



THE BANANA RANCH

The Last Little Whorehouse in Calaveras County

by *Bonnie Miller*

“What kinds of crops are grown in Calaveras County?” asked the school teacher.

“Bananas!” responded the young schoolboy confidently.

When the teacher corrected him and explained that bananas couldn’t grow in this climate, he begged to differ.

“My father talks about the Banana Ranch all of the time” he explained.

It must have taken a lot of self-control for the teacher to keep a straight face. She knew of the famous Banana Ranch south of Angels Camp. Everyone for several counties around knew of the “Ranch”, but they didn’t grow bananas there. The Banana Ranch was the last true brothel to operate in Calaveras County.

Prostitution through the ages

They say prostitution is the oldest profession, well, perhaps next to motherhood and politics.

Regardless, it was in the Bible, the Code of Hammurabi, and has been government subsidized in many cultures. By the time the Gold Rush reached California the prostitutes were here to greet the new miners. With an average demographic of ten men to one woman business was always good in the brothels.

One saying had it that you could judge the economic value of a town not by the number of saloons, but by the number of bordellos. Likewise, you could judge the moral value of the same community by the presence of schools and churches and the absence of those brothels. And they said



When people think of a western bordello, they think of this kind of typical gold rush town bordello with prostitutes beckoning customers. This was not the case in Angels Camp.

the prostitutes always knew when the money was gone. When the girls moved on, the gold had played out. That town had gone bust and the girls were looking for the next boom.

What made a woman become a prostitute? In the early Gold Rush, it was often a choice of money. In the west woman for the first time could call their own shots. They could own their own businesses and choose whatever man they wanted, and they certainly had plenty to choose from. Many women made it rich with a little ingenuity and a lot of hard work. But a lot of women, out of their element in the unfamiliar west, chose instead to embrace the life of the prostitute. Perhaps they had always been a bit of an outcast, maybe they wanted to try something a little wild, or maybe they wanted the protection of working in a sheltered community of close associates.

Historically it was not a glamorous life. "It has been said that the social disease and unwanted pregnancy were the occupational hazards of prostitution, but in reality it was loneliness," said Anne Seagraves in her famous study of Gold Rush prostitutes, *Soiled Doves*. "The 'soiled dove' by her own choice, cut herself off from her family and was isolated by society." Although they made good money, most were poor money handlers and failed to save for their future. As their looks and health declined over the years, they moved farther down the line of desirability. The smart ones invested in property or a business for retirement, or maybe became a madam themselves. The lucky ones got married. The unlucky ones found themselves continually abused by men and ultimately turned to other women for companionship. "Many became so tired of being victimized" said Seagraves, "they took it upon themselves to end it by suicide."

Madam Gayle

Vera Gayle Reynolds was born one day shy of Halloween in 1890, probably in Tulsa, Oklahoma. By the time she reached Calaveras County in 1928 she was a well educated thoroughly mannered,

proper lady who had already out-lived one husband. It is doubtful she had any children. She told some friends she had been raised in a Catholic convent in Canada.

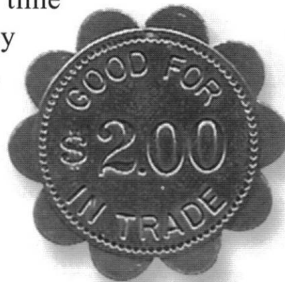
Gayle had most recently moved from the Bay Area where she had managed some hotels, so she understood the hospitality business. She purchased a small vacant ranch near Albany Flat south of Angels Camp. There wasn't much to it, just an old unpainted house, a pump house, and a building for a generator for electricity. It was surrounded by a stone fence. Gayle liked it that it was unpretentious, but it was also always tidy.

Gayle herself was a tidy person. She was tall, almost stately. She was always well dressed and well coifed. In her later years people fondly recalled her elegant manner, erect posture, nice clothes and perfectly arranged gray hair.

Gayle didn't drive so she used Carley's Garage in Angels Camp as her taxi service. When she or one of her girls needed a ride to town she called up the phone operator and asked for Carley's Garage to send out a car. Carley would even go all the way to Stockton to pick up a new girl coming to the Ranch. Gayle and her girls always gave Joe and his mechanics good tips for their driving. Joe Carley recalled that she was "quite a lady... she ran a real nice clean place there."

Gayle ran her business in a tidy fashion, too. She always paid her bills on time. She ran a strict business that depended on her neighbors and did not compete with the community. She was known for supporting all the local activities. She shut down her business for local events such as the Frog Jump or the Fourth of July so as to not detract from the importance of the local affair. She ran a lot of money through town, so she was treated kindly by most business folks. Some say they treated her well in return so she wouldn't point the finger at them for doing their personal business after hours with her, but she was far too discreet to name names.

