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## THE WILDERMUTH HOUSE



*The Wildermuth House as portrayed in a painting by Genevieve Thompson Markwood, a local artist. The painting was recently retrieved from the archives of the Calaveras County Historical Society. The painting was adorned with a blue ribbon from the 1961 Calaveras County Fair. 'Built of hand sawed sandstone by William A. Watt' was noted on the back of the painting.*

Photo by Bonnie Miller

# THE WILDERMUTH HOUSE

by Bonnie Miller

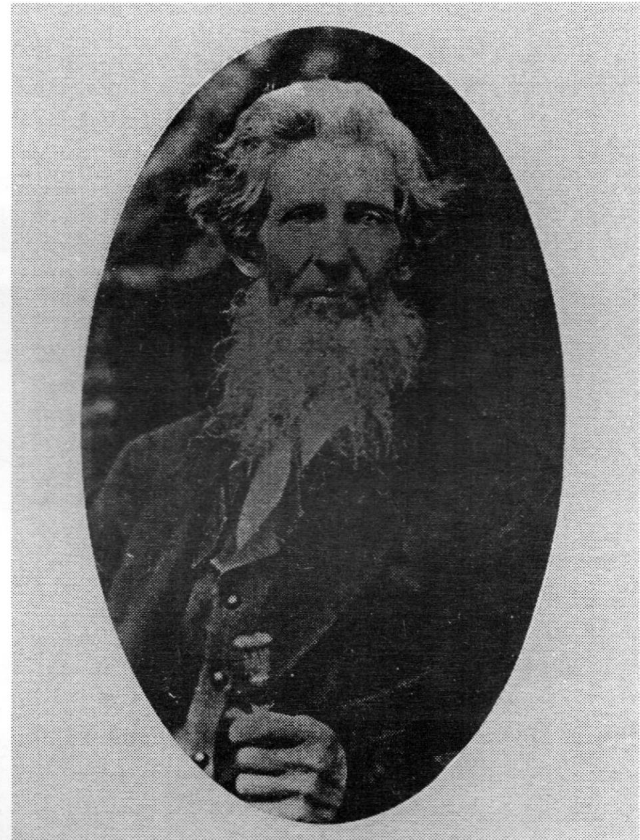
## John and Elizabeth Wildermuth

John and Elizabeth Wildermuth were best known as cattle ranchers in the Campo Seco area who happened to have lived in a very sturdy house. But the Wildermuth story is much more complex than that. The story actually began over 200 years before the California Gold Rush with the immigration of John Wildermuth's great grandfather, Johann David Wildermuth. Johann Wildermuth was born in Germany and later sailed from Sweden on the ship *Halifax* with his young family. He had four children, one of whom was the grandfather of John. Today the descendants of Johann David Wildermuth number several hundred across the United States. Upon his arrival in the New World on September 22, 1752, Johann signed his oath of allegiance to his new country, and he never looked back. But he probably never imagined the legacy that he would create.

John Hanna Wildermuth was born to his father's second wife, Elizabeth Hanna Cooper, on January 28, 1818 in Fairfield County, Ohio. In all, John had four siblings and six half brothers and sisters from his father's three wives. In 1846, the same year that his father passed away, John decided to strike out from Ohio. When the California Gold Rush called people to migrate from all over the world, John Wildermuth was already here. He preceded the forty-niners by three years by coming to California in 1846 by ship around the horn. Not much is known of John's early years in California although he did choose Calaveras County as his preferred home. Despite the excitement of the gold rush he returned to Ohio in 1856. Due to the severe shortage of women in the west, finding a bride may have been his motivation for his return home. Apparently he was successful as he married Miss Elizabeth Jane Summers, formerly of Virginia, on March 5, 1856 in St. Francisville, Missouri. While travelling back to the east coast to board another ship to return to California, the newlyweds stopped in Ohio to visit John's family. At this time John's younger half-sister, Louisa, decided to join them and came to California with John and Elizabeth. Eventually at least two other family members of John's, an older brother named Eli and a younger brother named Isaac, also made their way to California to join John in Calaveras County.

John again boarded a ship and undertook the arduous journey to California. With his new wife

and younger sister, they took the more modern route via the Panama crossing. Apparently it was this second trip by ship that was more adventurous for John as they were battered by storms, rough seas, and sea sickness. Upon finally reaching firm ground at the Panama Isthmus, they undertook the next difficult leg of the journey on the overland route. One last ship passage took them north on the more calm Pacific Ocean back to California. No doubt John was happy to see Calaveras County again upon his return.



