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“Pick out a girl for me...”

THE LETTERS OF WALTER KNIGHT

by *Bonnie Miller*

“Pick out a girl for me... I am on the marry” implores Walter Knight in one of his early letters home to his brother in Iowa. His request echoed the sentiments of many early Calaveras County bachelors of the time.

Walter Knight was one of many a young man who came to California to seek his fortune and his future in gold. He was born in Allegany, New York on the thirtieth of April, 1833. On 19 April 1852 he left at least two brothers behind in Iowa. Apparently he settled in the San Andreas area around 1860. Through a confusion of letters, handwriting, and mail delays, his brother Joseph lost track of him and became seriously concerned. At least one of the brothers' letters remained unclaimed in Placerville. Apparently Walter had mistakenly been corresponding with their older brother Stewart, who did not keep Joseph apprised of their sibling's whereabouts.

Walter had been moving about the gold country seeking his fortune. He posted letters from Calaveritas and San Domingo before settling in San Andreas. By 1860 he was fortunate enough to have acquired an estate valued at \$4000 according to that

year's census records. He was sharing a residence with another miner named Louis Simpson, and they lived within a hundred yards of their claim. The two were partnered with two others in the claim. Using hydraulics, they had opened their claim to 50–60 feet deep. Their efforts were sometimes richly rewarded, and at other times they found themselves in debt.

*“Hard luck don't hurt me
I have got used to it.”*

The miners supplemented their livelihood by hunting the plentiful small game nearby. Quail and rabbit were particularly abundant and satisfying. To aid in Knight's hunting, he proudly owned a shotgun and a “number one setter dog.”

Walter was the first of his Iowa family to move west. His brothers wanted to know if they should join him and repeatedly asked for positive information. Walter painted a bleak picture of the miner's life instead. “*I do not like this country to settle for life,*” he had stated in a letter written to his brother Joseph in 1863, yet the following year he was making efforts to do just that. He remained in California.

"Don't come & never think of coming," advised Walter to his other brother Stewart in 1864. "It is no country for a man to make money, with or without a family." He went on to describe the back-breaking hard work of looking for copper underground. In twelve years of mining in California he felt he had not even enough money to buy his passage back home. Concerns for the war attitudes brewing back east overshadowed his talk. Two years later, despite his defeatist attitude, he registered to vote in Calaveritas.

Determined to make the best of it, he found himself wishing to marry and make a comfortable home life, even if not permanent. In 1864 he asked his brother Stewart to have the women back home find him a suitable girl to marry. "Pick out a girl for me & send me a description," he asked. Then he went on to give his own description of his ideal candidate: "Not under sixteen nor over forty. The color of eyes and hair, general disposition & habits, capabilities as a housekeeper, not stoop shouldered nor squint eyed, to get up in the morning before breakfast, to do the washing before Saturday, if not a better cook than I am to be willing to be instructed. Weight not over one hundred & fifty-four."

A few years later Walter received a surprise. Rather than send a wife, his brother Joseph sent his own son. Walter quickly dispatched a letter back to his brother advising him that the boy had arrived in California safely. Walter praised the boy for his potential as a good worker, but went on to admonish his brother. "Please

tol the wimere to pick out a girl for me & send me a disscerption not under sixteen nor over forty the color of eyes & hair general disposition & habits capabilities as a housekeeper not stoop shouldered nor squint eyed

Portion of Knight's 14 October 1864 letter imploring relatives back home to find him a girl. Courtesy Terry Knight.

send the wife next time," he concluded.

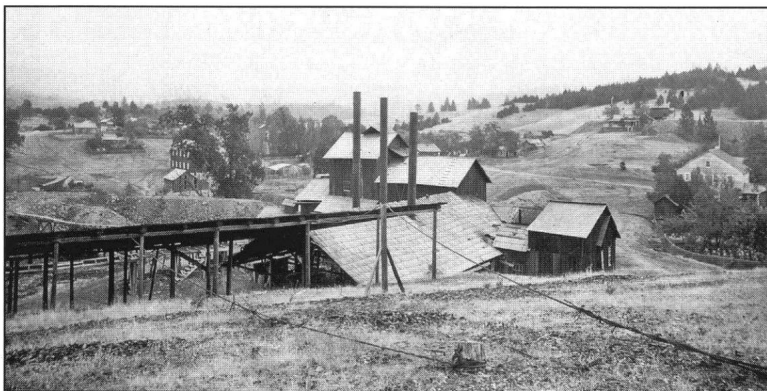
When Walter was mining in San Andreas, he experienced the boom and bust of claims that paid and those that didn't. Gold mining in California had

shifted from the easy surface, or placer mining that Walter had first known when he arrived years earlier. To make mining profitable, miners often joined forces or formed companies so that they could attack claims as a group. Methods had shifted to more extreme measures. In an 1863 letter home, he described his new technique, "... working dirt is from 30 to 50 feet deep and we work with a hydraulic." Although his claims appeared to have been profitable, he continued to advise his relatives to not join him. His vivid descriptions of the hard work were often coupled with the fruitlessness of their labors, "Three years hard work tunnel in three hundred & seventytwo feet no lode part of the company discouraged the balance of them disgusted abandon claim." Yet he continued working the claim, "... run a tunnel on a level tap the vein at one hundred & fifty feet do the job in six months then take out money enough to buy all necessary machinery..." Despite his perseverance, he fell into debt.

