

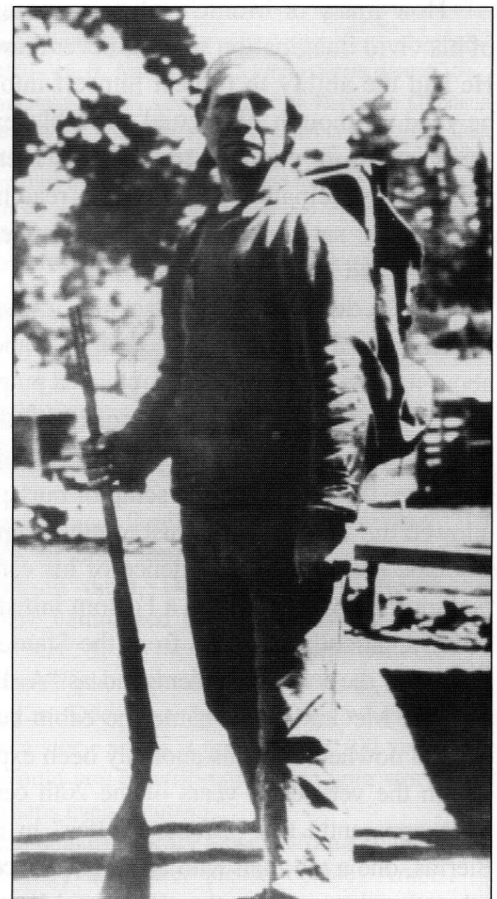
HISTORICAL NOTE ON MONTE WOLFE'S LIFE

by James T. Linford, © 2002

Monte Wolfe's wilderness cabin is deep in the Mokelumne River Canyon, about 10 miles north of Bear Valley. For many years the Monte Wolfe Society, a California non-profit, has been working to preserve the cabin through both maintenance work parties and efforts to regularize the cabin's legal status. The Monte Wolfe Society has been working to place the cabin on the National Register of Historic Places and to encourage the Forest Service to agree to the preservation of this unique historic resource, the pristine wilderness dwelling of the last mountain man of the central Sierras.

Monte Wolfe's significance as the last mountain man of the central Sierras adds much to the historic value of the Monte Wolfe Wilderness Cabin. However, much of the lore about his life is at best unsubstantiated.

For example, a traditional narrative of Monte Wolfe's parentage is often presented as fact, even though it is solely based on a report of what Monte Wolfe said to others. The narrative is that his father, also named "Ed McGrath" was an Indian agent in the northern Midwest and his mother of mixed Euro-American and Native American parentage. However, a search of the Federal Civil records for the last quarter of the nineteenth century shows no federal employee named "Ed" or "Edward" or "Edmund" McGrath.¹ U.S. Census records² from 1870 do mention an "Edmund McGrath" in LeSueur County, Minnesota, but other U.S. Census records show several McGraths in Nevada, especially in the Carson Valley (Douglas County), where



Monte Wolf, circa 1939, taken at Tamarack.

Monte Wolfe might also have been born. By the 1930s Monte Wolfe's accent, whether acquired or original, was a pure western mountain twang.

There are similar problems with accounts of Monte Wolfe's military record. A staple of the Monte Wolfe legend is that he served with General Pershing during the 1916 mission against Pancho Villa, then followed General Pershing to Europe. Monte Wolfe did have a campaign hat and a doughboy jacket (perhaps cut for a man a bit stouter than he was³), but 80% of the military records from this period were destroyed by fire in 1973, and the Military Personnel Records Center in St. Louis has written that they have no record of his having served.⁴ Furthermore, a search of draft board records⁵ from the World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration of 1917-1918 reveal that no Ed or Edward or Edmund McGrath⁶ was registered. Those draft records do contain cards for men on active service with the armed forces.

Although the unique source for these accounts of his military record is Monte's own story as reported in V.G Linford's book,⁷ these accounts sometimes take Monte's story more seriously than the book's author:

How many of Monte's tall tales were a product of his vivid imagination we will never know for sure. He had the ability to project himself into any story he read. Although his actual provable experiences were exciting enough to us, his memories of personal participation laced by his reading brought him more satisfaction, more inner excitement perhaps than his real life.⁸

Monte did read pulp magazines, consistent with his claim to a fourth grade education,⁹ and his story about tracking Pancho Villa contains a pulp magazine detail: The trail of the desperadoes had almost been lost because the horse's hooves had been covered to minimize their tracks, but a scrap of burlap on a rock allowed the story's protagonist to pick it up again.¹⁰

One piece of hard evidence of his early life is a picture of Monte Wolfe as a Folsom inmate in 1909-1911, apparently obtained from the State Archives.¹¹ However, the inmate is identified as "A. E. Wright," not "Ed McGrath," the name the cabin-builder went by, and nowhere has this anomaly been explored.