The Banana Ranch did not serve alcohol so a liquored up young man ran the risk of being turned away. The Ranch also did not cater to the military, and in the war years it was a require-



A token good for \$2.00 at the Banana Ranch with the familiar 153 phone number. Owned by Historical Society Director Gary Herd but never redeemed.



ment that any man home on leave must wear his uniform while in public, so it was easy to see who was a military boy or not. Gayle would also not admit a minor. A young man that had finally got his nerve up to go to the Ranch ran the embarrassment of being asked who his father was, so that Gayle could judge for herself if the young man were truly as old as he claimed to be. She was too discreet to mention the encounter to the father, but by then any desire in the poor embarrassed boy had probably wilted.

The Girls

The modern and stylish Angels Camp Girls of Gayle's Banana Ranch were far better off than the depressed and lonely Soiled Doves of the early Gold Rush. Gayle made sure of that. She only had about three or four girls working at the Ranch at a time. Her girls were always happy, healthy, and spoiled.

No local girls ever worked at the Ranch. All Banana Ranch employees were brought in from out of the area. When a new girl came to the Ranch, Gayle made sure to parade her around to all the livelier businesses so that she would get a good review. Gayle always exhibited extreme discretion and never put any townsfolk at any discomfort. The girl might be taken to the drugstore and introduced to the gentlemen there as Gayle's cousin or niece, come to town for a visit, or she'd be staying in Gayle's charge for a while. On the surface these introductions were completely innocent to any bystander, but they had the intended affect on the men: a new girl was out at the Ranch! If Gayle and the girl went into a bar, Gayle always bought the house a round, but she never spoke first. She always allowed the men to initiate the conversations.

The girls always dressed well and had all the latest cosmetics they desired. Cosmetics were quite a luxury in those days. Alan Correl remembers as a young boy when he worked at McDonald's Drugstore in downtown Angels Camp next to the Bank of America. When the girls would come to the store, Mac the druggist would give him a nod to open the locked cosmetics counter and let the girls have a go. Often times they would ring up a bill of \$150, a substantial sum back then, but Mac knew that Gayle was always good for it.

Gayle made sure the girls maintained good health as well, both for the sake of the girl and her clients. When natural monthly occurrences prevented a girl from working, Gayle politely took her off work and informed the clients that that girl was unavailable for a few days because she had received a delivery of "flowers." Apparently Gayle had a good network, because she could bring in a substitute during these absences, like a vacation relief. The girls always looked the picture of health, probably from their nude sunbathing on the front lawn of the ranch house. Many a young man remembers trying to sneak a peek at the nude girls.

The famous Angels Camp doctor 'Doc' Albasio had the job of conducting regular health checks on the girls. One evening he got to joking with the girls too much and Gayle had to regain his focus to the tasks at hand. She politely asked him not to wash his instruments in the sink near her giblet gravy while she was preparing dinner.

Everyone knew when the girls came to town since they were chauffeured in that big car from Carley's Garage. It didn't matter what errand they were on, they had to be on their best behavior. Gayle would not tolerate her girls misbehaving or being rude in the community. Even though everyone knew who, or what, those girls were, one thing they could count on was that the young ladies were always well mannered and left good tips at whichever establishments they visited. At least one young lady made such an impression on the community that she gave up her job and married into a local family.

The phone connection

During WWII the phones were connected by a switchboard operator. The phone number 153 was well known as that of the Banana Ranch. The young operator had just moved to town to marry a local rancher and soon found herself handling a lot of calls to the 153 number. She still remembers her first exposure to Gayle beyond the phone lines. One day in town she saw an "older well dressed woman who comported herself quite well; the younger women were more flamboyant. I wondered if this wasn't the local madam. It was."

Over time the young phone operator and Gayle became good friends down the phone wires. When it came time for the operator to quit her job to have a

baby, Gayle invited her and a friend out to the Ranch for a goodbye drink. The phone operator and her friend boldly drove out to the Ranch, probably two of the very few women who ever had. Gayle surprised them by throwing a mini baby shower as she and her girls had bought gifts for the future baby. The phone operator and her friend giggled over hot buttered rums until 4:00 in the morning while the working girls came and went from the kitchen to retrieve hot water, as no hot running water was available in the rest of the house.

The girls may have come and gone, but Gayle and the phone operator remained friends for life.

Too close to home

One time a fire from Tuolumne County was headed in the direction of the Banana Ranch. A vast amount of volunteers headed out to the Ranch to help save the place. Gayle rounded up her beloved cats and stuffed them into a pillow case while men rounded up horses and saved at least two of the girls. In the mayhem several of the men and two of the girls disappeared, but the fire turned away and the Ranch was unharmed. When the smoke cleared and everyone was accounted for later, everyone was quite giddy and pleased with themselves, although no one had fought a fire.