*John Hanna Wildermuth*  
1818-1893

photo from the archives of the  
Calaveras County Historical Society

John was a charismatic fellow. He did a good job of extolling the virtues of the California frontier. While in Ohio with his new wife, he managed to convince at least three other families to join him on his return to the gold fields. Alexander R. Wheat and his wife, Ira D. Late and his wife, and William Watt came to Calaveras County in 1856 with John Wildermuth upon his return trip. All of the families eventually settled within only a few miles of each other, and would all remain life-long friends of each other. But for the most part their's is a different story.



## William A. Watt

Perhaps the most notable of the three gentlemen that John recruited to Calaveras County was a Scottish immigrant named William Watt. Watt had become naturalized in Iowa in 1842, and after his relocation to Calaveras County he set up residence in Petersberg, and early mining camp along the Calaveras River now inundated by New Hogan Reservoir. Watt's trade, learned in Scotland, was that of a stone mason.



*Elizabeth Jane Summers Wildermuth*

1828-1904

*These Portraits of John and Elizabeth adorn the Wildermuth House today.*

He came to California with the intent of using his skill to obtain his wealth in the gold fields. But his luck ran differently, and he ultimately returned to his skill as a stone mason to make his living rather than as a gold miner. He was probably far more successful as a mason than he would have been as a miner.

Watt built several buildings in the west county area. Each building was built of stone quarried only a short distance away so as to reduce the time and effort to transport large quantities of heavy stone. Watt per-

sonally oversaw the quarrying of the stone after which it was sledded to the building site. Each building bears the distinct hand hewn markings of his personal handiwork. It was said that the only tools he used were an awkward, heavy saw and a stone adze. His adze marks were so precise that they were as distinctive as fingerprints. Watt's attention to detail was so careful that stone in his buildings fit together with only minimal need for mortar. (The heavier use of mortar and minimally hewn natural stone is more characteristic of the Italian masonry prevalent in the Mother Lode). And Watt's buildings have withstood the test of time weathering over 100 years and are still quite structurally sound.

Watt is credited with having built some ten to twelve homes in the area. Most of his work occurred between 1858 and 1862. Although he lived to better than the age of 75, he must have been a healthy fellow in his late forties when he undertook these constructions. Some of the buildings that Watt is known to have built are the Wheat home in Double Springs, and the Late home in Valley Springs, and the Hill home near Paloma (*Las Calaveras*, October 1956). Longevity was built into these walls, as witnessed by the Wheat home which eventually consecutively housed eight generations of that family.

## The Wildermuth House

John and Elizabeth acquired land for a cattle ranch and took up permanent residence near Campo Seco. They quickly built a wood cabin and lived there between 1856 and 1861 where the first two of their eight children were born. With a growing ranch and family, they decided to build a permanent home. Naturally they quickly recruited their friend Watt to build the house. Since John himself was an accomplished carpenter, the construction of the house was a collaborative effort.

The stone for the house was quarried from a sandstone cliff only two hundred yards from the house. Each stone was laid carefully in place by Watt. The window frames, porches, and steep roof were added by John. John's hand was evident in the fine tooling of the heavy roof beams that straddled the structure. The narrow wood porches in the front and back ran the length of the house. The back porch was high enough above ground level to provide access by stone steps at either end. Inside, the house was divided by a partition that ran the full length. Two large rooms in the front were heated by large fireplaces, and the rooms in the back, the kitchen, and the bedrooms, had coal and wood burning stoves. Interestingly, the flues are not straight up and down, but are angled from the offset fireplace and stoves that join into one opening which leads to the

*continued. . .*

chimney located at the exact center of the roof gables. The interior walls were finished in a fine plaster made of limestone from nearby Lancha Plana which was located approximately where the present day Pardee Dam is now located. The interior walls were always painted a cool white. John completed the picture with carefully crafted tongue-and-groove wood floors and ceilings. Descendants fondly remember the fine carpenter's tools that John owned and had used to build the house.

Other aspects of the property include additional buildings such as a barn and a granary. A stone wall surrounds the house and is clearly evident in old family photographs. To reach the front door of the house, visitors climbed a carefully constructed stone stile over the wall, which was apparently installed to keep the cattle out of the front yard so loved by Elizabeth. This wall, the stile, and a large corral were all built of stone apparently judged unsuitable by Watt for the house. Although sturdy, these other stone features are enhanced with mortar or native uncut rocks.

