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A Home In "Copper"

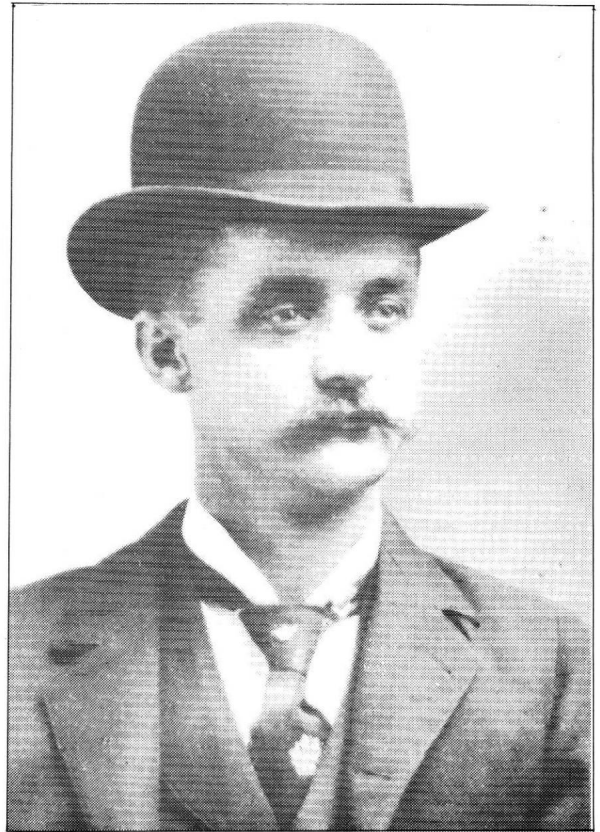
By Francis Howard Riggs

The casual tourist, passing through Copperopolis, might not be much impressed with this old mining town with its crumbling buildings, unsightly mine dumps, and old foundations. But those who take the time to inquire into its history will be well rewarded, for Copperopolis has indeed a fascinating past.

The significant copper mining took place between the 1860's and the 1920's during a succession of booms separated by hard times. Each boom would bring in a fresh influx of miners and others hoping to share in the tangible benefits of the renewed mining, joining the earlier residents who had remained from previous booms. One such newcomer in early 1916, during the World War I boom, was Edgar Leon Riggs, hired by the Calaveras Copper Company as mine foreman.

Riggs had moved west from Kansas to Oklahoma, as a small boy, where his father operated a farm. In 1888, when Edgar was 17, he left home for the new mining excitement at Silverton, Colorado, and went to work underground as a miner. A long, bitter, and violent strike in 1893-4 convinced Edgar that there were better places in which to work. He mined successively in Sonora (Mexico), Arizona, and then in the Tintic mining district in central Utah, working up to the position of mine foreman. While at Tintic in 1906, he married Vera Merrell and they moved back to Mexico for a brief period where their first child, Edgar Merrill, was born in 1908. The Riggs then moved up to the Malachite copper mine in Utah. In 1910, a second son, Francis Howard, was born. Next back to Arizona to Casa Grande, and in the winter of 1914-15, to Mason, Nevada, where Riggs was mine foreman. The following year he moved on to Copperopolis. Son Howard relies on his excellent memory to recall that move.

In December Father was solicited for the job of mine foreman at the Calaveras Copper Company at Copperopolis, California. The price of copper was reaching for the moon, because of the war in Europe. He was offered two hundred and forty dollars a month, plus a house. This was very good wages at that time, because