In the very early years of the 20th century there were apparently two "Monte Wolfes" in the Central Sierras, one a tall man with an English accent and the other the short man with a Western Mountain twang

who built the Monte Wolfe Cabin. The most recent account of the two Monte Wolfes was an oral history interview with 80-year-old Robert Jackson of Markleeville in the summer of 2001. Other indications include a recollection of a stock drive in 1908 by Ira C. Shank, when he encountered a Monte Wolfe at Rail Road Flat, 12 miles northeast of San Andreas in Calaveras County. The stockmen called him "That Crazy Englishman"¹² and Mr. Shank described him as follows: "... about 30 years old, ...definitely English. His manners were faultless and he spoke with a clipped English accent. He could talk fluently and intelligently on any subject."¹³ Mr. Shank's certainty about this Monte Wolfe's ethnicity strongly implies that he was not the man who built the Monte Wolfe Cabin, a man who had visible Native American ancestry.

A two-Monte-Wolfe hypothesis raises many questions. For example, was the English one named Archie E. Wright? Might the cabin-builder have erroneously been convicted of the other's second degree burglary, the conviction that resulted in the Folsom Prison term for the cabin-builder? A formal request to the Criminal Archives of the Stanislaus County Superior Court for any record of the 1909 trial has turned up nothing, not even any indication that the defendant was represented at trial.

The Monte that built the cabin was also arrested after 1909. In 1961, retired Calaveras County Superior Court Judge J. A. Smith¹⁴ was President of the Calaveras County Historical Society and recalled having presided at Monte Wolfe's trial across the county line in Tuolumne County:

He was accused of carrying a pistol after a conviction of a felony. [¶] At that time he had been arrested at Groveland and had a pistol on his person, not concealed. The facts of the case developed that while a young man he had been prosecuted in Stanislaus County and sent to the State penitentiary. He felt that he had been too severely dealt with and became angry at society and lived a life of a hermit. At the trial he was defended by Dave Bush who is now a Judge of the Superior Court in Stanislaus County. [¶] McGrath [*sic*] admitted having the pistol but said he did not know it was a crime. The jury acquitted him and I think everyone concerned with the case

was happy. [¶] When men were required to register for World War I, Ed McGrath [*sic*] registered in Alpine County.¹⁵

There may be a question whether this trial was for the charges that led to his arrest on September 12, 1927, when the Tuolumne County Sheriff arrested “Archie E. Wright,” “Ed McGrath,” or “Monty Wolf” at Lake Alpine for cabin burglary, presumably in Tuolumne County.¹⁶ However, Judge Smith’s account refers to a different charge and an arrest in a different place: Highmountain Lake Alpine on Highway 4 in Alpine County is quite a distance from low-mountain Groveland on Highway 120 in Tuolumne County. Unfortunately the criminal records at the Tuolumne County Superior Court only go back to 1935. It may be that a condition for Monte’s release on the charge tried in Judge Smith’s court was that Monte never return to Tuolumne County. This condition might arguably be inferred from Judge Smith’s account, especially given the erroneous spelling of Ed McGrath’s name and the inaccuracy of his representation that Monte had registered for the draft in Alpine County. It is certainly conceivable that Judge Smith’s historical discourse addressed the overarching issues of the trial rather than particular details. It may be that an earlier court deal implied dropping the Tuolumne County charges, perhaps for a burglary that had taken place several years before, the charges that led to Monte’s arrest at Lake Alpine.

Whatever reading one might give to Judge Smith’s article, the late 1920s do seem to be the period when the fragmentary accounts of Monte’s earlier life cease to associate him with the low mountains of Calaveras and, especially, Tuolumne Counties,¹⁷ and place him instead in the high mountains of Alpine County. There were apparently hard feelings toward him by the Tuolumne County Sheriff,¹⁸ feelings not made any softer by Monte’s having, according to Judge Smith,¹⁹ pulled a gun on the sheriff and his deputy to avoid an earlier arrest. Law enforcement in Calaveras and Tuolumne Counties had him down as a petty thief, and understandably saw their duty as protecting others from him.²⁰ In contrast, Monte saw the Alpine County sheriff as his “friend.”²¹

There are sharply contrasting views of Monte’s honesty: Many newspaper and other accounts present him as a pilferer while the accounts of V.G Linford and J.A. Linford insist on his honesty and honorableness.

