to Esperanza with his wife Lydia and continued to operate the farm until his death in 1929. With no heirs to succeed her, Lydia

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## "SNIPERS" LIVED AN INDEPENDENT LIFE

By the Editor

Tumbled down fireplaces or moss covered foundations mark where their camps were located or where their cabins stood. They were the last of the individual gold miners who employed pick, shovel, gold pan, rocker or sluice box to eke out a living along the streams and rivers of the Mother Lode. They were gold prospectors but they were also known by other names. Most townspeople simply called them miners or prospectors, but others in a more derogatory vein called them river rats. These solitary men referred to their form of mining as "sniping" and to themselves as "snipers". Over the years they had become adept at locating gold and developed skills that allowed them to find and recover even minute quantities of the finest "flour gold".

Few ever made much money. Theirs was more often a hand-to-mouth existence, but among them lived a fierce independence. They had never heard of the words dole or welfare, and if they had, they would have been affronted. Their kind inhabited and mined remote foothill areas for a hundred years or more. Some, in the early days, had come as young gold rush miners and chose to stay on after the cream had been



**Sniper's cabins may not have been fancy but they kept out the rain. This gold prospector's wife, pictured in foreground, even provided curtains.**

skimmed off -- after others had found the easily mined placer gold -- and moved on. They had outlasted the companies of busy Chinese miners who moved in on the heels of the Caucasians, to rework abandoned diggings and sometimes recover as much or more than the original gold seekers.

They stayed and mined, those lone prospectors, made enough to live on and were content. Periodic trips to town provided them with supplies and news of

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sold the property in 1929 and so it passed from French ownership for the first time in its eighty-year history.

Constructed in the mid-1850s to serve the French and Chinese miners who were working the stream placers along the upper Calaveras River, the Esperanza store and ranch were undoubtedly the center of the commercial and social life of the area. There is scarcely an inch of the riverbed that was not turned, ditched, flumed, and worked with rockers, longtoms, and sluices in the 1850s and early 1860s. All along the river are found the stone walls of miners, as well as cabin foundations, remains of stone chimneys, and a stone bake-oven. But, except for the Esperanza operation, there are no signs of agricultural or commercial enterprises. When the placer mining boom ended, so did the need for a store to supply the miners with provisions. Esperanza became simply a garden spot on the river, tended to by a lone Frenchman and a few boarders from time to time.

From what remains at Esperanza, it is obvious

that Vian, Hermand, Portron, and other Frenchmen at the site were excellent craftsmen. A 30-foot deep well, perfectly round and constructed of stone, provided water for their operations. The three-room, stuccoed adobe house with stone floor has a large fireplace for indoor cooking in the European manner. Outside the rear door is another long adobe building nestled against the bank. Beside it is a stone baking oven, easily accessible to the kitchen door. Another adobe house was probably a bunkhouse, and is covered with stucco and decorated with blue polychrome. Situated along the entrance road is a stone stable, but by far the largest building was the stone store, now with only its walls remaining. Even roofless and exposed to the weather, the building stands in its massiveness as a testament to the building talents of a small group of Frenchmen far from their native land.

*Judith Marvin heads Foothill Resources Associates, of Murphys. She is a recognized authority on Northern California Native American Culture.*

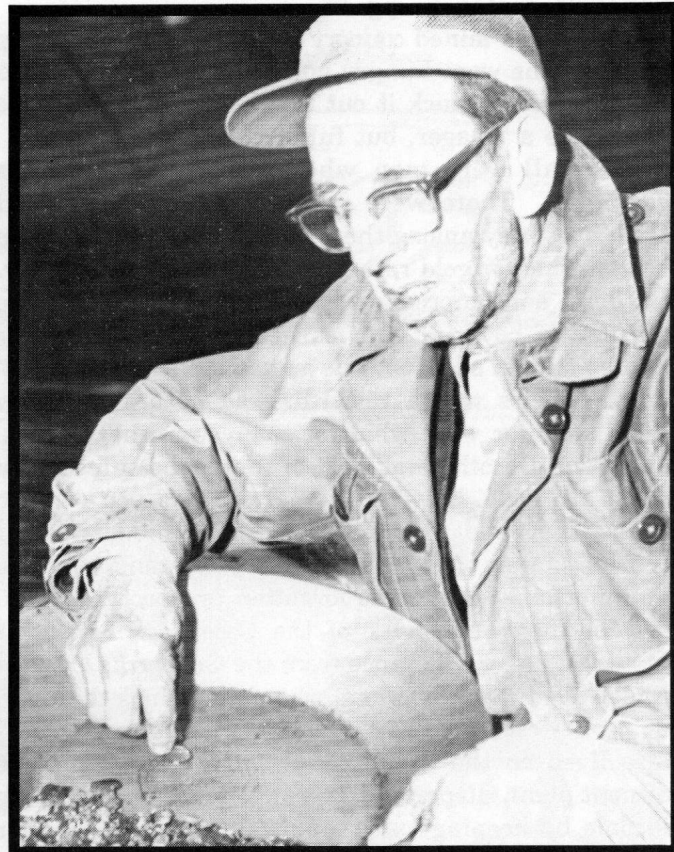
the community and the world. Oddly, many were avid readers who coveted a newspaper or magazine and more likely than not, their first question to a passerby concerned what the news was from the outside world.