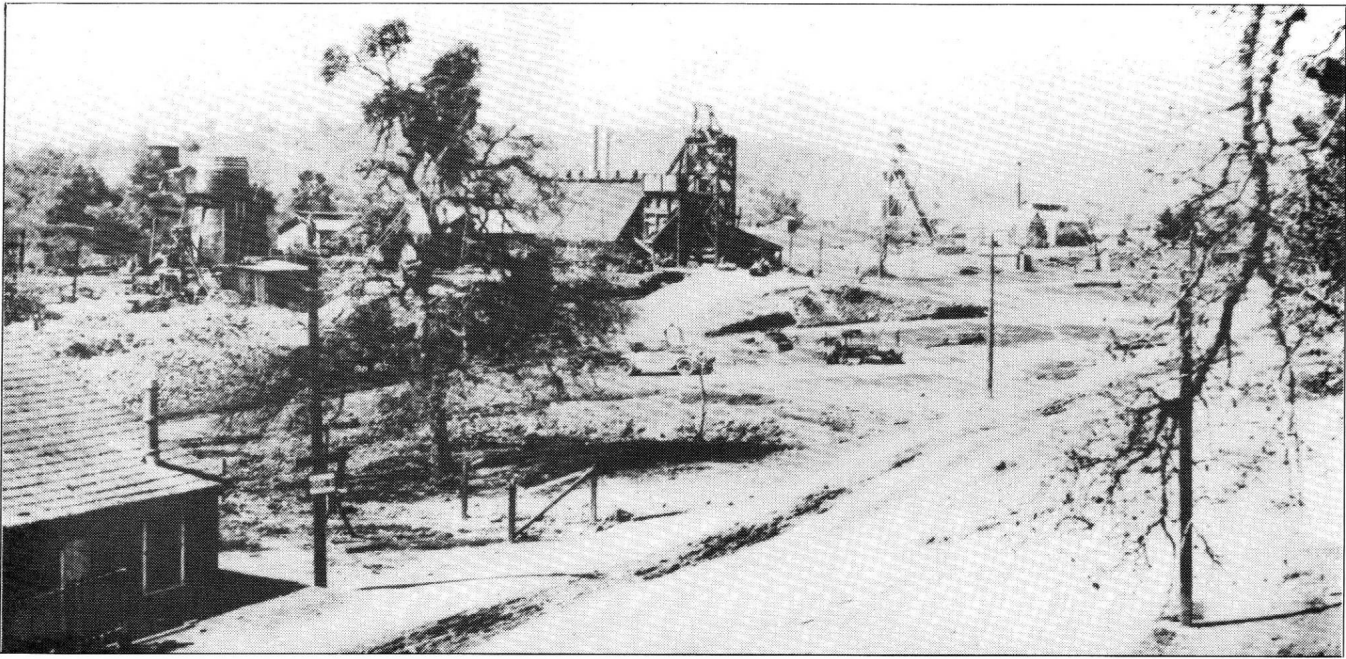
EDGAR LEON RIGGS

1871-1932

He was one of the very knowledgeable, competent, and resourceful mining supervisors typical of the "golden age" of western mining. These were the men that successfully operated mines in those days against incredible difficulties, and who generally rang up large profits for their absentee owners. Yet Riggs' own life was a constant struggle against the vicissitudes of a precarious profession.

miners were working for about three dollars for a ten-hour day and the word overtime had not been coined as yet.

He was to report to work the first of the year, but told them that he would be there the sixth or seventh, because he wanted to stay for my birthday on the fourth of January. This was a very mild winter and we had practically no snowstorms. Father had promised me that he would make ice cream for my birthday, but there was neither ice nor snow available. He drove about twenty miles to a high mountain, and then climbed up about another 2000 feet and loaded a washtub full of icy snow. He then had to drag and slide it back to the Model T, because it was too heavy to carry. The washtub was ruined but we had our ice cream. He left that night on the train for Copperopolis. We could not go because Mother was



THE COPPEROPOLIS MINES

Looking westerly from the south end of town towards the Union and Keystone mines. Both were operated by the same company. The nearest water tank was used for mine pump-out water to be recirculated for recovery of

cement copper by passing the water over tin cans. The tank behind was part of the town water system. The Riggs' home was just off the left edge of the picture, above the rooming house. It is no longer standing.

eights months' pregnant with her third child. There was a large building a hundred yards from our house at Mason that was called and used for a hospital, where my sister Elizabeth was born on February 4. In about a month we packed up and took a train to California. The Ford had been sold because it could not make the climb over Donner Summit, and Father could not spare the time to drive south to Tehachapi and then back north. I also believe he was afraid that he could not cope with any mechanical difficulties that might develop, as there were no places on most of the trip where he might get parts or even gasoline.