The latter actually knew Monte well as a personal friend, and their account should be given more weight than opinions based on reputation. However, the favorable accounts date from 1933 and after, when Monte was probably in his forties and fifties. It is certainly

MONTE WOLF IS CAPTURED AT LAKE ALPINE

Monte Wolf, the “Lone Wolf” of the Sierra has been captured at last. For years he has preyed upon vacant cabins and summer homes, stealing provisions and other valuable articles.

Sheriff J. Dambacher of Tuolumne county discovered “Monte Wolf” alias Archie E. Right, alias Ed McGrath, working for B.R. Gianelli at Lake Alpine, and through the co-operation of Gianelli the sheriff was able to surprise his man and capture him last Monday, September 12. Wolf was arrested on a warrant issued in 1926, sworn to by C. Alexander, charging him with robbing his cabin.

He did his raiding on summer homes during the late fall and winter months when they were vacated for the winter and no one was able to catch him at the time of his raids.

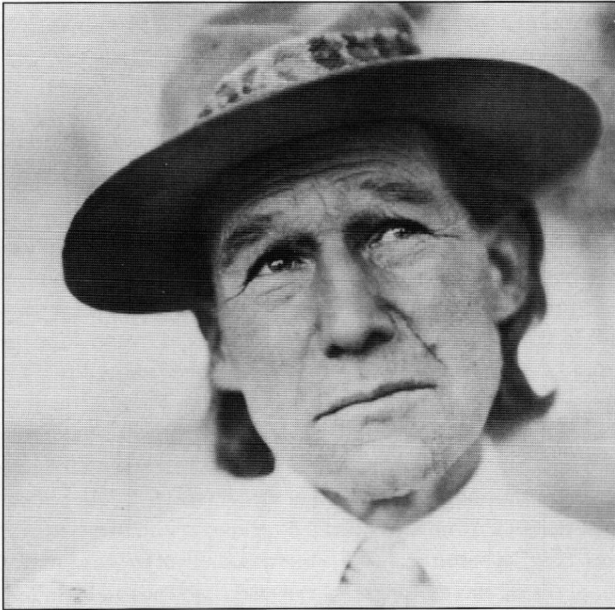
Wolf was arrested in Tuolumne a few years ago by officers and asked that he change his shoes. He reached under the bed, apparently for his shoes and brought forth a rifle and ordered the officers to hit the trail and he in turn escaped. It is believed he has been roaming the mountains ever since.

It is believed by the arresting officer that Wolf is a war slacker, coming to the mountains to evade the wartime draft.

Cattle and sheepmen, tourists and people who own cabins in the mountains can breathe a sigh of relief for the notorious “Monte Wolf” is now in the clutches of the law. It is thought that it will be several summers before he robs any more cabins.



Newspaper article from the Calaveras Californian, September 22, 1927. This article depicted Monte as a “pilferer”, a charge often later disputed.



The best portrait of Monte Wolf. Photo courtesy of the Calaveras County Historical Society. Both photos reprinted by permission of the Monte Wolf Society.

possible that as a younger man his behavior could have been less commendable, but that his appearance in Judge Smith's court, perhaps when he was in his late thirties, succeeded in turning him around.

What comes through most clearly from the historical record as it now stands is that we do not know many of the pivotal details of Monte's life such as when and where he was born, who his parents were, where he grew up, and what was in his military and criminal records. However, all accounts of him agree that he was a mountain man of remarkable strength, endurance and

independence. By the time he built his wilderness cabin in 1933 and 1934, he was living in the wilderness as western mountain men had lived for a century, supporting himself from hunting, trapping and guiding. By the 1930's subsistence farming was also putting food on his table, thus linking him not only to the many centuries of Euro-American settlement of the North American wilderness but also to the millennia-old tradition of Native American subsistence agriculture.

