

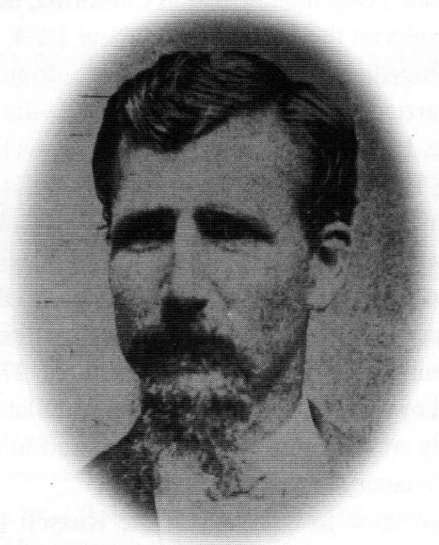


THE RUSSELL FAMILY OF MURPHYS

by Elizabeth Fischer

George and Elizabeth Russell and their family were long-time residents of Calaveras County. They settled there in the 1880s, where they lived for over 40 years on "the Old Russell Place," their ranch near Murphys, and where their descendants lived on after them. They did not settle in Calaveras County until they were mature adults who had been married for over a decade, and their earlier lives exemplify the pioneer spirit that led so many people to the Gold Country.

George Russell was the son of Isaac Russell, who was born on December 30, 1813, in Breckenridge County, Kentucky. According to the story told in the family, Isaac was the oldest of ten brothers. He moved to Illinois in 1831, then to Arkansas in 1839. It was probably within a year or two of moving to Arkansas that he married Rebecca Price, and they settled in Perry County. Their first child was my great-grandfather, George Russell, who was born on March 9, 1842, in Perryville. Two other children soon followed. Isaac Russell must have been a well-respected man because he held three offices for Perry County: he was county clerk from 1840 to 1846, a judge from 1848 to 1850, and county treasurer from 1850 to 1852. Rebecca Russell died during or some time after the birth of her last child in 1845. In 1848 Isaac married a widow named Lydia McCain Strong, who brought her young son Preston Strong with her into the Russell family. Isaac and Rebecca's two younger children died in childhood, so that Isaac and his son George were the



George Russell, 1842-1929.

only survivors of that first family. Isaac and Lydia soon started a family, however, and had four children during their time in Arkansas.

In about 1860 the family began moving west toward California. Isaac's brother William had already settled there, in Sacramento County, and their brother Ben came later. Isaac's eighth child was born in Colorado after the family began moving west. They arrived in California and also settled in Sacramento County, where they began farming. With Isaac and his two brothers living in Sacramento County, and with



Mary Elizabeth Tock Russell, 1849-1935.

most members of the Russell clan seemingly prone to large families, the area became heavily populated with Russells and their descendants within a couple of generations. After their arrival in California, Isaac and Lydia produced their last child in about 1864, so they had six together, in addition to George, from Isaac's first marriage, and Preston, from Lydia's first marriage. By the 1870 census the family was living in Franklin Township near Sacramento. There is a short biography of Isaac Russell in Thompson and West's *The History of Sacramento County*, first published in 1880, and re-issued by the Howell-North Press in 1960. Isaac Russell spent the rest of his life in the Sacramento area, and died on September 27, 1902, followed by his wife Lydia just five months later. They and many of their descendants are buried in the Elk Grove Cemetery near Sacramento.

To go back to the time of the Russell family's arrival in California, the Civil War had broken out in 1861, shortly after their journey west. On March 23, 1865, in San Francisco, 23-year-old George Russell enlisted as a private in Company F of the Seventh California Infantry. The last Confederate troops surrendered in May of that year, however, and he probably never saw action. He was discharged at the Presidio in San Francisco on April 13, 1866, and he subsequently established a homestead in Galt, in Sacramento County.

George Russell married Elizabeth Tock, a resident of nearby Woodbridge, on February 23, 1875, in Stockton. The newlyweds made a disparate couple, since George was very tall and Elizabeth was probably

not over five feet tall in her prime. However, they must have been well-matched in other respects, because their marriage lasted 54 years, until George's death, and produced seven children.

Elizabeth Tock Russell's travels had brought her an even greater distance than George's. She had been born Mary Elizabeth Tock on February 8, 1849 in the parish of Burton-upon-Stather, in the county of Lincolnshire (now Humberside), in England. (Mary Elizabeth was called Elizabeth or Lizzy. However, she signed her name as "Mary E. Russell," so it should be borne in mind that these names refer to the same person.) Elizabeth's father was James Tock and her mother's maiden name was Martha Wadd. Elizabeth was their oldest child, and the only one born in England. In about 1853 the family emigrated to New Brunswick, on the east coast of Canada, and Elizabeth always remembered crossing the ocean at the age of four. They settled in the town of St. Stephen, near the U.S. border. She eventually had three younger sisters, all born in New Brunswick. Their mother, Martha Tock, died when Elizabeth was about 12. In 1870, twenty-one-year-old Elizabeth is listed in the U.S. census as Elizabeth "Tuck." She was living by herself across the border in Calais, Maine, and gave her occupation as dressmaker.