"Claim on side hill water lead. Company not able to buy machinery."

At one point he was personally five hundred dollars in debt and the company owed more. He felt obliged to do something about it. He decided to abandon the hard life of the miner and turned toward regular employment for his income to pay down his debt. "I have laid down the pick & shovel & have an easy job working for wages," he described of his fifty-dollar a month job at the jail that included board. "Deputy sheriff, on a small scale but it pays better than mining."

"There is a large proportion of healthy men in this country who are not making more than a living."



The Sheep Ranch Mine in 1880. Knight probably lived behind the three stacks in the center of the photo, where foremen were housed. Courtesy Calaveras County Historical Society.

Walter gave up on getting a wife from his family. While working as a jailer, he had met a woman named Rachel and they claimed to have married. They decided to leave San

Walter Knight's autograph, 1864. Courtesy Terry Knight.

Andreas and moved to Sheep Ranch. Rachel was a woman of little record. She was the daughter of Adelphine Armbruster. Rachel was born in either Wisconsin or more likely Missouri but it is not known how or when she arrived in California. Before she was twenty she had married a man sixteen years her senior named Lyman Benson. They had two children, Albert and Glendora. The 1860 census noted Benson as a miner, yet by 1870 he had taken the job as Justice of the Peace. Lyman and Rachel lived in San Andreas apparently with Lyman's brother Andrew, a local farmer. Sometime prior to 1870 Lyman and Rachel divorced, and Rachel had met and married Walter.

Walter and his new wife Rachel moved to Sheep Ranch with her daughter Glendora. Her son remained in San Andreas with his father. Within ten years the divorced man had given up his Justice of the Peace job and had resumed mining, but was living alone in the San Andreas area. In 1885 Lyman passed away in Lake County, although he left an estate in Calaveras County. He had owned at least seven parcels of land around San Andreas, as well as three water ditches. The three water ditches had great potential for profit. His son Albert filed for probate, listing himself and his sister Glendora as the sole heirs to their father's estate. Oddly, Albert had considerable debts against the inheritance. He relinquished his claim to a third party. This third party and Glendora each inherited fifty-percent interests in the estate left by Lyman.

In Sheep Ranch, Walter's life hit a low point when he described his situation to his brother in 1871. His health began to trouble him, as he experienced problems with his throat and lungs. He may have been suffering from the early stages of "miner's lung." He travelled to San Francisco for medical attention and was advised by doctors to avoid cold wet winters. With that in mind, he returned to Calaveras County where the winters

were drier. His brother Joseph still wished to join him in California in the spring of 1871. He advised Walter that he may come across country and be in Salt Lake City by the

following winter. Walter agreed to meet him in Salt Lake if the winter proved favorable. Salt Lake was appealing to Walter, as he said "I believe that is far better country than this." It is not known whether they met up in Salt Lake or not.

Walter seemed determined to discourage his family from coming to California. He felt that true wealth was reserved for only the wealthy capitalists. Early in his California tenure he had noted that "... it requires capital of from 5 to 50 thousand dollars to make it profitable... the paying business here is in the hands of capitalists," and, "... as a general thing here, money makes money."

Meanwhile, Walter and Rachel had established their new life in Sheep Ranch. Apparently the "easy job" of working as a jailer did not really suit Walter. Within ten years he was back to working as a miner. He regarded his home, and listed his return address, as the Washington Mining District of Calaveras County. That was the area that included Sheep Ranch and San Domingo Creek. He held an interest in at least one hard-rock mine, and owned property in the community. Walter purchased all or part of Lot 5 of Block 3 in

Mining claim of Walter Knight and his partners, Indian Creek and Washington Mining Districts Records, 12 May 1871, Calaveras County Archives.



Main Street, Sheep Ranch, circa 1885, much as it must have appeared to Walter Knight when he moved there.

Historical Society photo.

Sheep Ranch. This property was located directly across the street from the Sheep Ranch Mining Company. It is likely that he worked or at least partnered there, as Walter listed himself as a mining foreman in the 1890 census. His obituary years later noted that he had been an honorable employee of the mine.

