



MEMOIRS OF LOWELL ANTHONY “BUZZ” AIROLA LIFE IN THE EARLY 1900s IN ANGELS CAMP

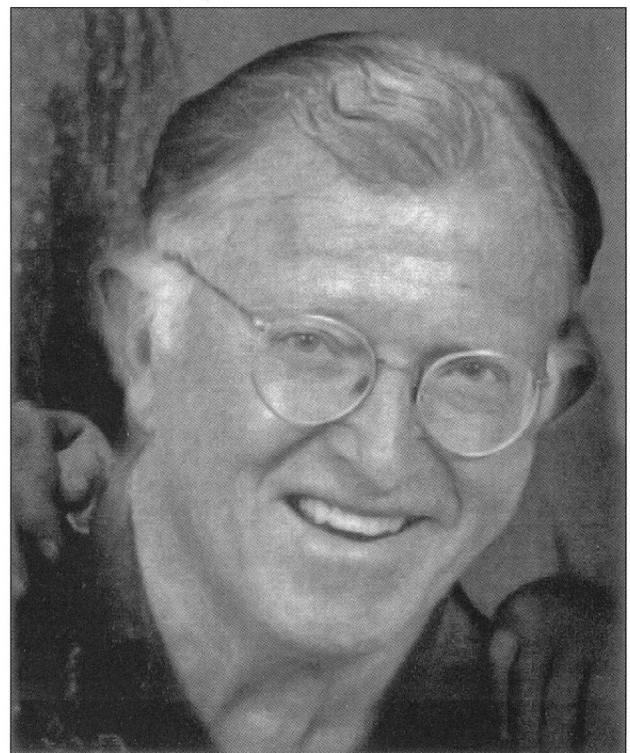
Submitted by Daniel A. Airola • Edited by Charity Maness

Lowell Anthony “Buzz” Airola, 2-28-1926 to 10-19-2004, was a member of a long-time Calaveras County family who lived and ranched in and around Angels Camp. In the 1990s Buzz wrote a personal memoir for family members. This article is a slightly edited version of the portions of his memoir pertaining to his life growing up in Angels Camp and his life as a child in the ranching business during the 1920s to early 1940s. Buzz contracted polio in 1937 at the young age of 11; this changed his life. I have inserted several comments based on things told to me by Buzz, but not included in his personal memoir—Daniel A. Airola

Family History

I was born and raised in Angels Camp, Calaveras County. My mother, Bessie Donovan Airola lived all her life on the “Hawkeye” ranch, near Cosgrave Road on Highway 49 north of Angels Camp, except for the years raising her four children in town. Her grandparents, David and Margaret Maloney, emigrated from Ireland in the early 1850s. Maloney worked a mining claim at Chili Gulch near Mokelumne Hill with his cousin John Donaldson,

where they struck a gold pocket worth about \$15,000. They split the money and bought ranches. Maloney purchased the Hawkeye, which contained about 700



acres of pasture, and later his daughter Lucy homesteaded an additional contiguous 100 acres.

My maternal grandfather, Bill Donovan, sailed to San Francisco from New Zealand in the 1890s when he was 20 years old. He was a surveyor. While in Angels Camp surveying a mine, he met my grandmother Kate, and they subsequently married. They lived on the Hawkeye, raising sheep and cattle. The ranch also was a stage coach stop. The large ranch house had six rooms downstairs, nine bedrooms on the second floor, and a large third floor attic. A separate building was used as a store and dance hall.

My mother told us a story of the notorious stage coach robber, Black Bart, who stayed at the ranch when she was a young girl. He got up early and robbed the stage of its gold shipment near Fourth Crossing at San Antonio Creek. He was remembered as quite a gentleman.