Shortly afterwards, in about 1872, James Tock again moved his family, this time to California, making use of the transcontinental railroad which had been completed in 1869. They settled in the Lodi area in San Joaquin County, where the blistering summers and arid valleys must have seemed a world away from England. I've sometimes wondered if this move was motivated in part by James Tock's desire to find husbands for his four daughters in the west, where the men outnumbered the women. If this was James' strategy, it paid off, because all of his daughters were married within three years.

As mentioned above, Elizabeth married George Russell in 1875. They had seven children, all reportedly big babies who weight ten pounds or more—the diminutive Elizabeth must have been hardy to survive this and live on to the age of 86. Their first four children were born in the Sacramento area: Sammy in about 1876, Henry in 1877, Lee in 1879, and Ross in 1880. In about 1882 the family moved to Abilene, Texas, where Thomas was born in 1884, and where Sammy died at around the same time, at the age of eight.

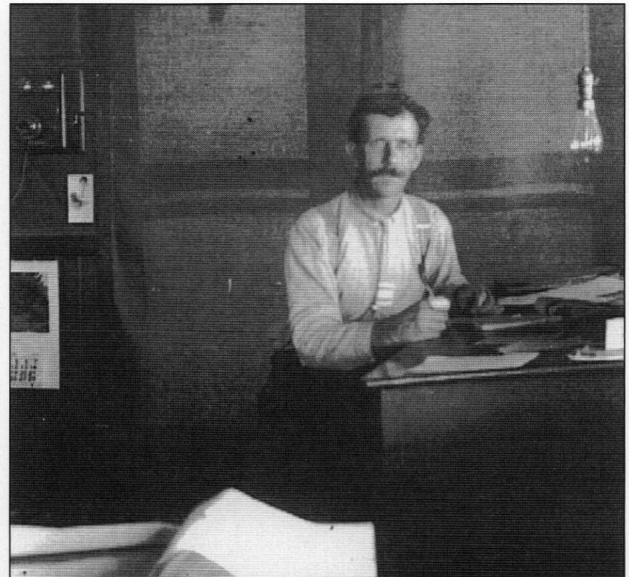
The Russell family moved back to California in about 1887, where they decided to settle in Calaveras

County. Their daughter Mary Emma was born there that same year, near Sheep Ranch. Since George already had a homestead in California, he obtained one in Calaveras County, near Murphys, under the name of his father, Isaac Russell. On May 20, 1891, Elizabeth Russell's father, the old Englishman James Tock, died in the San Joaquin County Hospital in Stockton at the age of 74. Two weeks later, on June 5, Elizabeth and George Russell's youngest child was born—my grandmother, Elsie Anne Russell.

George and Elizabeth Russell's children were spread out over 16 years, so the elder ones were growing up by the time the youngest were born. Lee Russell died at the age of 16, possibly of appendicitis, in about 1895. Ross suffered from some kind of mental disability and spent the last several years of his life at the state hospital in Stockton until his death in 1918. This meant that, of the four oldest boys, Henry Russell was the only one who had survived and was not disabled, and he became the *de facto* head of the next generation of Russells. He obtained a teaching certificate and taught at several schools around Calaveras County, including the Avery School. He married another teacher, Lilith (pronounced Lie-lith) Land, and they had three daughters, Hazel, Elsie and Ellen. His brother Thomas married Helen Laidet and had four children, and Mary Emma Russell married four times and had four children. Henry and Tom both stayed in California, but Mary eventually settled in Centralia, Washington, with her fourth husband, Peter Vivoda.