"I think it is the greatest favor I can do to advise you to stay home."

In the 1871 letter to his brother, Walter was living in Sheep Ranch, fretting about his health. He had described his travels for his health and settling upon Sheep Ranch. *"I came here whar I have acquaintences... I spent part of the winter here part at San Andreas which is sixteen miles from here. This is a quiet plase three thousand feet above the level of the sea good water pure air in summer."* In this letter he considerably downplays his role in Sheep Ranch. It appears he may have joined the capitalists. He had partners in what eventually proved to be a profitable mining claim, but he did not inform his brothers of that venture. Further, he never mentioned Rachel in any of his letters. There remains somewhat of a question as to whether or not Walter was actually married to Rachel. Although she claimed to be his wife, and her first husband Lyman claimed to be divorced, there is no divorce record from that first marriage.

Walter had bounced around Calaveras County before he married Rachel and settled down. Records indicate that he lived in Calaveritas, San Andreas, San Domingo,

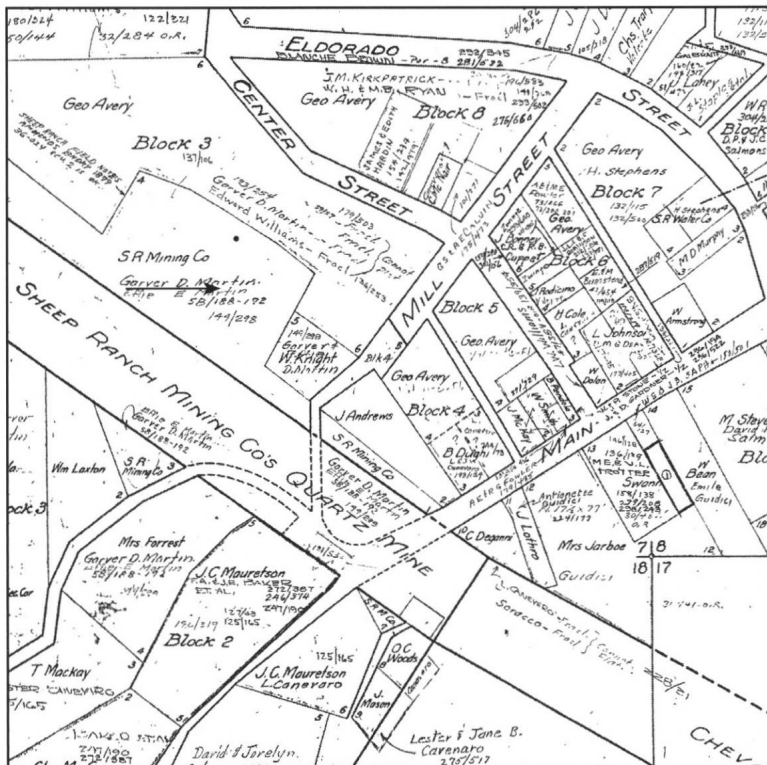
Sheep Ranch, and the Washington Mining District which was probably his Sheep Ranch residence. His census records are amiss; Walter often placed himself and/or his parents as natives of both New York or Iowa. Most interestingly, his age changes over the years. In 1860 he listed himself (correctly) as aged thirty-one. Yet at the next census ten years later, he had only aged five years and he declared his age as only 36. At least his obituary correctly stated his birth in the year 1833.

By 1888, Walter listed himself as a 55-year old miner, living in Sheep Ranch, but having come from New York. He was still listed in Sheep Ranch in the 1890 census, when he listed himself as a mining foreman. Walter's letters home never mentioned his nephew, Joseph's boy, again. And he continued to write disparaging descriptions of the life of a miner, discouraging his brothers from coming to California.

In an 1892 letter home to his brother Joseph, Walter reminisced about his forty years in California. *"I have had the usual ups & downs of a miner's life,"* he described. *"... have had enough to eat drink & wair; my constitution is pretty good yet for a man of my age."* He must have felt generally satisfied with his life, even though he happened to have been on crutches at the time.

Early in the year 1907 Walter Knight began putting his affairs in order. Perhaps he anticipated his pending death. His eventual obituary noted that he had been suffering a lingering illness of several months. Additionally it appears that he had gained control of Glendora's estate, perhaps as he was the head of his household and had raised the girl. He and Rachel had never had children of their own, but he had acquired property and amassed an estate. He transferred all of his interests in Glendora's estate to his wife Rachel on February 7, 1907. Continuing in that vein, he then transferred all of his own holdings, all property and cash, to Rachel on April 14. This action allowed Rachel to fully own the house where they lived in Sheep Ranch as well as have complete access to the money that he had in the bank. She was also able to avoid probate, possibly avoiding the inconvenience that she had witnessed her own children suffer at the death of their father.