We were met in Stockton by Father and had breakfast in a restaurant. This was the only time I can recall eating in a restaurant until I had left home and was on my own. We caught the train to Milton and the horse-drawn stagecoach to Copperopolis, our home for the next six years. Father worked there eight years altogether but we moved to Stockton after six years so that my brother Edgar could go to high school. To us the house in "Copper" was luxurious. The outside walls were concrete, making the house easy to warm in the winter and cool in summer. Mother was thirty-two years old and this was the first time she had ever lived in a house with piped-in water or any kind of electricity or a toilet that wasn't outside with a pit under it. This electricity was from the mining company's generator and was direct current. We had one 25 Watt bulb in the center of each room, but the wiring was 16 gauge, so we could only use about three lights at

one time without blowing a fuse. This current varied with the load at the mine, smelter and mill. Sometimes the bulb showed only a red glow on the filament. There was never a time when it gave as much light as a 25 Watt A.C. bulb. The piped water was creek water, and not potable. But when it was not too muddy we could use it for laundry and dishes. We had a pull-chain toilet that discharged directly into the tiny creek about thirty feet in back of the house. This was called Copper Creek because it was the sump water pumped from the North Shaft of the mine. This water went another half-mile downstream and was then repumped to be used in the flotation mill.

Howard Riggs goes on to describe life in Copperopolis as he remembers it.

We kept 50 to 100 chickens, ducks, a flock of pigeons and always raised a couple of turkeys or geese for the holidays. These animals ran loose, scratching for worms and bugs that thrived in the ground. The chickens roosted up in the oak trees along this creek and when we wanted one for a meal, Father would go out at night and reach up in the tree with a board and poke a chicken in the breast. The sleeping chicken would step over onto the board and be lowered down without even awakening.

During World War I there was a meat shortage, so Father supplemented our meat supplies by shooting tree squirrels, quail, doves, ducks, geese and cottontail. He built a sty astraddle the



THE KEYSTONE MINE

This two-compartment inclined shaft, also referred to as the New Discovery Shaft, was served by a large steel headframe and double-drum steam hoist in the building in the center of the picture, taken in 1919. Here, "Billy the Hoist" sat behind the huge hoist, manipulating the throttle, clutch and brakes. The carpenter shop, where the timber for the underground supports was framed,

was located just north of the hoist house. Adjoining was a large steam plant that powered the 1500 cubic foot Nordberg compressor, so vital to the mine operation. Ore was trammed by electric motor to the concentrator over the tracks in the foreground. The large barns at the extreme right were the stables for the Calaveras Copper Company.

creek and we raised three hogs. We had a hard time scrounging food for those hogs, but gathered about six gunny sacks of acorns and managed to get them raised. We had a huge vegetable garden in the front yard and a farmer sold us milk, so we did not suffer from the food shortage.

Father always got up around five in the morning, got the fire going, made his own breakfast and was up at the mine by 6:30. He carried a lunch bucket which he prepared himself and stayed at the mine until the day shift came up at five o'clock. Once or twice a week he would go down in the mine at night, to check on the night-shift miners and to see what the day shift had opened up.

We cooked and heated with wood. Father was a terror at wood cutting. He would cut down a big oak tree, trim it, saw it into stove lengths with a five-foot saw, and do better than a cord a day. This wood was brought home in a wheelbarrow and then it was up to us boys to split it and keep the woodboxes in the house full at all times. We used about the same amount of pine as oak, because it made a quick hot fire for cooking. We also used a lot of pine cones for fuel and once in a while we would use manzanita.

Everything used for mining was moved by horse and wagon, so the company had a large barn, corral and wagon yard. All sup-

plies came from the railhead at Milton, 12 miles away. It took two to four wagons a day to keep everything going. In the winter and heavy mud, eight to ten horses were needed to get a wagon up the hill. In the dusty summer, two less draft horses could do it.