The term "wilderness cabin" might seem self-contradictory to some people today, but it would not have seemed so to the founder of the American environmental movement. As John Muir completed his first stay in Tuolumne Meadows during the summer of 1869, he lamented that he could not remain in the wilderness over the winter. In *My First Summer in the Sierra*, his 1911 book based on his field notes, he wrote

If I had a few sacks of flour, an axe, and some matches, I would build a cabin of pine logs, pile up plenty of firewood about it and stay all winter to see the grand fertile snow-storms, watch the birds and animals that winter thus high, how they live, how the forests look snow-laden or buried, and how the avalanches look and sound on their way down the mountains. But now I'll have to go, for there is nothing to spare in the way of provisions. I'll surely be back, however, surely I'll be back. No other place has ever so overwhelmingly attracted me as this hospitable, Godful wilderness.

THE MONTE WOLFE SOCIETY

Las Calaveras appreciates the contribution of this article from James T. Lindford. Mr. Lindford is the grandson of Veda Lindford who wrote the definitive book on Monte Wolfe. Mr. Lindford grew up in the shadow of Monte Wolfe and spent his summers as a youth hiking in the Mokelumne wilderness to the cabin. Today Mr. Lindford works as an attorney in San Francisco. Recently he worked in conjunction with local historian Judith Marvin to prepare a nomination for the Monte Wolfe cabin to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Several years ago the Monte Wolfe Society was formed to preserve the memory of this unique man. It is the society's objective to perpetuate the truth versus the myth around the legend of Monte Wolfe. The society

works to preserve the cabin through annual work-parties that hike in to the wilderness to conduct restoration projects on the cabin. Individuals interested in the Monte Wolfe Society can contact James T. Lindford at P. O. Box 210598, San Francisco, CA 94121-0598.

The life of Monte Wolfe has been thoroughly chronicled in the book *MONTE Lone Wolf of the Mokelumne* by Veda Guild Lindford, published by the Lindford family in 1985. A copy of this book can be reviewed by interested people in the Calaveras County Library or at the office of the Historical Society. *Las Calaveras* has noted the legendary figure in articles printed in October of 1961 and January of 1993. The 1993 article by George Hoepfer provides a thorough retrospective of the myth of the man.

Muir's spirituality was deeply influenced by the ancient earth-worshipping traditions of his native Scotland. Yet for him, a log cabin could exist in the wilderness without diminishing his wilderness experience. He knew what it was like to live in a log cabin. He had lived in one when he first came to America with his family from Scotland in 1849: The first structure on his fathers farm in Wisconsin's Fox River Valley was a log cabin. What if Muir had built his wilderness cabin and stayed in Tuolumne Meadows over the winter or 1869-1870? What if his attachment to his fond memories of the hypothetical winter had led him to preserve his cabin? What would we give today to have that cabin as a National Monument to the founder of our environmental movement!

Monte Wolfe's spirituality derived not only from the earth-worshipping traditions of Native Americans but perhaps also from the ancient Celtic traditions that inspired John Muir. Monte Wolfe also found solace and inspiration in a sacred wilderness. If we fail to protect Monte Wolfe's masterwork today, our children and grandchildren—and theirs—will bitterly regret our short-sightedness. We must protect the wilderness dwelling of the last mountain man of the central Sierras.

—James T. Linford
October 2002

1 Communication from M. F. Morrow, Reference Archivist, Old Military and Civil Records, National Archives and Records Administration ["NARA"], Washington, D.C.. Archives of the Monte Wolfe Foundation.

2 NARA, Colma, California.

3 From the writer's personal recollection of the jacket.

4 Communication in MWA

5 Records of the following counties searched: Alpine, Calaveras, Stanislaus, and Tuolumne Counties, California; Douglas County, Nevada. Microfilm records at NARA, Colma, California.

6 Nor was there any "McGraff" registered in Alpine County as Judge J. A. Smith may have believed according to his article, "Monte Wolfe, Sierra Hermit" in Las Calaveras: Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society, April 1961 (Vol IX, No. 3). Please see the discussion of Judge Smith's article below.

7 Monte: Lone Wolf of the Mokelumne, 1985, at p. 46

8 Linford 1985: 46.

9 Linford 1985:

10 Linford 1985: 46

11 See Dana Supernowicz's article in the September 1986 Sierra Heritage Magazine (Vol. 6, No. 2) pp. 51-52.

12 Las Calaveras, October 1961 (Vol X, No. 1) "More on Monte Wolfe"

13 Photocopy of excerpt from personal journal, Archives of the Monte Wolfe Foundation

14 James Alexander "Alex" Smith was admitted to the California Bar in 1909 (sbn 2907). His 1917 appointment Calaveras County Superior Court by Governor Hiram Johnson was confirmed by election in 1918. He retired in 1956. He was founding President of the Calaveras County Historical Society. Las Calaveras, Vol. XXIV, No. 4, p. 46, July 1976

15 Las Calaveras: Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society, April 1961 (Vol. IX, No. 3), "Monte Wolfe, Sierra Hermit" by Judge J. A. Smith. As set forth above, the NARA microfilm records of the Alpine County draft registration cards show nothing for "Ed McGraff."