Walter passed away on the 29th of September, 1907. The Calaveras Prospect of 5 October gave an obituary, describing him as having been a Sheep Ranch pioneer, aged 73, originally from New York. *"To nearly all of the old residents of the county Walter Knight was known as a loyal friend and splendid type of American citizen,"* the obituary noted. The obituary



Portion of the 1878 Sheep Ranch Townsite Map; Knight was an owner of Lot 5 of Block 3.

failed to mention a wife. Elsewhere in the same edition of the paper Rachel, distinguishing herself as Walter's wife, had printed a thank you to friends for their kindness. Undertaker McElhany arranged to have his body shipped to Los Angeles for burial where he was believed to have had relatives. Ultimately he was buried in Sebastopol. Perhaps Walter's nephew had moved there, or one or more of his brothers did indeed come to California after all.

Rachel wasted no time in disposing of her and Walter's properties. In late October she sold part of the land for ten dollars in gold coin. Two weeks later she sold the lot in Sheep Ranch for another ten dollars in gold coin. She probably left Sheep Ranch as she had sold her home.

The following year Rachel entered a guardianship plea at the court in Calaveras County regarding her daughter Glendora. Glendora was declared incompetent, and Rachel was appointed her guardian. Glendora had to be admitted to an asylum. She is believed to have lived out the remainder of her life in the Asylum for the Insane in Stockton. In order to pay for her care, her mother found it necessary to liquidate her estate, the inheritance from Lyman twenty-three years prior. The properties were sold to another long-time Calaveras family.

Rachel seems to have disappeared after her husband's

death and taking care of her daughter's business. Descendents of Walther's family did not know her or what became of her. There are no death records for her, but she is believed to have passed away in 1913. Likewise, we know no more about her son Albert, other than he may have moved to San Francisco. Interestingly, the County Administrator brought a probate against the estate of Walter Knight ten years after his death. In 1917, the administrator looked into his estate, and found that there was none. No action was taken. This is not a surprise as Walter had transferred his estate, and Rachel had disposed of the property. What is unique is that the county looked into it at all. It is presumed that a possible heir sought any remaining estate, but found none. Walter left no heirs.

Acknowledgement

Letters between Walter Knight in California's early gold country and his relatives in Iowa were passed down through the family members. They eventually landed with Terry Knight, great-great grand niece of Walter. Terry had once visited the old jail yard in San Andreas, and until she inherited Knight's letters, she had not known that her ancestor had worked in that jail yard. Terry is descended from Walter's brother Joseph, whose descendents did not reach California until the 1940s. Terry's brother, also named Joseph, owns the distinction of being the seventh in line of those named for their ancestor Joseph Knight. Las Calaveras thanks Terry Knight and her family for sharing these letters with us.

Thank you to Maureen Elliott for bringing these letters to the attention of Las Calaveras, and sharing her extensive research with us.



Women posed with the great water wheel located on W H Clary's property in Sheep Ranch. At one time Walter worked for Clary. Rachel M Armbruster Benson Knight is standing on the left, just above the children, wearing a light colored dress with a dark scarf. Courtesy Calaveras County Archives.

Calaveras County Historical Society

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The Calaveras County Historical Society is a non-profit corporation. It meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the County. Locations and scheduled programs are announced in advance. Some meetings include a dinner program, and visitors are always welcome.

The Society operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 to 4:00 in the historic County courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas; and the historic Red Barn Museum at 891 Mountain Ranch Road, also in San Andreas, which is open Thursday to Sunday, 10:00 to 4:00.

The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museums while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4:00, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058, or contact us at: CCHS@goldrush.com; Red Barn Museum (209) 754-0800.

July–September 2011

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Donations

The Historical Society appreciates the following generous donations:

Gary D. Lowe—Paper entitled “Big Tree Bulletin and Murphy’s Advertiser”, paper entitled, “The Mammoth Trees of California”, copy of photo and Sperry’s Hotel registry page dated 1887, book entitled “Carleton E. Watkins, Photographer of the American West” with additional photo and Sperry’s Hotel registry page dated 1882

Jeanne Gibbens—wedding dress belonging to her grandmother Henrietta (Hattie) LaRiviere when she married George Stewart (1894), and Jeanne Gibbens wedding dress from 1946

Irmgard Temple—painting of Sophie Schwab, her mother’s governess, from early 1890s

James & Joanne Nims—Two maps of the McKisson Ranch/Pleasant Springs

Dan O’Boyle—Photographs of Highway 26

Karen Dustman—Copy of her book, *Ghost of the Sierra—Silver Mountain City*

Tuolumne County Museum—Court papers dated November 22, 1895 from Murphys Township

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