There were two main shafts that went down to 1800 feet, with crosscut tunnels at every hundred-foot level so that they could stope out the orebody. From the top of the shafts narrow gauge tracks ran to the mill and the various waste dumps. It was just short of a mile from the North shaft to the mill. They would run trains of six or eight side-dump ore cars to the mill at one time. These were then dumped directly into the primary crusher. The mill was located on a hillside, so that they could use gravity in the mill circuit. When we first came to "Copper" the ore trains were moved with horses. In 1918, the mine machine shop made an engine for these trains, using a Ford Model "T" engine for power. This did away with the horses, but in 1919, they bought two electric engines and ran these from electric overhead trolleys like street cars. A horse-drawn passenger stage ran from Milton once a day, with mail and parcels. It was replaced in 1918 with a Ford "Jitney". These were touring cars that had been cut in half and an extension welded into the middle so that one or two full seats could

be added. They were in used all over the country and were the forerunners of busses.

Until 1917, all of the concentrate from the mill was sacked and hauled to Milton and from there shipped to the smelter by Selby, near San Francisco. In 1917, they finished and put into operation their own open hearth smelter. It was before the days of oxygen lances so this was a very slow process and required a lot of coke, which had to be hauled in. They were compelled to build a blast furnace, where the concentrate was melted and then transferred to the open hearth.*

Right after World War I, Father purchased a Saxon "Super Six", a touring car. This was used for trips around the area. I don't believe he ever made any trips farther than Stockton, which was forty miles. In the summers of 1918-1919, the family stayed in the High Sierras at Dorrington, in the hope of escaping the "Spanish Influenza". In the winter all but Father did get it, but luckily none died. In summers after that there were lots of trips to Salt Spring Valley reservoir, for all night camping out, fishing and swimming. This was only nine miles, but was a real event. We also went to "O'Bryne's" Ferry on the Stanislaus River for outings. Father also would go there in the fall to spear salmon. They would go at night and use lanterns and carbide lamps (miner's lamps), to spear the big fish as they went over the gravel bars. I was never allowed to go because the area was alive with rattlesnakes.

The roads were very rutted and rocky and we would average about one flat tire every twenty or thirty miles...This meant taking it off, (the wheel stayed on), patching the tube, & hand pumping the tire back to sixty-five lbs. The cars did not have differential gears then. When making turns one wheel would have to skid, or the other one spin on the ground. This put a torque stress on the axle, and because of the winding roads, one would frequently twist an axle in two. Father always carried two spare axles and a bucket of grease. It took about an hour and a half to put in a new axle, and a very dirty job it was: in the summer, deep powdery dust, and in the winter, mud. The axles were brought back to the mine blacksmith and he forge-welded them together again. The machine shop would true them up and some of them had a half dozen welds and were still in use. The machine shop had a lot of machine tools, but only one machinist. There was only one blacksmith and he was really overworked. All of the hard-rock drills had to be sharpened after every day's use. When the picks or shovels wore down too short, a new piece of steel was welded on, shaped and sharpened in the forge and these tools made probably better than new. This work fascinated me and I spent hundreds of hours there, pumping the bellows and holding the various swage forms while he pounded on them. When you figure all of the other work that he did for the mill, smelter and wagons, I

*Author Riggs is not quite correct on this point. Ore concentrates had been smelted at Copperopolis in the first smelter constructed before the turn of the century. This was modernized in 1908, and was in operation for some time after that. The flotation mill concentrates had been sent to Selby for only a relatively short time.

don't know how he did it. I know he made the wagon tires and shrunk them to the wheels, but someone else did the horseshoeing. This was before the arc-weld was in common use. He did some carbide gas welding, but only for patching. All joining was done by forging.

There was a two-room, two-teacher school and around forty pupils. I finished the sixth grade there, and in comparison to the education of the 1970's, I think I got a very good education. Learning came easy to me, so I made a very poor student. I received more "strappings" than all the other kids combined. I always got very high grades in everything but penmanship, and had time to get into mischief. The kids did all of the janitorial work, so they managed to keep me busy. One time I and another boy were delegated, for a month, to tend stove. The school was set up high off the ground and a place had been dug out (basement like) to store the coal. We had to fill the coal scuttle and bring it up for the pot-bellied stoves in each room.