As with all good home sites, the Wildermuth's house was built near a spring. A fig tree, believed to have been one of the largest Calaveras County, grew next to the spring. Water from the spring was transported to the house via a trough and pipe. Elizabeth made good use of this supply of water to sustain her many flowers, shrubs, and trees. The homestead even included a cork oak, which had been planted earlier by the old cabin site to see if it could survive in the Campo Seco climate. Of particular note was a special rose known as the "Covered Wagon Rose", a very old variety now extremely rare. Cuttings of this rose were shared among the residents of the area and can still be found at the Wheat home today.

The house was completed in 1861 and bears that date in stone on its visage. Prior to moving into the



*The Wildermuth House ruins as seen by residents of Calaveras County for 30 years until it was restored in 1971. The solid stone walls built by William Watt have remained intact for over 135 years.* photo courtesy of EBMUD

new house Elizabeth had born two daughters, Emma Elizabeth, born February 28, 1857, and Theo Susan, born on January 12, 1859. Their next child, Mary Helen, was born on May 13 1860, and may or may not have been born in the new house. The remaining children were Ada Wing, born July 31, 1862; Isaac Brandt, born June 18, 1864; John Andrew, born July 20, 1868; Newton Perry, born August 8, 1868 (there is a discrepancy in the records of the birth and death dates of John and Newton); and lastly Reason Good, born August 23, 1870. Other than Emma, who died at only three years of age, all of the children outlived their parents. John and Elizabeth lived securely in their stone house for the remainder of their lives. John passed away on April 1, 1893, and Elizabeth followed him on December 11, 1904. Their fourth daughter Ada never married and remained at home with her parents until her mother's death. After her mother died Ada joined her four brothers who had moved to the Selma District near Fresno where they continued their ranching tradition. Ada eventually outlived all of her siblings and did not pass away until 1953. Upon her passing she was fondly remembered by her surviving nieces and nephews. She was considered the last descendant in California bearing the Wildermuth name.



Ada left the stone house in 1906 two years after her mother's death. The house had been a home for the Wildermuths for 45 years. It remained vacant until 1909, however it was eventually severely damaged by a grass fire in the late 1940s. But the house had been built with permanence in mind by the two master craftsmen, Wildermuth and Watt. Although much of the wood features had been destroyed by the fire the stone walls remained intact. In fact the stone shell became somewhat of a landmark. Eventually the property was acquired by the East Bay Municipal Utility District in conjunction with the Pardee Dam watershed. In the early 1970's EBMUD decided to renovate the famous house.

## The Wildermuth Legacy

Descendants of Johann Wildermuth have faithfully chronicled their heritage. Although much of the family remains in the Pennsylvania area, branches of Johann's descendants have been documented throughout the United States. Admirable qualities seem to run in the blood of this respectable family. As stated in the family genealogy:

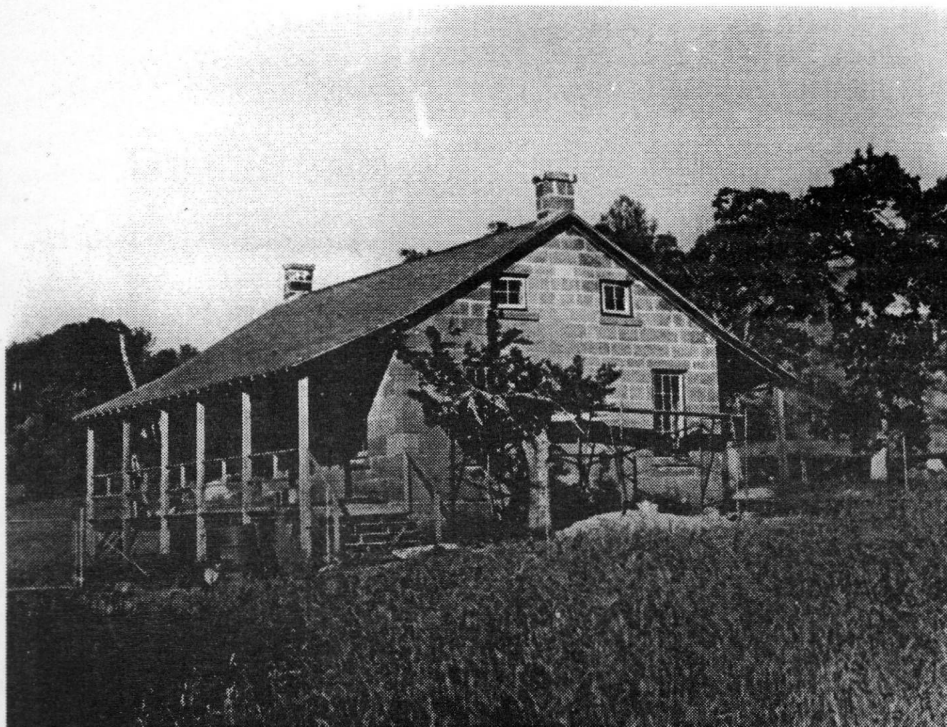
*"The Wildermuth family has a long history in this country and its members have been God-fearing law abiding people. If none have achieved world fame neither has the name been featured in sensational news headlines. It's members reflect a cross section of American life, representing a great variety of occupations scattered across the nation. Their emphasis on education is seen in every generation. Two interests which recur so frequently that they may almost be described as family characteristics are musical talent and an interest in the general field of medicine. They have served their county in time of war from the American Revolution to the Korean conflict and lost their lives. Indeed a true picture of America can be drawn from the lives of the generations of Wildermuths..."*