A San Andreas rancher recalled the time his friend finally got the nerve to visit the famous Ranch. It took him all summer to talk himself into

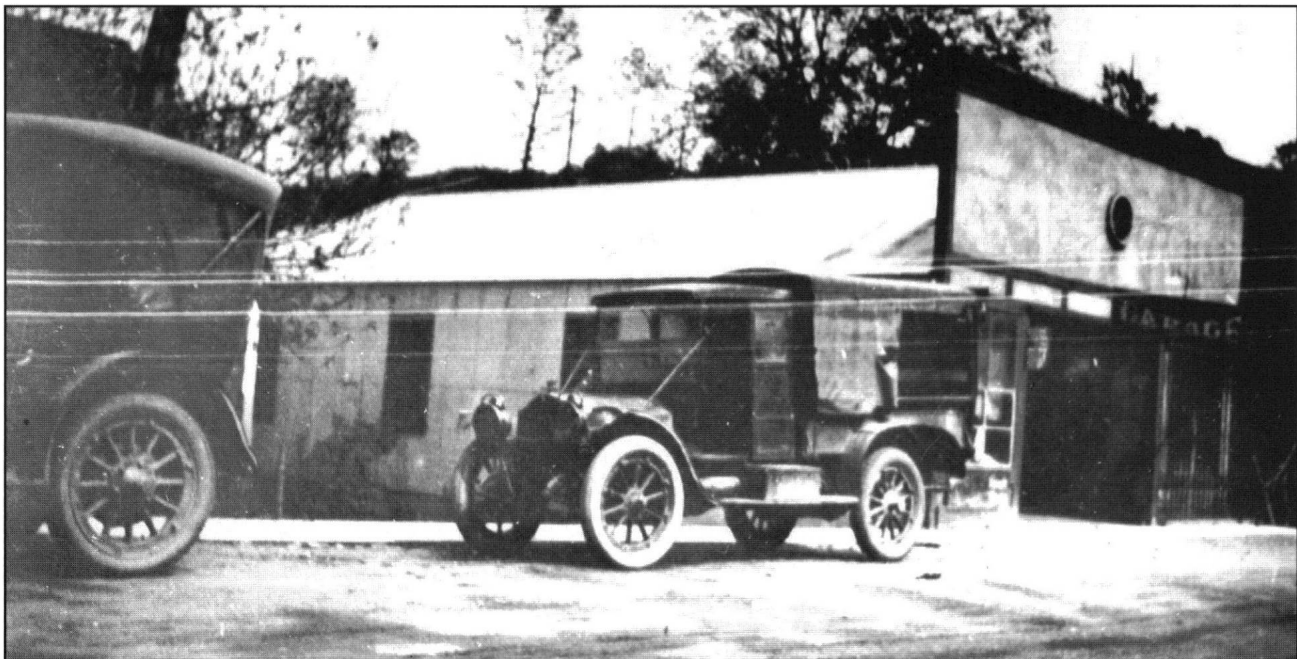
making the drive out there, but when he pulled into the parking lot all hope faded. He had pulled up next to his father's pickup truck. Perhaps he should have gone to the other brothel that operated near Paloma, but it just didn't have the same cachet as the famous Banana Ranch. Another young Angels Camp rancher went to visit Gayle's girls to partake of some entertainment. He was told to keep his enthusiasm quiet as his father was in the next room!

A group of young men were out having a good time one evening and had a little too much to drink. One of the boys fell asleep in the back seat of the car. His friends drove him "home" and dropped him off in the front yard of the Banana Ranch, much to his surprise upon waking. He did not stick around to enjoy the hospitality, but years later he served two terms as a county supervisor.

If Angels Camp was too close to home for comfort, comfort could be found just a river crossing away. Amador County's famous Red Light District continued to thrive well into the 1950s, while another brothel operated near Chinese Camp in Tuolumne County.