My father, Antone "Tone" Merlin Airola (12-2-1893 to 7-15-1989), was one of two sons of Giovanni "John" (4-14-1868 to 2-2-1940) and Emma Yokum Airola (1870 to 9-1-1965). John's father Emmanuel "Manuelo" Airola (1-1836 to 5-26-1872) emigrated from near Genoa, Italy, in the early 1850s. He married Caroline "Charlotte" Figaro (5-8-1848 to 11-29-1929) who came from the same region in Italy. They lived in Melones on the Stanislaus River, which is now inundated by the New Melones Reservoir. Caroline operated a boarding house and Emmanuel ran a bar. They had four boys: Augusto, Antonio, Giovanni "John", and Luigi. Luigi died at 15 months old, and Emmanuel died shortly thereafter, perhaps both of an epidemic.

Caroline was apparently a resourceful and good-hearted business-woman. My father told me that she took care of a number of older miners at her boarding house in exchange for title to lands that they homesteaded, which became the ranch she sold to her grandson, Tone Airola.

After Emmanuel's death, Caroline married Balthasar Riedel, a fiddler, and had three more children: George, William, and Josie. Caroline traded her boarding house for property on Red Hill Road near Carson Hill. My grandfather John Airola got one of the parcels, 300 acres called The Frenchman's Ranch where he ran several hundred cows. He gave names to every cow and could recognize each one by looking at them. He kept track of them in a small spiral tablet he kept in his shirt pocket. John and his

wife Emma lived there until he died in 1939; the house burned down in 1940.

John and Emma Airola had two sons. The oldest, Virgil (5-17-1892 to 12-1-1980) graduated from the University of California in 1914 and Boalt Law school in 1916. Virgil served as Calaveras County District Attorney for 24 years (1927-51), and Superior Court Judge (1956-1964). The youngest, Tone, left school after the 4th grade to help his father at the ranch.

I have a vivid memory of my grandparents' house from when I visited there as a young boy. My grandfather John had a pet buck deer that he raised after he found him abandoned as a fawn. During the deer hunting season, John put a bell on him and kept him in the yard of the house. When he was in the yard, a trip to the outhouse was risky because he would charge you. My grandmother had a long stick with a small pitch fork attached, which she would use to fend him off. As I recall, he never injured anyone though.

My parents, Tone and Bessie Airola, were married in 1922. They purchased a home in Angels Camp (now on Highway 49 south of downtown) and lived there until 1956 when they built a home on the Hawkeye Ranch. I was born in 1926, second in a family of four children; Robert, John William "Bill", Lowell "Buzz" and Beverly.

Shortly after marrying, Tone bought 3,000 acres of grazing land from his grandmother Caroline. This acreage was a combination of a number of homesteads. For years afterwards, we referred to these properties by the names of the original homesteaders such as Rolleri, Marshall, etc. Before Tone bought a car in the late 1920s, he rode horseback about four miles each way to his ranches; ranches which are now under the New Melones Reservoir and in the adjacent recreation lands.

My parents had mortgaged the ranch after Tone suffered a serious back injury while riding his horse which caused him to be bedridden for nine months. Fortunately, he made a complete recovery, yet soon thereafter the Great Depression came, and it was never clear until many years later if the debt would be paid off.

Buzz told us that the bank threatened to foreclose on the loan many times, but Tone argued with them saying that he doubted that they could find anyone else during the Depression who could afford to buy the ranches, since the cattle business was so bad. And

he told them that they would never find anyone else who would work harder to make a go of it in the cattle business. So they let him carry the note for many years with payment of only the interest on the loan.

Early Years in Angels Camp

The Depression years of the 1930s in the Mother Lode region were unlike much of the rest of the country. The gold mines continued to operate so towns did not see the severe conditions of elsewhere. The cattle business, however, was hit very hard. The income from the cattle sold would not cover the interest on our mortgage. We had about 400 cows plus yearling heifers and steers. To add insult to injury, the weather during that period was horrible. Winters were cold and dry, so cattle had to be fed, if hay was available. Fortunately, we were able to put up hay because we had water to irrigate clover, which was cut and stacked. When the ranches were purchased, there was a free right from Angels Creek for about 100 miners-inches of water—with a miners inch equaling approximately 1.5 cubic feet per minute. In addition, the cattle were taken to the higher mountains in the Sierra Nevada for summer pasture, which allowed us to maintain the dry grass on the home range to winter the cattle.