Strength and longevity are two other characteristics that could be used to describe this family. These features can also be found in the stone home of John and Elizabeth Wildermuth in Campo Seco. Similarly, such traits can be found in another such building created by another member of the Wildermuth family. A church was constructed at the farm of Daniel Wildermuth Jr. (John's uncle's son) back home in Ohio some time before 1859. The church was eventually moved to the farm of another Wildermuth family member in 1875 so as to be more accessible in conjunction with a new road having been built nearby. Today the 19 acre complex is known as the Wildermuth Memorial Church and Youth Center and has been restored by the Wildermuth Association as a gift of E. F. Wildermuth, sixth generation descendant of Johann. These enduring buildings, the church in Ohio and the stone house in California, are truly a testament to the legacy of Johann Wildermuth.

## The Historical Society Connection

In 1971 the Calaveras County Historical Society joined with EBMUD to celebrate the refurbishment of the Wildermuth house near Campo Seco. A picnic

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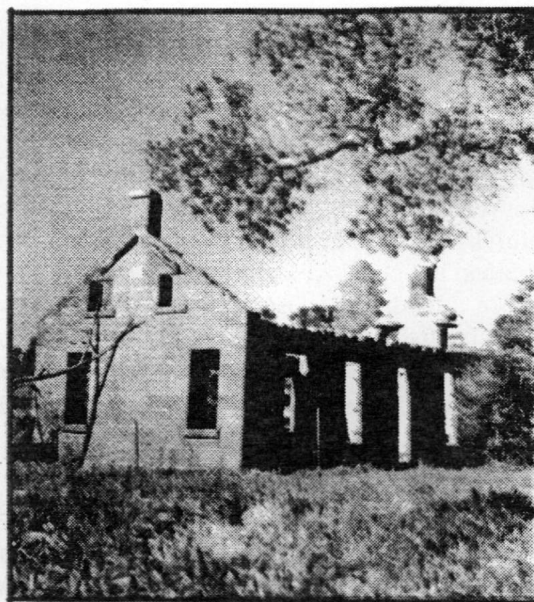


*With a new roof, porch and window, the Wildermuth House as it appeared after its restoration in 1971. photo from the archives of the Calaveras County Historical Society*