As the "old timers," those who had arrived in gold rush days, passed on, others took their places, living much the same life. In summer they cultivated a garden and as water levels dropped along the rivers they creviced and cubbyholed for gold in the freshly exposed bedrock. During winter, when there was sufficient storm run-off, they ground sluiced gravel deposits overlooked or forgotten by the original miners.

A new century arrived, then World War I. Gradually, the population of snipers declined as the older men died and others moved away. The late 1920's saw few permanent prospectors living along the rivers of the Mother Lode. Then, in 1929, the Great Depression changed the way of life across America.

Men who one day had been secure with well paying jobs found themselves next day standing in job lines. There were those who gave up, turned to bread lines and charity, but there were those who gritted their teeth and turned to the hills. Once again, the Calaveras, Mokelumne, Cosumnes, forks of the American, Yuba and Feather rivers heard the rattle of pick and gold pan on bedrock. Tent houses sprouted up along every gold bearing stream. Vacant snipers' cabins once again had occupants looking to mining for a livelihood.

It was not an easy life, many had arrived in this  
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**Master gold prospector Jesse Coffey and his wife, earned a living mining gold during the depression years, but Jesse continued long after retiring from Calaveras Cement, because he loved mining.**



**Sniping along rivers in the Mother Lode was cold, hard work in winter, hot and miserable in summer, and the return was small, but during the depression years many chose mining over charity.**

**SNIPER, cont. from pg. 25**

already much mined country with virtually no mining skills. Some went hungry and some went back to the city, but many stuck it out and learned how to mine and made a meager, but fulfilling living from it.

Not all were men who came to those 1930's goldfields. There were married couples, Jesse and Dorothy Coffey among them, who without jobs left the city to mine for gold rather than depend upon charity.

Jesse and Dorothy were luckier than most, for Jesse during his boyhood had learned the skills of placer mining and, in addition, was an accomplished outdoorsman. Theirs was a rewarding adventure that saw them weather well, what for many were hard years. Jesse and Dorothy and most of those who sniped with them are gone, but walk the rivers and you can see where they and their pre-decessors mined and find the foundations, or perhaps the still standing stone and mortar wall of some forgotten prospector's cabin.

On the South Fork of the Calaveras River, for instance, a short distance from the Calaveras Cement Plant, lived Tom Shedman, who mined along the river, doing better than most. A man known as "Happy", also lived on the South Fork, downstream from the cement plant. Reportedly he supplemented his sniping income by keeping rattlesnakes which he milked for venom that he sold. There is no record of his ever having been bitten, but his friends looked upon his profession as a hard way of making a living.

Charlie Preston also lived on the Calaveras River and during his latter years, leased his mining claim to a small company. Once, when he was away the men to whom he had leased the claim fired up a tractor and bulldozed boulders, brush and an old outhouse into the river. Preston returned and was aghast. Several years' savings of raw gold had been cached in the outhouse. Only a few ounces of gold was recovered.

George Mather, son of a gold rush pioneer, had been a successful miner all his life. He raised a family and made a good living mining the claim his family had worked before him. Mather told of a young man from the city who had turned to gold mining, and after learning the trade, was doing rather well. He was camped on the site of an old gold rush miner's cabin, using remains of the old fireplace for his outdoor kitchen. One morning, said Mather, as the young sniper cooked breakfast, he idly overturned a loose slab of rock in the old fireplace hearth. Beneath it lay a rusted can containing \$600 in raw gold -- a small

fortune in those hungry, depression era days. "Spoiled him," said Mather, disgustedly. "Spoiled him as a sniper. From then on, all he did was wander up and down the river hunting for old stone cabin foundations or old fireplaces to tear apart."

Not all the snipers lived in remote cabins. Jesse and Dorothy Coffey, during the years after the depression while he was employed by Calaveras



**Time and the elements have turned to rubble this mud and stone fireplace that once warmed a gold prospector's cabin. Pine trees grow from the cabin's hard-packed earthen floor.**

Cement, lived in a modern home in San Andreas. But, it was gold they had mined in Mariposa, Sierra and later in Calaveras County that helped pay off the mortgage on their home. Long after he retired from the cement plant, Jesse, a master prospector, continued to snipe the rivers and creeks at every opportunity.

On rainy winter afternoons Jesse would be seen driving through town with a battered wheel barrow in his old, green Chevy truck and everyone knew he had been out sniping again.

Referring to their years of prospecting on the Yuba River and along Mariposa County's Aqua Fria Creek, a young woman visiting Dorothy one afternoon in her new home in San Andreas, asked "wasn't it terribly difficult living out in the wilds like that? I just don't see how you could stand it."

Dorothy smiled. With a far away look in her eyes, she replied, "those were the best years of our lives."