I have fond memories of my boyhood in Angels Camp. The town had a varied population of about 900. The Italians lived in an area called Purdyville. There were Serbs and other southern Europeans, referred to as “Austrians”. There were also some Welch, English, German, and Irish. Many of the men worked in the mines, where they earned \$4.00 per day per shift. Otherwise, cattle ranching was the predominant livelihood as logging was at a standstill at that time.

Angels had two hotels, several bars, a livery and garage, several restaurants, a movie theater, drug store, meat markets, grocery stores, and a few offices. You could get a haircut for 25 cents. There were many mines nearby, some of which are well-known such as Utica, Gold Cliff, Lightner, Stickles, Calaveras Central, and Carson Hill (Morgan). When the miners got off their shifts, many headed for the bars, where the first drink was always free.

Grade School

Our house was in the town area called “the annex”, which was across Angels Creek south of town. The Angels “grade” (elementary) school was

on Back Street, now called Finnegan Lane. There was a foot bridge I would use to cross over the creek to get to school.

The school was built in 1912 and had four class rooms with two grades to a room. The grounds were rough; some flat and some hilly. The janitor, Bob Snow, kept some sheep on the grounds to keep the grass down. There were four teachers, three women and one man, who served as both a teacher and principal. Each class had 15 to 25 students

Some of the older students were difficult to discipline. Students were not automatically passed, so some of the 7th and 8th graders, mainly boys, were 15 or 16 years old. The discipline was usually physical in nature. The principal, who we called behind his back “Baldy Giraffe”, would take the offenders behind the school to the sheep shed and apply corporal punishment.

Most of us were afraid of the principal because of the stories the big boys told us of what happened there. I remember going there several times. He would have you place your hands in front of you, palms up, and he would strike them with a “cat-of-nine-tails”, a stick with nine strings of buckskin attached. If you flinched or cried out, he would double the dose. We never complained of this punishment to our parents, because it would be likely that you would then get worse punishment at home.

We played a variety of games at school, during which there was much arguing and fighting. The school yard was not well supervised. Games included spinning tops, marbles, and ball games. The boys had to be careful not to play “sissy games” such as hopscotch or “Tom ball”, or they would get teased.

Baseball was a big favorite, which I played a lot with my best friend Charlie (“Cha-cha”) Segale. We spent as much time as possible playing. Cha-cha was a Yankees fan and I was a Tiger fan, which were the best teams in the American League. We followed them closely in the newspapers. Only the World Series games were on the radio then. I had many disputes with my father over baseball, because he wanted me to help at the ranch during non-school time.

I got in trouble at school sometimes because I was aggressive in trying to control the other kids, perhaps because I was applying the harsh techniques I had learned from my father and grandfather in control-

ling horses and dogs. I was sent home on several occasions, but my mother would march me right back to school and after a heated discussion with the Principal, I was usually allowed to return to classes.

Ranch Life

Goat-raising

There were many jobs on the ranch that took the romance out of cattle ranching. I helped with branding, dehorning, castrating, and marking the calves. We had fences to build and repair, clearing rocks from the hayfields, loading manure by shovel and spreading it on the hayfields, as well as countless other chores.

By far the worse chore for me was caring for our angora goats. We had about 200 animals that were mainly used to clear the land. Goats required special "hogwire" fencing, which was more difficult and expensive to build than typical 4-strand barbed wire fencing for cattle. After the live oaks were cut for wood, they prolifically grew sprouts, which would shade the ground and prevent the grass from growing. The goats would eat these sprouts and eventually kill the trees, which would increase forage for the cattle.

Their mohair also was a small cash crop and goat kids were a popular meat at Easter for many families. When the goats were sheared, I usually got the job of helping the shearer. The goats were penned, and I would catch one by the leg and drag it to the shearer. After the goat was fleeced, I would take the mohair and stuff it into a burlap bag. This was a dirty, smelly, sickening chore, after which I could "smell goat" for many days.