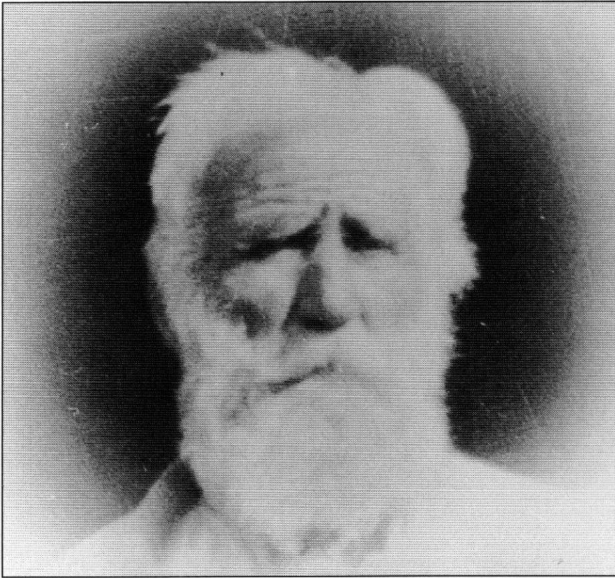
Two of George and Elizabeth's daughters, Elsie Anne on the left and Mary (holding baby), taken about 1906



George and Elizabeth's son Henry who became a prominent Calaveras County teacher.

The youngest of George and Elizabeth's children, Elsie, married George Grover Fischer on June 6, 1909, the day after her eighteenth birthday. Grover had grown up in nearby Sheep Ranch, but he had been working in construction in San Francisco before his marriage, helping to rebuild the city after the 1906 earthquake. George and Elizabeth were very fond of their daughter Elsie's parents-in-law, and formed a lasting friendship with John and Leoda Fischer.

George and Elizabeth Russell continued to live at the Russell place near Murphys. George was an independent-minded man who went his own way. He was eccentric in many ways, one example of which was his refusal to wear anything but homemade clothes. He had a fat old mare named Sally, of whom he was very fond, and he would make everyone get out of the wagon and walk when she had to go up a hill. He had many ideas about horticulture, and he devised an ambitious overhead irrigation system for his farm, although his house still did not have running water. He used his system to grow turnips, which do not seem to have been of much practical or monetary use. His granddaughter Elsie Fischer Burns says that he used to pay his grandchildren to haul the turnips over the hill. He hitched up Sally to his wagon and drove down to Sonoma County to talk to the famous horticulturist Luther Burbank about his ideas. It would be interesting to know what Mr. Burbank and other people in the more urban areas made of this mountain man with the long white beard and the homemade overalls.



George Russell, known by his family as "Pap."



Elizabeth Russell, who was only 4'-10" tall, and was called "Little Grandma" by her family.

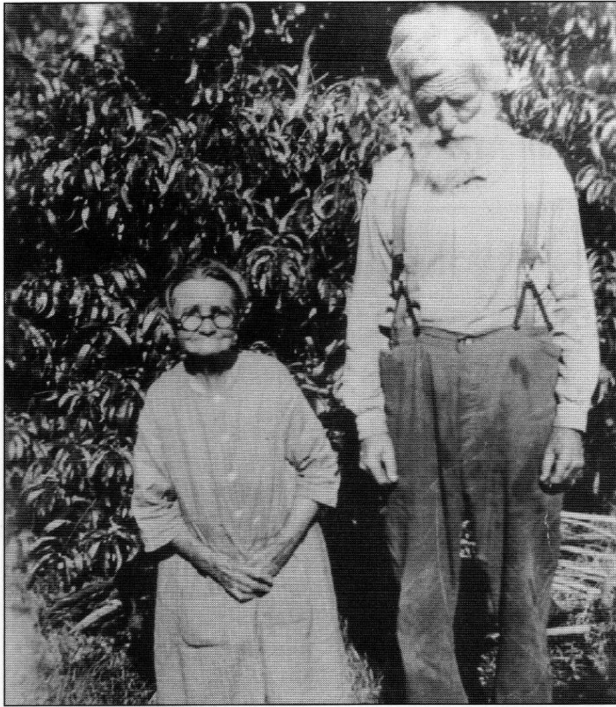
Having already lost three sons, Sammy, Lee and Ross, the Russells had yet another loss to endure. Their daughter Elsie's young husband Grover Fischer died in 1918 in the influenza epidemic, leaving her with two little children, Elsie and Grover, Jr. She was remarried to Charles Ream and had a little boy, Charlie, before becoming ill with cancer. She died at her parents' home in Murphys on December 30, 1922, at the age of 31. Her two older children were raised by their Fischer grandparents in Sheep Ranch, with help from George and Elizabeth Russell, and her youngest son was raised by the Ream family.

George suffered from health problems and grew increasingly forgetful in his declining years. Of course, there was no social security until the 1930s, so one resource George and Elizabeth used to augment their modest means was George's Civil War pension, which was allotted to disabled veterans. He applied for the pension as early as 1891, when he was only 49, but he could not prove he was disabled and it was denied. It was granted in 1904, at which time the payment was \$6 per month. In 1928, when George's health was seriously declining, Henry and Lilith Russell and their three girls moved in with the elderly couple to help out. They built another house on the property for George and Elizabeth to move in to. Henry had formerly had a homestead next to George's which he had sold, and he bought it back so that the Russell place now comprised two homesteads, or 320 acres.