Riggs then describes some of the events he remembered connected with mining at the Calaveras Copper Company.

When we first came to "Copper", many of the miners were Austrians. When the United States entered the War they were interned as enemy aliens. The only experienced miners available were Mexican nationals, but Father spoke fluent Mexican-type Spanish, so he had no trouble with them. The shift bosses had a lot of difficulty with the language, so Father had to spend more time underground, both day and night, than before. One evening Father and I were going duck hunting and I met him at the "time shack" with our guns. After the shift camp up at five p.m. we were to walk up to the town reservoir to hunt. We were about fifty feet from the mine shaft when I heard a commotion, as the men stepped off of the skip. It seemed that the day shift boss had argued with a Mexican miner during that shift. He had fired him and the man came up, changed his clothes, and had been waiting at the shaft collar. He picked up a big rock and coming from behind the shift boss, hit him over the head with it. Father saw the whole thing through the window. He grabbed his shotgun and took off, loading on the run. It appeared as though his shift boss was dead. Several other Mexicans grabbed the culprit and held him. Father poked and shoved them with the shotgun, trying to make them let him go, so he could take the man into custody. After about a couple of minutes, the man who had been hit with the rock, started stirring around and got up. I don't know what they did about the incident, but there were no shots fired.

During World War I, with copper so high in price, Father and two of the day-shift miners leased an old mine prospect from the company. It was about a hundred and fifty yards north of our house. The men worked a ten-hour shift for the company, went home, ate, and then worked another four or five hours for themselves. The vertical shaft was down four hundred feet and all hoisting had to be done with a hand winch. Like the mine it had to be timbered every foot, so there was a lot of work to it. I don't know if they made any money, but I can remember seeing gunny

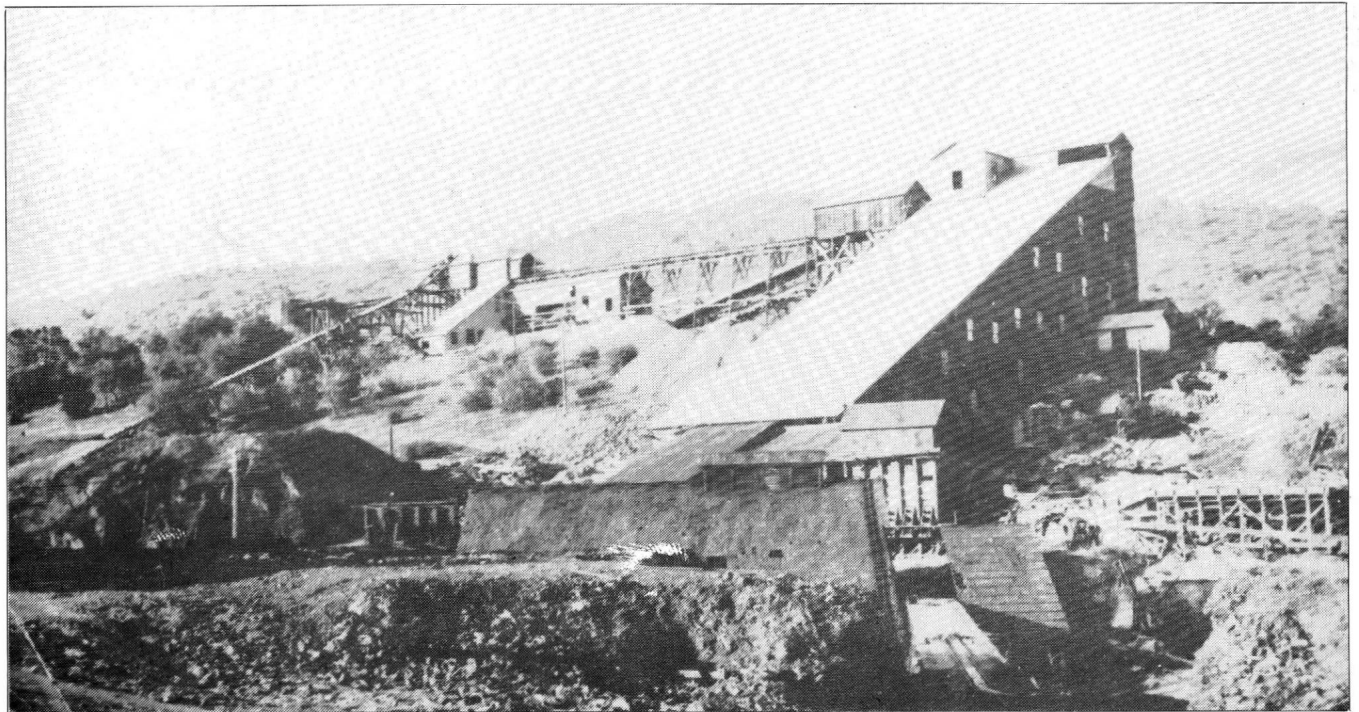
sacks of hand-hoisted, high-grade ore, piled up until they could get a wagon-load to be hauled to the mill.

