

A TRIP TO MT. HAMILTON IN 1915

By FRANK HUBBARD McKEE
(1904-1984)

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- INTRODUCTION:
- I am submitting this Essay to honor my Father, Frank Hubbard McKee, who passed away ten years ago this year.
- He wrote this story in 1965 having first been taken into these hills as an infant.
- My father was born in San Jose in 1904 and was a true "California Pioneer." His Grandfather, George B. McKee, arrived in Santa Clara County in 1853 having walked the Oregon Trail when he was 15. I have the double-barreled shotgun he carried with him. He operated the George B. McKee Paint Company in San Jose and whose company remained in business for 75 years at the same location. George McKee was very civic-minded and became a Knight Commander of the Scottish Rite in 1921.
- My Mother was a published poet and felt this story had a special message. My father lived his entire life in this Valley and was known as "The Golfing Cowboy" in the '30s. He worked at Hendy's Iron Works during World War II and for the U.S. Department of Agriculture until retirement.
- His heart was here with his cattle and the homesteaded property we've written about. Today, my cousin and I are Third Generation on that land. My husband and I often "go to the hills" for the perfect weekend!
- As we drive up the mountain, we often recall my Father's stories and those I heard as a child, as I started "going to the hills" 43 years ago.
- Thank you for the opportunity to submit my Father's memories!

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I'll call these few flashbacks in the memory of one who has made the journey countless times: "A Trip to Mt. Hamilton" because in 1915 it was indeed a trip! It would have been impossible to convince those old-timers I knew that with the push of a foot throttle one could swish up this mountain in less than an hour.

My Mother's uncle, William Adams, had a homestead fourteen miles beyond Mt. Hamilton. It was situated in a beautiful little valley. He loved the place and stayed for several months at a time. He persuaded my Mother, Mary Agnes Grimley McKee, to file on some government land that was available at the time. She did, and eventually received her title to the land.

She became so fond of the country that every trip was looked upon with eager anticipation. In those days, it was unthinkable to go for less than two weeks. Many times, my Mother would stuff three children and provisions for a three or four-week stay in a light spring wagon.

It was about a fifty mile trip over a road that, fifty years later, has not changed very much and throws fear into scores of seasoned travelers even in the comfort of a "modern" vehicle. The road has been improved a little, but is very hazardous in places. To me, it is the same and a pleasant memory pops up around every turn.

My father could not leave for longer than a week because he was in business in San Jose [with his father, operating the George B. McKee Paint Company at Second and San Fernando]. We would stay for weeks during the summer, however. My father would arrange with John Wiebel to haul us up to Mt. Hamilton and there my Mother's uncle would meet us for the final leg of the journey.

Mr. Wiebel had a contract hauling supplies to Lick Observatory situated atop Mt. Hamilton. He was a great friend of my family so there was no problem hitching a ride with him. Mr. Wiebel was a wonderful man, large and powerful. As a road builder, he built many roads in Santa Clara County including the upper road into Alum Rock Park. Mr. Wiebel's teams used Fresno scrapers and they played a large part in the building of Mt. Hamilton road.

Getting ready to go, loading the wagon and being told to fetch this and that by Mr. Wiebel was as much fun as going. But, when that enormous man settled high on the seat with me squeezing beside him as close as I could get, looked over the backs of those big horses and then back at the rear for one final inspection and hollered, "Yeah," the thrilling blast-off of the astronauts was small stuff compared to the spine-tingling joy I felt when that greatest of all teams stepped out and started for Mt. Hamilton.

We started from our home on Third and San Fernando, out Santa Clara Street to Alum Rock Avenue and up to Mt. Hamilton Road. Our first stop was the Grand View House. From here, it was an absolute must that your horses be in top shape because it was no trip for an animal that had any of the many horse ailments not easily detected.

Mt. Hamilton Road rises sharply and it is not long before you encounter a view that travelers have been awestruck by for years. It is a panorama that seems different around every curve.

Mr. and Mrs. Storey ran the Grand View House, where the Mt. Hamilton Stage changed horses but Mr. Wiebel preferred to go on to Smith Creek. He didn't like to spend much time there as the road to Hall's Valley was mostly downhill and he could make up for the slow time coming up from San Jose. He watered the horses, adjusted the harnesses, collars and pads and in a short time we were off again!