George Russell was known to his grandchildren as "Pap" and Elizabeth was known as "Little Grandma." She had always been small, but as she became bent with age she grew even shorter, and was reportedly only about 4'-6" in her last years. Although George was a rugged individualist, he could also be a kind grandfather. His granddaughter Elsie Fischer Burns has pleasant memories of Pap making wooden toys for the children. I don't know a great deal about Little Grandma, Elizabeth Russell, but I feel that, in her own humble way, she must have been a woman of strength and courage. Her life had taken her from England to



The original George Russell homestead near Murphys as it appears today.



Elizabeth "Little Grandma" and George "Pap" Russell in the 1920s.

Canada, from Canada to California, and from California to Texas and back. She was a tiny woman and was apparently not considered strong, since one reason given for their move to the mountains was for her health. Yet she bore seven children and raised them with few material resources or comforts. She lived for 54 years with an eccentric and sometimes prickly husband, and tended him devotedly in his declining years. She was to outlive not only him, but also her three younger sisters and four of her seven children, which must have been a devastating loss. Through it all, with fortitude and good nature, she did her duty and made the best of what fate doled out to her.

George Russell died on October 23, 1929, and Elizabeth Russell on April 10, 1935. Because of their affection for the Fischers, they had chosen to be buried in the Fischer plot in the Sheep Ranch cemetery, near their daughter Elsie. Henry and Lilith Russell stayed on at the Russell place, where they grew in the love and respect of their relatives and friends. Also known as "Uncle Henry and Aunty," they presided over their own extended family of children, nieces and nephews, and grandchildren there. At least two of George and Elizabeth's grandchildren are still living: Elsie Fischer Burns of Benecia, California, and Ellen Russell Gilbo of Pacheco, California. In addition, there are many more of their descendants, in California and elsewhere. A piece of the Russell place is still in the family in the

year 2001, since it forms part of the ranch that is owned by George and Elizabeth Russell's great-great-grandson, David Lei, Jr.

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This article and most of the photographs were provided by Elizabeth Fischer who is a descendent of the Fischer family of Sheep Ranch. Ms. Fischer has contributed material to Las Calaveras in the past (see Las Calaveras, October 1998) and has been instrumental in preserving the Sheep Ranch Cemetery. The reminiscence by Ellen Russell and the two later photos of Pap and Little Grandma Russell were provided by their great-grandson Russell Pettit. For more information about the area where the Russell homestead was located, see Las Calaveras, January 1977 regarding the Darby family. County Road Number 406, Darby Russell Road still bears the names of these two prominent families.

My Grandfather was 87 when he died.

I was 10 and only knew him in his senile time.

When we told my Grandmother that he was gone, she only sat very still, hands folded in her lap. She said, "I am glad I could take care of him so many years."

I could not think that she would miss him. He always complained that she was in his way and even sometimes swore at her.

When I was a little older and had learned to sew, she said, "I will pay you to make a dress for me. I want a pink silk dress."

And I made the dress, following her pattern, with a little lace ruffle at the neck.

She said, "My wedding dress was pink silk. Pap always liked me in it."

Then she hung it away and never wore it until she was in her coffin.

In those days of my youth, I could not understand.

But now my heart is many years wiser and I know that inside her aged, withered body, lived the same girl who had worn pink on her Bridal Day. And she planned to go again to meet her man, wearing pink silk.

This story was written by granddaughter Ellen Russell in the late 1930s. The original handwritten letter is owned by descendant Russell Pettit.

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.

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 museum 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.

Museum Donations

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

March 2001

Betty Snyder, Valley Springs, CA
21 photos of building a stone oven

April 2001

Rosemary Faulkner, Jackson, CA
Dressmaker's mannequin,
Picture of shepherd

Kathryn Robie, Farmington, CA
Various Christmas decorations

Richard N. Anderson, Altaville, CA
Calaveras Cement sack

Don Cuneo, Calaveritas, CA
3 photographs

Wally Motloch, Mountain Ranch, CA
1-year subscription to the Mountain
Ranch Miner's Pick and cash donation

May 2001

Sylvia (Hendsch) Armstrong, Fresno, CA
2 pictures relating to the Hendsch
family history in the Copperopolis/
Murphys area

Joan Donleavy, Valley Springs, CA
School desk

Carmenne Poore, San Andreas, CA
Antique kitchen items and book

NEW MEMBERS

The Calaveras County Historical Society welcomes the following new members:

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