One night while working, they heard a prowler up the shaft, at the next level. They went up, but did not see him. It was a Mexican who took a stick of dynamite, some fuse and caps. He had been arguing with some other Mexican miners. He went to the boarding house where they lived. There were ten or so of them sitting around, talking and playing cards in the dining room. He took half of the stick of dynamite, with about a two-inch fuse, lit it, and threw it in the room. It went off, turned everything topsy-turvy, but never hurt anyone seriously. He ran across the road, put the other half-stick under his belt and blew his guts out. He was alive but his intestines were hanging to his knees. There was no doctor in town and it took at least an hour to get one from Angels Camp. They figured he would die anyway, so they did not even call the doctor. "After all it's just another 'greaser' ". He lived until daylight and was never unaware of what was going on.

In the fall of 1918, there was a terrible mine fire. All of the buildings around the collar of the Union shaft burnt. This happened just after dark and as the mine was only about a hundred and fifty yards from our front door, we had a ring-side seat. It was a vertical shaft, with a wooden headframe, (always called by the miners, "gallows" frame and pronounced "gallers"

frame. I never head the word 'headframe' until I was grown and then had to figure out what they were talking about.). This shaft was sixteen hundred feet deep and the fire burnt the timbers nearly to the bottom. There was no one hurt, because the miners were evacuated through the New Discovery shaft, which was about a half-mile north of the Union. This Union shaft got its name because it was sunk during the Civil War.

The next day they figured that they had better clear the mine of smoke and gas. A miner went down to the New Discovery shaft to turn on the blowers at the bottom. They got no response from him, so decided to go down looking for him. Father and a young war veteran named Reggie Lampson (his father was the mill foreman.), went down. Reggie wore the gas mask that he had used in France. This was an incline shaft. It followed the dip of the ore body at about seventy degrees. The hoist stopped at the 1800 foot level and then there was about fifty feet more of shaft that was used as a sump for the pumps. This shaft had a double drum hoist and two sets of rails, so was about eight to ten feet wide. There were ladders down each side of the shaft to the sump. The idea was to go down to the very bottom to open the blower and make sure that the pump valve was clear. They were afraid that the mine was full of gas from the fire, so did not have any light. Reggie was to go down one ladder and Father the other. They each



THE MILL BUILDINGS

The ore hoisted from the Union and Keystone shafts was trammed by electric motor over the long trestles and fills south of the crushing plant (left) and the crushed

ore was then conveyed to the concentrator (the larger building to the right). This view was taken about 1918 from the smelter.