The distance to Hall's Valley was not far, but beautiful all the way. Once the Grand View House is behind you, appropriately named for the marvelous view of the valley, travel a short distance and make a right turn around a mountain. You could be in another state. Now, the landmark Mt. Hamilton Vineyard is on the right and San Jose is out of sight. The road swings around many turns and soon drops down into Hall's Valley. Uncluttered beauty at its best: cattle grazing, oak trees and ferns line the shady side of the road and brush-covered hills are home to deer, rabbits and quail. Farther out in the valley, the view is solid wildflowers. Hall's Valley, a place to remember, as beautiful today as then. Only a small portion of the road is changed and of course, it's paved!

From Hall's Valley, we start climbing again and the horses settle in for some solid pulling. The next stop is Smith Creek and

the day's work will be over for Jack and Tobie, Mack and Bob. And, what a job well done!

As we near Smith Creek, the opportunity to make a spectacular arrival presents itself. There was a nice little hotel, blacksmith shop, large barn, store and saloon. These buildings were situated in a circle, forming a plaza in the center a hundred yards across.

The road passes in front of the hotel around the other buildings and up Mt. Hamilton. Due to the store and saloon, with emphasis on the latter, a goodly crowd of men that knew horses would be on hand. For that reason, most teamsters including Mr. Wiebel took the opportunity to come in with colors flying and their teams right up on their toes. I think Mr. Wiebel looked on it as a tribute to his horses to let them have the acclaim they deserved. He didn't disappoint anyone -- a short distance before the hotel, he'd get out his four-horse whip that he hadn't touched thus far, and with a resounding crack, brought us past the hotel, around in front of the saloon and up to the barn with the horses performing in a manner suitable for the Rose Parade.

The horses were unhitched and four more brought out of the large barn. Mr. Wiebel assisted in harnessing the new team. Each horse had his own harness that was adjusted to his personal size. They were brought out with their harness on, then it was just a matter of swinging them into the proper positions and hooking up. When this was done, Mr. Wiebel stood at the head of the lead horses, took them by the bridles and stepped back a short distance, just enough to tighten the harness, then he walked around his team

for a final inspection as this part of the trip was the most rigorous for the horses.

Smith Creek was run by a man named Brockey. He was a very good friend of both my father and Mr. Wiebel. Deer and quail were plentiful and so was trout fishing in the creek. For this reason, it was a busy place during the various seasons.

The horses were ready to go and so were we young ones, but a stop at Brockey's Saloon was a must. It was half saloon and half store. I can see it now and there's no forgetting the odor of barreled whiskey mingled with saddle soap, axle grease and smoke from a pot-bellied stove. There was even a rinky-dink piano. Today, it is a fire station today but yesterday it was a museum in the making.

Just as we were leaving, Mr. Brockey handed my Mother a big bag of grapes. She thanked him and handed a large bunch up to Mr. Wiebel. He put them in the jockey box, a compartment in the middle of the seat for small tools. My Mother spoke to me and said, "you'd better come back here and take a nap." I immediately begged off from any idea like that; I certainly didn't want to be asleep and miss the chance I had been waiting for.

From here, the road becomes very dramatic. It is uphill all the way to the top and a stern test for the horses. It is said that there are 365 turns in the road -- one for every day in the year. About a half mile from Smith Creek, Mr. Wiebel let me drive.

I can see his hands today -- like two gnarled pieces of oak handing me the lines and showing me the proper way to hold them -- quite a different picture from my Mother's dainty but capable hands wearing her brown leather driving gloves and holding the lines properly.

Despite the road being steep, it was wide and the team was traveling very slowly. Mr. Wiebel knew there was no danger, but not I. Danger was everywhere and of no consequence to me, for right now, I was the equal of Hank Monk, Long-Line Thompson and the other great old-time stagecoach drivers.

Think of the impact on an eleven-year boy to sit beside (to his mind) the greatest of all horsemen and drive a four-horse team up that winding grade. I can close my eyes today and feel the wagon's movement with the even cadence of each coal black horse, their coats now glistening with sweat, their manes flipping up alittle as their heads bobbed in unison with every stride.