Another major problem with goats occurred during the kidding season. Goats travel in herds and where the leader goes the herd follows. The nannies would drop their kids in the field and continue to follow the herd. Every evening, I would have to go over the field to pick up the kids and take them to the shed where the goats were locked up at night. (The coyotes would kill them if they were left out overnight.) I used a horse with four barley sacks attached to my saddle to carry the kids to the shed. In the process, my smell would get on them, and many times the mothers would refuse to claim them. They were dumb and stubborn. I always had a group of orphan goat kids that I fed at the barn where I also milked several cows for home use.

Wood-cutting

Because the cattle business was so bad during the Depression, we made our money selling firewood for stoves in town. Wood was the only source of energy available locally, used for both cooking and heating. My father always needed help hauling wood and other chores after school and on weekends. He had a 2-ton stake-side Chevy truck for wood hauling. He would be waiting at the school gate when I got out of school. We would go to the ranch, load the wood on the truck, and drive to town to deliver it there for \$7.00 per cord.

Wood cutting was year-round work that was fit in around other tasks. The work was mainly done by family members, with some hired help, including some of the local Miwuk Indians.

One Miwuk, Romie Dixie, lived in a cabin on the ranch and worked for Tone for nearly 50 years, mainly doing irrigating of the summer pasture during later years.

In early years, wood choppers would cut down the trees, saw it, and stack it in tiers (4 x 8 ft stacks). The length of cut wood would vary from 12 to 16 inches, to fit the various customers' stoves. In later years, Tone rigged up a 24-inch circular saw powered by a large gasoline engine. The wood choppers would cut the wood limbs into 6- to 8-foot lengths, which were put on a sled and pulled by horses, and the limbs would be stacked in a line so they could be placed along side of the saw. Some of the stacks were hundreds of feet long. My dad worked the saw, the wood choppers picked up the limbs and placed them on the table for the saw and I would take the cut pieces of wood and throw them away from the saw. The wood was then split and stacked into tiers. The work was very noisy, boring and exhausting. My ears would ring for days afterward.

Although wood cutting was dangerous work, only my father sustained injuries of any consequence. Once, he was sawing a very small limb that caught between the teeth of the saw and flipped his hand up and over into the saw. His ring finger was splintered, and his middle finger nearly cut off. He wrapped it in his handkerchief and we went to town for the doctor. I helped him drive to town by shifting of the truck's gears, as his right hand was useless. The doctor wanted to amputate the middle finger and expressed little hope of saving the ring finger. Tone would not agree and directed the doctor to place the fingers on splints and do as much suturing as possible for the

nerve, blood, and tendon supply. The doctor said that infection was certain, but the fingers healed without infection and, although there was some limited motion in several joints, the hand was about 80% useful. Subsequently, Tone made a metal frame for the saw that prevented sticks from catching.

Cattle Ranching

Working cattle was my favorite ranch activity. Although it was work, it was also fun. I especially liked riding the horses.

On the ranch I had to handle a number of animals, including horses, cattle, goats, and dogs. Good horses and dogs were highly valued. One good cow dog could take the place of several cowboys, especially in rough brush-covered terrain. At a young age, I was always fascinated with how my grandfather John and father Tone handled and controlled animals, especially horses and dogs. They were severe disciplinarians, but not cruel. They made the animals mind them but relied on them for help. I learned early on this was a way of controlling the animals. For example, we had a stud horse named Joe that had to be kept isolated from the other horses. We did not have a water source at the barn where he was kept, so he had to be led to water several times a day. When being led there, he would become excited and jump and rear up, and whinny loudly. He'd try to pull the rope to run away. At a very early age, I was able to control him by yelling and swearing at him to keep his attention while yanking on the lead rope.

Spring was a busy time with the cattle. Several times the herds would be brought in to "do up" the calves. This involved putting the calves down, using ropes around their hind legs and around their necks to stretch them out, and then several men or boys (or on occasion, my sister) would mark their ears. Our mark was a slit in the left ear and an under-slit in the right ear. We branded them with a hot iron with our "lazy H" brand, vaccinated them for black leg disease, castrated the males, and dehorned them. Dehorning often resulted in a lot of blood loss before we used a hot iron to singe the cut area, which cauterized the wound and stopped the bleeding.