RIDING THE WILD BURROS

Frank Riggs is the boy at the far left advising his friend how to handle the animal. Those knowledgeable about

“Copper” assert that these burros were not wild but were strays from the McCarty Ranch.

had tools and knew their way in the total darkness. Father started feeling groggy and heard Reggie drop his wrench. They were about ten feet down the ladders and that was the last that Father remembered. Up on top, they were watching closely, and saw the signal cable shake, but not enough to ring the signal bell. They took a chance and brought the skip up singly, leaving the other one down. Father had passed out in the skip. It was awhile before he came to and they took him home and put him to bed. He developed pneumonia and was really very sick. Father was in a weakened condition for a long time after the pneumonia. About six months later he developed a bad arm infection from a minor scratch. At that time it was called “blood poison” or “mortified flesh”. He went to Stockton to be operated on for this arm and hand. He had always had a large lump on his head, which stuck up about a full inch and it was a source of annoyance, because he was continually bumping it in the low mine tunnels. He told the surgeon to remove this lump while he was under the anesthetic for the arm operation. The surgeon found a “44” slug inside the lump that had been there since the Colorado riot nearly thirty years before. This was the only time I remember Father being sick or injured enough to go to a doctor.

A state mine rescue team was sent up to the mine to rescue the two miners and help fight the fire. Much publicity resulted in the newspapers about the event. This rather incensed the miners and local people because of its inaccuracies and the efforts to glorify the rescue team. The two men were found, but as was expected, they had both been asphyxiated by the gases from the fire. Eventually the fire burned out, and mining was resumed.

In 1919, an aviator, flying a war surplus J N 3 - “Jenny”, landed in the field just north of town. This was the first plane that anyone (except war veterans) had ever seen, either in the air or on the ground. He took passengers on a ten-minute flight around the area for five dollars. Father and one other man were the only ones bold enough to take this flight.

At this time there was a herd of about ten wild burros that showed up around town a couple of times a year. We boys would ride them. And I guess that I was the only one, at one time or another, that never had a broken arm or leg. Father thought that riding a horse or any animal was the nadir of transportation. He had a deep-seated aversion for horses, considering them the stupidest of all domesticated livestock, including pigs and chickens. I heard him on numerous occasions give his opinion on

the innate stupidity, meanness, stubbornness, lack of loyalty, and stomach-turning body odor of horses. This man, who spent his youth on horseback, I never saw on horseback. Several times, when I was real young, he rented or borrowed buggies or wagons for a daily trip, or to move, but under no circumstances would he own a horse.

This was a wonderful life for a growing boy who loved the outdoors. This was before television, radio, electric refrigerators, washing machines, electric irons, toasters, plastics, wonder drugs, strong unions, social welfare, and other modern evils. Anyone who accepted charity of any kind was forever a social pariah. People who worked at any kind of government or tax supported job were considered not much better than the charity cases. These jobs gravitated to people who just couldn't "cut the buck" in any other work. I could probably fill a book with experiences of this area, but I am trying to show how Father was affected by different events. He was perfectly at ease with millionaires or high political figures, but he disgusted me with the way he related to education. He had the stupid idea that because you had been to college or even a high school, it made you intelligent. I have seen him fawn over an engineer or other person that didn't have a quarter of his knowledge. Every summer, for three months, we would have a student, from the Stanford School of Mines, to work and study mining under him. A couple of the more intelligent ones practically revered him for his knowledge. Others did not have the character to stand up under his adulation of education, and instead of learning something, would really believe they were showing him the facts of mining. This really did me a lot of good in later life, because it made me forever suspect of "know-it-all"-educated or not.

I could write a book on our life in "Copper", but I am only trying to tell enough to give you a feeling that you really know Ed Riggs. He was a soft-spoken person, and a very self-effacing man. I never once heard him raise his voice in annoyance or anger to anyone. He treated Mother like a lady (in fact he called her 'Lady', not by her name), and would always do everything she asked of him. He did drink, but never in front of the children, and never to excess. Around the miners, 'cuss' words were just a part of their speech, but I heard more swear words from Mother than from him. He never swore when away from the mine.