The Ranch finally shut its doors

Maintaining a brothel had always been illegal in California, or at least since 1872. Fortunately for the Ranch no local authorities would shut the place down. Whether Gayle contributed to some sher-



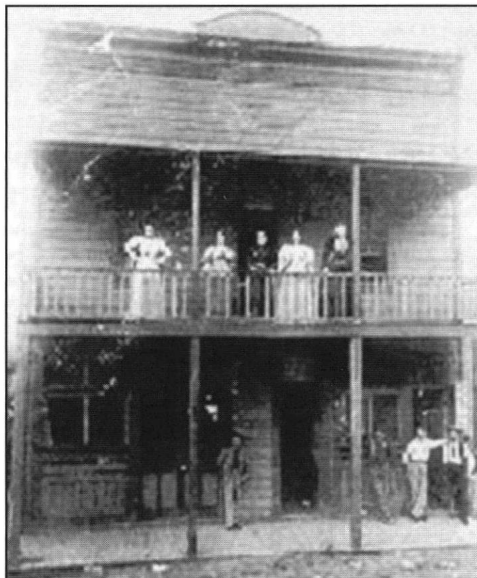
Carley's Garage in Angels Camp provided taxi service to Madam Gayle and her girls.

iff's fund, or the local police frequented her establishment, we do not know, but no local law authorities would take any action against her. Gayle had started the Banana Ranch in 1928 and thrived through the Great Depression and WWII. By 1949 she had been in the business over twenty years and was ready to retire. She sold the ranch to another woman who painted the quaint stone fence white and renamed the place the White Wall Ranch, but the new name never caught on. The new owner never ran as tight a business as Gayle had so the new ranch didn't prosper.

Brothels had been illegal since 1872, but more definitively so since the Red Light Abatement Act. This act that originated in San Francisco was passed by the California legislature in 1913. Historically it became one of the first major political movements organized by women, specifically women's clubs. It was a portent of the suffragette movement in California. The result of the legislation was that it served to push the brothels out of the big cities and into the rural areas where it was only loosely enforced.

By the 1950s times had changed. California had a new, tougher Attorney General. It took changes in Sacramento to make an affect out at Albany Flat. In 1951 California had Edmund G. "Pat" Brown as their Attorney General who vowed to enforce the laws that were already on the books. In Calaveras County the District Attorney and the Sheriff got the message and in the late 1950's succeeded in closing the Ranch. Across the river the Amador DA lacked the courage to take on the local madam, and it required the state police acting under the authority of the State Attorney General to come in and finally shut down their notorious red light district. The Attorney General, Pat Brown, went on to serve two terms as California's 32nd governor, and in 1962 further tightened the California Penal Code regarding brothels.

By then Gayle was comfortably in to her retirement. After Gayle had sold the Banana Ranch in 1949 she returned to the Bay Area to live out her years. Eventually



Another typical western bordello was not the scene at the sedate one story ranch house known as the Banana Ranch.

with the assistance of friends she moved in to a retirement home in Oakland. She never stopped communicating with her friends from Calaveras County, many of whom maintained regular correspondences and visits with her throughout the succeeding years. Remember our phone operator? She fondly recalls visiting Gayle in Oakland over the years.

Farewell

When a good friend finally mustered the nerve to ask Gayle, such a fine lady, just why did she do what she did, being the madam of a brothel? The polite and lady like Miss Gayle answered in all

wide-eyed honesty, "For the money, why else?" Social graces aside, Gayle knew a good thing while she had it. And she knew the end of the line when she saw it coming. With all the business acumen of those at the top, and the fine social graces that her alleged Catholic upbringing gave her, she clearly knew how to run a well respected business. Maybe not respectable, but by most bank accounts it certainly took in a respectable amount of deposits.

On May 23, 1968, Gayle passed away at the age of 77 leaving no known family.

The local landmark, known as the Banana Ranch, had the most unlikely name. It was not named for the fruits of the labors within the Ranch, but for a rich banana tree that grew in the front yard. It had come to pass. The ranch lay dormant for another twenty years until it became a victim of yet another act of progress: the New Melones Project. The new reservoir required an access that widened the old ranch road and wiped out the last of the stone fence, the last remnants of the last little whore house in Calaveras County.

Bibliography

- Seagraves, Anne, *Soiled Doves, Prostitution in the Early West*, 1994, Wesanne Publications.
- Deck, Carol, article for the *Calaveras Enterprise*, 2/1982
- Las Calaveras* appreciates the many fond recollections by local personalities, most of whom wish to remain anonymous. Stories continue to pour in, so this subject may be revisited at a later date.

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 \$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.

New Members

The Historical Society welcomes the following new members:

May 2009

Robert and Patricia Flynn, Bellevue, WA
Sharon Lumsden, Mokelumne Hill
William Schwoerer, Murphys

June 2009

Dianne Cummings, San Andreas
Lynn Fox, Healdsburg, CA



Donations

May 2009

David Greenlaw—book and assorted photographs

June 2009

Lois (Romaggi) Fuher—photo albums pertaining to the Romaggi Adobe, and the Peirano, Gazzola, Romaggi, Bedoni and DeMartina families



Upcoming Meetings

July 23 at the Pickle Patch in San Andreas. Please join the Historical Society for the Installation of Officers and to meet our new staff.

August there will be no meeting. Have a great summer!