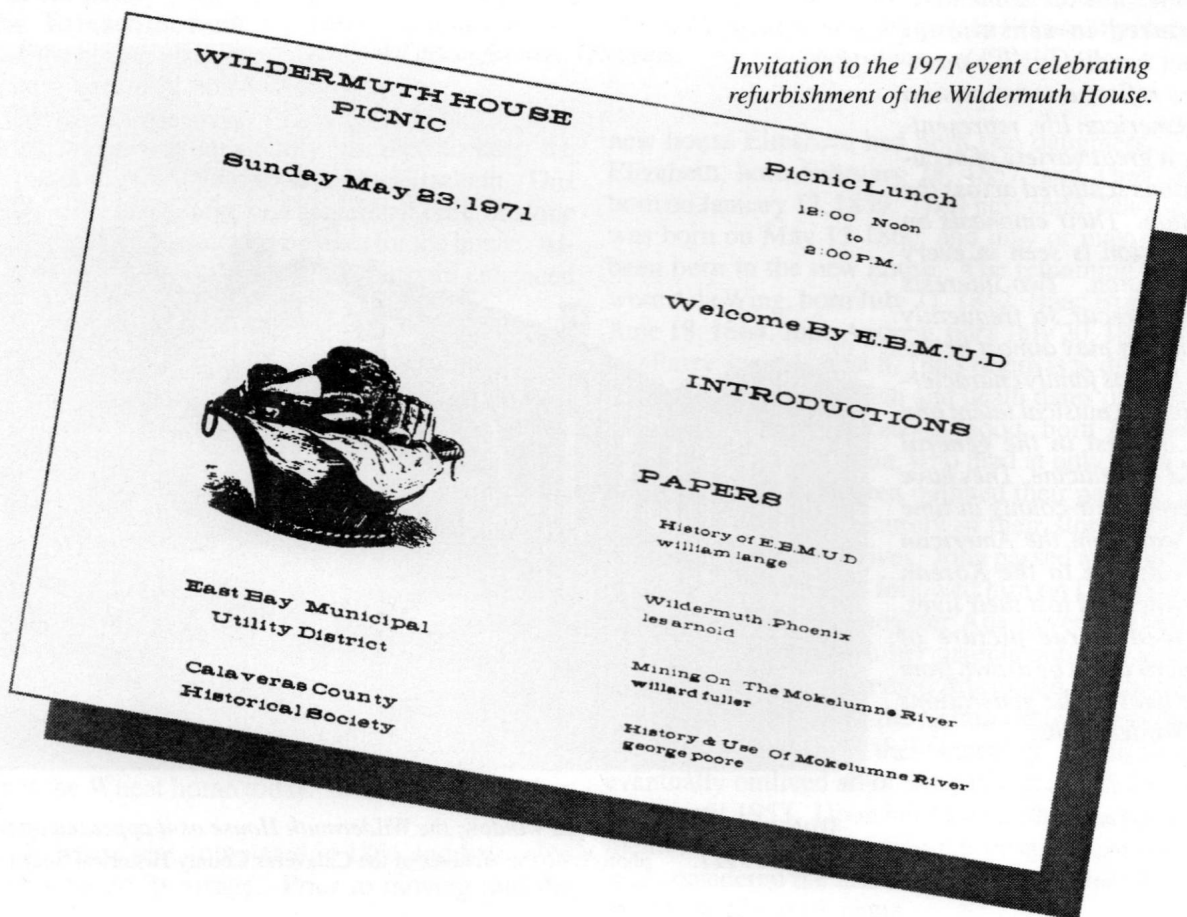
lunch was held at the site and various talks were given by dignitaries. The event emphasized the community's desire to see the important landmark remain respected and cared for. EBMUD has attempted to reconstruct as much of the house as funding permits, and is dedicated to its conservatorship of this important building. By special arrangement the Historical Society is periodically allowed to use the house for special events or meetings. Long time residents of the area enjoy attending these events as it allows for fond reminiscing about the good old days of cattle ranching and strong craftsmanship. graphs and research for this article.

*Las Calaveras* is grateful to Walt Mellin of EBMUD for his assistance with photographs and research for this article. Much of the material used in this article is based on the Wildermuth family's book (entitled Johann David Wildermuth and His Descendants 1752 - 1964, 1995 edition), and material compiled by EBMUD which was based on research initially contributed by George Poore of the Calaveras County Historical Society.

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WILDERMUTH HOUSE  
RUINS



*Invitation to the 1971 event celebrating refurbishment of the Wildermuth House.*



## NEW LIFETIME MEMBERSHIPS AVAILABLE

In response to several requests, the Directors of the Historical Society have created a new category of membership. A Lifetime Membership can now be purchased for \$250 for an individual. This new membership provides generous support to the society and guarantees a subscription to *Las Calaveras* plus all of the privileges of membership for the remainder of the Lifetime Member's life. With annual memberships presently at \$16 per year, this new Lifetime Member opportunity can really be a bargain. Wouldn't it be a great gift idea for your loved one? Or as a house warming gift for the recent retiree who is finally returning to Calaveras County? How about as a graduation gift for that special grad who is going to college to study history? The possibilities are limitless.

For more information, contact Dee at the Historical Society office at 754-1058.