Father smoked a pipe and an occasional cigar and was a confirmed tobacco chewer. Never in the house, but when riding in the car there was always a fuss with my brother and me about who would have to ride behind the driver and receive an occasional spray. Every two or three months I would go down into the mine with him when he was making his inspections of the various workings. He was against his children becoming miners. He reasoned that if we were acquainted with the work and saw how wet, dirty, and miserable mining work was, that we would make an effort to get another trade. My brother only went down one time and Father had to bring him up right away because of his fear. As for me, I really enjoyed it, and Father would bad mouth mining to me at every opportunity. There was no high school available in



COPPEROPOLIS SCHOOL - 1918

"Copper" so when my brother graduated from grammar school, in 1923, we moved to a rented house in Stockton. Father stayed in the old house in "Copper", but would come down about twice a month, to spend a Sunday. In 1924 the stockholders sold the mine. The new owners closed the mill and smelter and wanted to do the mining in person. Father was out of a job, so he moved to Stockton with the family.

This was a very emotional and traumatic time for Father. All of the mines were losing money and the Securities Exchange Commission had shut down the "bucket-shop" operations, where most of their money had come from for years. The gold mines just closed down, but the copper mines went to open pit mining of low grade ore, or just shut down. There was just no market for the time being that could use Father's skills. He had never lived in a city and was very uncomfortable in Stockton. Mother was incapable of empathizing with him and nagged him unmercifully. He worked in Hodson, for Frank Tower, the owner of the Royal gold mine, for about four or five months. They had "faulted out" on their gold bear quartz vein and gambled on finding it by sinking a new shaft about a mile south. I stayed with Father during school vacation and we "batched" and got to know each other real well. They got down to 400 feet, ran a couple of crosscuts and then gave up.

With the closing of the mine at Copperopolis and the general depression in metal prices and mining, the Riggs family, like many others, faced hard times. Edgar worked at a number of jobs, eventually returning to Mexico where he obtained a good position at the Candelaria mine in Rosario. During those years the Riggs family made Stockton their headquarters, but it was a difficult life for them all. Riggs contracted typhus in Mexico in 1932, and was brought back to Stockton where he died.

The history of Edgar Riggs and his family portrays all too well the hard life of the miners of two or three generations ago. We are pleased to have Mr. Howard Riggs make these reminiscences available to us to help chronicle those times and to give us a better appreciation of what our not so distant forebears underwent to develop the west and particularly Calaveras County.

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The Calaveras County Historical Society, a non-profit corporation, meets on the fourth Thursday of each month at the Grange Hall in San Andreas - except for dinner meetings which are held each quarter at different places in the county.

Back issues of "Las Calaveras" may be purchased from the Society at a cost of 75¢ per issue to members or \$1.00 to non-members, plus a charge of 25¢ per issue for envelope and postage if mailed. Xerox copies of out-of-print issues will be supplied at 60¢ per issue plus mailing charges. Back issues may be purchased over the counter (without mailing) at the San Andreas Museum.

Annual Dues

We remind those who have not already paid them that annual dues are now due and payable. Mrs. Lillian Filippini, our new membership secretary, will be pleased to receive such payments, and asks that you mail them to her at 529 Gold Strike Road, San Andreas, Ca. 95249.

New Members

We are pleased to welcome the following new members to the Society:

Mr. & Mrs. Charles Bell, San Andreas
 Mrs. Greetice R. Boren, Stockton
 Mrs. T.O. Boren, Stockton
 Mrs. Freida Breitenbacher, Sherman Oaks
 Mr. & Mrs. Jack Burrows, San Jose
 Mrs. Lucile Doe, Stockton
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 Mr. & Mrs. Glen Walfoort, Vallecito
 Marshall Young, Sheep Ranch

In Memoriam

Madeline Jack Carley Alex J. Casey
 Grace Haupt Reinking Ella Huberty Thompson
 Lettie Thorowgood

Ella Thompson was a charter member and was our first treasurer, serving in that capacity for five years. She was a native of Calaveras, having been born and brought up on the Huberty ranch above Fourth Crossing. She and her husband ran a grocery store in San Andreas in the building now occupied by Jimmie Oller's enterprises. A number of years ago the Thompsons moved down to the Modesto area. Ella visited her brother John recently at the ranch on her last birthday.

MISSING ANY ISSUES OF LAS CALAVERAS?

If you failed to receive any of your copies of "Las Calaveras", please notify the Society so that we may send you the missing copy.