16 Calaveras Californian, October 8, 1927, "The Wolf Seems To Have Been Cornered"; Calaveras Prospector, September 24, 1927, p. 1, "Monte Wolf is Captured at Lake Alpine."

17 In his article in the August 10, 1969 Stockton Record, "The Legend of Monte Wolfe," George Hoeper places a Monte Wolfe working at the Groveland Hotel 1915 for a short while before heading up the Clavey River, eventually building a rock-and-wood shelter concealed by brush on Reed Creek, about 10 miles east of Twain Harte.

18 Linford 1985: 23, 24.

19 Las Calaveras: Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society, April 1961 (Vol. IX, No. 3), "Monte Wolfe, Sierra Hermit."

20 See, for example, a 1974 interview by San Francisco Chronicle journalist Mike Dunne ("Wolf Man's Cabin," October 6, 1974) of then 84-year-old retired Calaveras County deputy sheriff, Howard Collins who, while admitting that Monte "was blamed for a lot of thievery he had nothing to do with" was firmly persuaded by the volume of complaints sworn out against him that Monte was a pilferer. This is also the view of Monte that Judge Smith strongly supported in his Las Calaveras article.

21 Linford 1985: 23.

HISTORICAL DISPLAY GARDEN PLANNED

A group of dedicated local gardeners have planned a Calaveras County Historical Display Garden to show the public the various plants that were common to the pioneers of this county. These are not the California native plants that we know, but the traditional imported plants that the pioneer families loved so much that they brought them to Calaveras County.

These gardeners are enlisting the assistance of others to help fill out their garden. They would like to know of any historical plants that you



may have in your family garden. They are interested in both the plants and the stories behind them. Does your "homestead" have naturalized bulbs, established vinca or lilac? If so, then you probably have an historical planting that they would be interested in. Does your heirloom rose or grape have a story, and is it greater than 100 years old? Would you be willing to share your story, and perhaps even a cutting?

If you can help to identify these historical plants, and have a story to share, please contact Annie Stevenot at 728-0614.

Calaveras County Historical Society

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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 \$16.00 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 is 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.

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 museum 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.

New Members

November 2002

Frank Barnes, LA
Judy Santos, San Andreas, CA
Debra Lawlor, Mokelumne Hill, CA
Lloyd Ames, Glencoe, CA
Bill & Margarita Todd, Valley Springs, CA

Museum Donations

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

September 2002

Shirley Ellsworth Strong, Fremont, CA
Negatives of Miwok artifacts taken by her father Terence H. Ellsworth

George De Bem, Jackson, CA
Three misc mining artifacts from the Peek Ranch Mine

Wally Motloch, Mountain Ranch, CA
Photo of Bush Mining Claim at Mountain Ranch

Mrs. James Wells Jordan, Greenbrae, CA
Two Wells Fargo checks from 1874 and letters about Sheep Ranch Mine

Shirley Headley, Golden Rose Florist Shop, San Andreas, CA
Huge China Doll house plant for Museum

October 2002

Jill Gray, Copperopolis, CA
One pair of red long johns

Earl Thompson, Stockton, CA
San Andreas Independent newspaper, October 3, 1857

November 2002

Sandy Dragomanovich, San Andreas, CA
Antique Wooden Breadboard

Don Cuneo, Calaveritas, CA
Two photos of Moonlight Flat

New Office Manager

The Calaveras County Historical Society is happy to welcome Jill Gray as our new Office Manager. Jill joined us in October, filling the vacancy created when former employee Elizabeth Braydis left to pursue other career opportunities. Jill has lived in Copperopolis for the past eleven years where she and her husband have raised their family. Most recently Jill worked for the Central Sierra Bank for over three years until she decided to return to school. In May of 2001 she graduated from Columbia College with her Associate Science degree in Business Administration.

Jill has a love of history and even a business background in the antiques retail field. We look forward to her combining all of these skills and putting them to use for us at the Historical Society. She has already identified several projects that she can't wait to tackle. In her own words, she is "very thrilled!" to be here. And we are thrilled to have her. Welcome to the Historical Society, Jill Gray, and best wishes!