**\$1,000 REWARD**  
for information leading to the safe return of a  
**Civil War Cannon stolen from the**  
**People's Cemetery in San Andreas**  
**Calaveras County California**  
**September 27, 1998**

*Is this Reward poster correct? Is the date of the theft actually September of 1998?? Regrettably we are sad to inform our members that this theft did in fact occur. One of our beloved Civil War cannons was stolen from the San Andreas Cemetery. It is truly difficult to comprehend how a #12 Field Howitzer weighing 790 pounds could be stolen, but it was. Law enforcement agencies and Civil War organizations across the country have been notified. The Historical Society and the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors joined to offer the \$1,000 reward. Anyone with information that could lead to the recovery of the cannon is strongly encouraged to contact the Calaveras County Sheriff's Department at 209-754-6500, or the Historical Society at 209-754-1058.*

*Readers may recall that the cannons have not only stood as sentinels over the cemetery for years, but have often been proudly featured on the pages of *Las Calaveras*. On occasion the Historical Society holds functions with the cannon as the centerpiece such as when they were recently fired in a re-enactment. Artifacts such as the cannon are our pictures of the past and we do not want to discourage our benefactors from bequeathing such treasures to us. Let us all join in this effort to prevent further thefts. Unchecked theft and vandalism can only be prevented with more diligent attention to our duties. The easiest way you can help is to volunteer today. Increased personnel in the museum will help increase surveillance and reduce the threat of theft. Won't you please volunteer?*

# Calaveras County Historical Society

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

## OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS

President	Donna Schantz, San Andreas
Vice President	Joan Donleavy, Paloma
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*Las Calaveras*  
Office Manager

The *Las Calaveras* is published quarterly by the Calaveras Country Historical Society. A subscription to the *Las Calaveras* comes with membership in the Historical Society for \$16.00 per year. Non-members may obtain copies of the *Las Calaveras* from the Historical Society office. The original historical material presented in the *Las Calaveras* is not copy-righted 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.

The Calaveras County Historical Society is a non-profit corporation. They meet 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 Calaveras County Historical Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 am to 4:00 pm, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058. The Society also operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm in the historic county courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museum while in the area.

## NEW MEMBERS

The Calaveras Historical Society welcomes the following new members:

### DECEMBER 1998

Mike & Heidi Fischer of Mokelumne Hill, CA

### JANUARY 1999

Mr & Mrs. John Armstrong of Berkeley, CA  
Debbie Nunes of Mountain Ranch, CA  
Mr. & Mrs. Tim Laddish of Berkely, CA  
Mr. & Mrs. Robert Robertson, winters in Valley Springs, CA and summers in Rochester, MN  
Mr. & Mrs. Roark Weber of San Andreas, CA  
Mr. & Mrs. Bernard Swanson of Seguin, TX

### FEBRUARY 1999

Don & Lois Conklin of San Andreas, CA  
Don & Mary Cross of Angels Camp, CA  
George Harris of Valley Springs, CA  
Fred & Anne Heck of Mountain Ranch, CA  
Elaine Northcote of Burson, CA  
Mr. & Mrs. Presley Peek of Mokelumne Hill, CA  
Robert & Jane Steel of Stockton, CA  
Tuolumne County Genealogical Society of Sonora, CA  
John Munn of Angels Camp, CA  
John & Peggy Hutchinson of Murphys, CA  
Dennis Sanfilippo of Angels Camp, CA  
Lynn Miller of San Andreas, CA  
John Alan Sherman of Hollywood, CA  
Barbara R. Powell of Sacramento, CA  
Glen Malliet & Patti Raggio of Mountain Ranch, CA

## IN MEMORIUM

The Calaveras County Historical Society is sad to note the passing of our friend Gladys Shally in January, 1999.

## MUSEUM DONATIONS

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

### DECEMBER 1998

**William Lafranchi**, Pittsburg, PA: \$100.00 cash for the George Hoepfer Scholarship Fund.

**Amy Mathis**, Stockton, CA: Xerox copy of the Keystone School in 1919. Students are named.

### JANUARY 1999

**Harold & Nadeen Womble**, Stockton, CA: \$25.00 in memory of Elsie (Womble) Blazer.

**Alice M. Nelson**, Rail Road Flat, CA : Various magazines from 1906 to 1976, Bible, Photo Album, Newspapers.

**Fred Cuneo**, Calaveritas, CA: 150 year history of St. Andrew's Parish Catholic church.