The Spring Cattle Drive

The Airolos drove their cattle to the mountains every summer, where green grass was available. Although Buzz did not note how old he was when he began going for the summer, it was clear that he went

for at least several years before he contacted polio at 11 years old. He probably began going around 1934–1936, at ages eight to ten.

Every year, we took the cattle to the mountains for green grass from early June (just after school let out) through early October. The "mountain cattle" (those who we had taken before) started to walk the fences in May, anxious to get started for the mountains. My grandfather even told stories of cows and calves going to and from Angels Camp to the mountains on their own.

The cattle drive was a 4- to 5-day trip and getting the cattle ready for the trip to the mountains took several weeks. Many cows calved in the spring, so the smallest calves would not keep up with the herd. They had to be cut out of the herd to be hauled and matched with their mother each night. We strapped bells onto the necks of many of the cows so they could be found at gathering time in October.

The cattle would graze for the summer in open forest lands between the North and Middle Forks of the Stanislaus River, an area of hundreds of thousands of acres. When cattle were assembled at the ranch south of Angels, there would be about 600 "head," including calves. It required six to eight cowboys and three to four dogs to drive them.

The first day was an easy drive from Tone's ranch to his father's ranch on Red Hill Road, which connected with Highway 4 near Vallecito. Most of the roads were fenced, so the only complication was bringing in the calves that could get through the fences. If you rode at the tail end of the herd, you directed the dogs by voice and hand and arm commands. We put a dog on the calf to get it to return it to the herd, but never more than one dog, as they would "down" the calf. Usually, when the calf saw the dog coming after him or her, it would return through the fence to its mother.

The second day was a 15-mile drive on Highway 4 to Avery, where there were corrals. The major problem on the highway was getting cars through the herd from the tail end. Many drivers were impatient, cranky, and belligerent. The riders on the tail end had bull whips, which they used on the "dog-fighters" (cows that would turn around and try to hook the dogs). If a car drove into a cow or calf, I would crack the whip over or on the hood of the truck or car. This usually took care of the problem, although there was much cursing and threatening by some.

From Avery to the cattle range at the Grohl's Meadow camp was a two-day drive, depending on the route. In the earlier years before 1935, there were no roads to Grohl's. The cattle were driven to "Squaw Hollow" on the North Fork of the Stanislaus for crossing. This area is now in the North Grove of the Calaveras Big Trees State Park. There, the cattle were herded to the river, swelled from snow melt and spring rains, to cross.

It was a herculean job to get the cattle to enter the river. Once you were able to get one into the water and swimming, all, including the little calves, would follow. At the tail end, you had to be very careful that no calves got separated from the herd and ran back. The dogs would have major problems getting a single calf to cross if the herd was already across.

One year we had 20 head of cattle get caught in the swift river, but they all got out downstream and caught up with the herd. It was then a 15-mile trip from the river to the summer cow camp at Grohl's.

Buzz often told us of a mishap he had crossing the North Fork as a young boy. He entered the river on his horse to discover that the horse could not swim and went to the bottom of the river. The rushing water knocked Buzz off his horse. With quick thinking, he saved himself by grabbing the horse's tail and holding on for dear life. The horse crossed by bouncing several times off the river bottom and eventually dragged Buzz ashore, wet, cold, scared, but otherwise all right. On they rode to camp.

In 1935, "Roosevelt's boys", the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) completed a 25-mile road from Dorrington on Highway 4 to Grohl's. We then drove the cattle on that route, as there was a bridge across the river. Getting the cattle across the bridge was similarly difficult to crossing the river, but there were log fence wings on either side of the bridge approach, which helped steer the cattle.

Summer in the Mountains

Before the road was built, we had to use pack horses to bring our supplies for the summer. We did not go back and forth, but rather stayed at Grohl's most of the summer. After the road was completed and we could drive to camp, we went back-and-forth to Angels Camp during the summer.

The CCC's not only built roads, but also spent a lot of time digging out gooseberries (*Ribes roezlii*), which were said to host a beetle that could kill the fir

trees. (Actually, gooseberry is a host for white pine blister rust, (*Cronartium ribicola*) which kills sugar pines (*Pinus lambertiana*)). These young men laid out a string to mark their work progress, to be sure that the ground was thoroughly covered. These strings were seen all over the mountains. For several summers the CCCs maintained their camp at Grohl's. They allowed us to eat at their commissary, which served first rate food. It was interesting to talk to these boys, who were from all walks of life and all areas of the country. Most of them had a deadly fear of rattlesnakes and bears; both of which were plentiful at the time.

Before the roads were built, trout were plentiful in all the creeks, including Beaver, Skull, Griswald, Soap, and McCormick creeks. I remember riding my horse into pools along these creeks and catching fish off the horse. Once the roads were completed, however, the fishing deteriorated.

During the Depression, cattle were worth only \$30.00 a head or less. Why would my dad spend so much arduous time and effort under these circumstances? I don't think monetary value was the key concern. It was that he was in the business of raising cattle, and it was his responsibility to act accordingly.

Fall Cattle Gathering

In mid-September and for about a month thereafter, the cattle were gathered into small pastures and driven home in several trips. Maintaining enough "feed" in the gathering pastures was always a concern, so you had to get the first gathered bunch out as soon as possible. The river was never a concern in the fall because the water was very low at that time of year.

Gathering the cattle in the fall was difficult because of the vast area over which they were scattered. The belled cows were easy to locate. The real trick to gathering cattle was to train them to come to certain areas where we could gather them. We would train them to come by calling them when we put out salt. Cowmen's cow calls varied. Ours were something like this: "Whooley; sak, sak, sak the cows; come boss, come boss; come bally salt the cows". Starting in mid-summer, we would stop providing salt so by fall they were very salt-hungry and would rush to answer your calls.

As a young boy, I had mixed feelings about gathering the cattle on the summer range. It required long hours of riding, usually alone, over a large area of heavily timbered mountains. My dad would send

me off in the morning with instructions as to where I should ride, what to do if I found cattle, and where I should meet him at a specific location hours later. An example of his early morning instructions might be: "I want you to take the main trail to Griswold Creek, look up and down the creek in the green spots, then take the trail to the South Grove. There, ride that area that looks good for cattle. Then go to Shumake's, the Brown Boy's cabin to Skull Creek, and on to Oxidine Meadow, where I'll meet you."

I always had trouble remembering the instructions, and somehow the routes and places I travelled through didn't match his descriptions. But God help me if I didn't show up where I was told to be, although I know of many besides myself that did get lost. He could backtrack to find me, but he couldn't afford time to look for a lost cowboy. However, you were not really completely lost, because you could always find your way back to camp eventually, if need be.

If I found cattle along the way, I would salt them, in hopes that they would stay there until we came back on the way to camp. After searching for and finding cattle while riding alone, your problems had just begun. Driving cattle in the forest off of the main trails required much skill and some luck. You had to drive them but then also get ahead of them so you could turn them toward the home pasture. If you were driving young animals, calves or yearlings, they were fast and unpredictable. Sometimes it was smart to give them salt and hold them together until my dad showed up to take charge. Although this work was tedious, stressful, and tiring, it was also enjoyable and rewarding. It taught me to be independent and resourceful at a young age.

After Buzz was stricken with polio he spent more than a year and a half in Shriner's Hospital. When he returned to school after he recovered he found it to be emotionally and educationally stressful. Yet with determination he graduated from Bret Harte High School, followed by U. C. Berkeley and finally Hastings School of Law to become one of the state's first specialists in the practice of Worker's Compensation defending injured workers. Though he lived in Marin County he maintained close ties with his home town eventually passing his ranch and legacy on to his children.

April–June 2019

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Native Daughters of the Golden West—Framed photo of Utica Mine South and North Shafts

Mary Anne Garamendi—Photos of Ray Neilsen at Neilsen Gravel Plant

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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.

April-June 2019

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Doug & Loree Joses—
Converted to Lifetime Membership

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