When we would stop to rest the team, Mr. Wiebel would get down and loosen the foaming collars and hold them up so some cool air could enter. You could smell the sweat and little puddles would appear under each horse as it dripped off the belly bands.

The grapes proved a bust; they were so sour we couldn't eat them. Occasionally, Mr. Wiebel would throw one at a particular horse he thought was lagging abit. Without even asking, I took a grape and threw it at one horse. I was in such a hurry to complete the throw, I hit one of the leaders on the head. Mr. Wiebel said,

"Just what would you have done if you had thrown that grape in Bob's ear?" I had no idea what to say then. However, I asked, "Mr. Wiebel, what do YOU think Bobby would have done if I had thrown the grape in his ear?"

He said to me, "Do you see that turn up there?" pointing to one far up the road, flanked by a steep canyon. "I knew a man who used to toss rocks at his horses and one time he threw one right in his lead horse's ear. The horse went to shaking his head and finally ran over the bank and spilled his whole outfit in that gulch."

"Where's that man now?" I asked. "Oh, he's down there in that ravine covered by a landslide his wagon made rolling over and over." A likely story, no doubt, but it cured me of doing that prank again.

We've reached the 3,000 feet point by now and the road makes a turn past a wide open hillside, directly in the middle stands a lone evergreen. This is known as Juniper Flat.

Now we swing along one of the few straight stretches and come to Manzanita Turn. As the road makes a sharp turn around a little manzanita tree, I can see Mr. Wiebel's hand here -- he didn't want to disturb the beautiful little tree so he built the road around it.

A 100 percent switchback looms ahead, called appropriately Horseshoe Turn. Approaching from the north, you're heading south when you are through the turn. Mr. Wiebel has long since taken

over the driving, but I am grateful for the short time I was outrunning the hold-up men at breakneck speed. To complete a horseshoe turn properly with a four-horse team, you must keep to the extreme outside, about halfway into the turn your wagon will come to a complete stop but not the horses. They continue on around the perimeter of the turn, back into a straight line and are off again. A well-trained team will always come around at double time, the nigh horse at a trot and the off horse slowly pivoting until just the right moment and then, bingo, he's right in there beside his partner and their stride evens.

We are still inching our way up this steep road and the view is intensifying with visual rewards everywhere. To the north, there is San Francisco Bay and the mountains beyond. Santa Cruz mountains ring part of Santa Clara Valley. To the south, a sea of mountains and canyons, finally disappearing into a purple haze. The reader should keep in mind, the time of which I speak was before the Santa Clara Valley gave way to subdivisions and other development. This Valley was embraced with a carpet of white prune blossoms as far as you could see, from East San Jose to Los Gatos, especially the Campbell and Cupertino areas. Truly a breathtaking site and all you had to do was look.

We're heading toward The Brickyard now where bricks for Lick Observatory were made. A mile or so on, we come to the most dangerous part of the road. A stretch of two hundred yards had to be blasted out of solid rock, and probably for this reason, the men who built the road didn't make it wider than necessary. They must

have measured a wagon and said that was it. Anyone coming down had to wait. This was known as The Tunnel and only in the last ten years has it been widened making it safer for cars.

We keep on and finally come to a place unforgettable for any traveler and that's the "Oh My Turn." This is a switchback around a rocky point and it appears as though you're going into thin air as you continue around it. I have seen people beg to get out and walk at this point, but after a few times they're alright and will readily admit they will never forget the turn.

To the East, it's never-ending mountains and valleys and our Homestead. Even the Sierras outline the horizon. Below, the Isabel Valley knifes its way through the mountains. Mt. Isabel is to the south of Mt. Hamilton separated by an enormous canyon with Little Sulphur Creek at the bottom.

We're nearly to the top at 4,300 feet. A quarter of a mile on, we round the "20 Inch Turn" which is a companion to the "Oh My Turn." Can you guess why? You feel the sharp, crystal clear air associated with altitude and the entire San Francisco Bay and Mt. Tamalpais come into view. The sun on the water of the bay tries your eyes as you gaze out the Golden Gate.

The brake shoe squeaks. We are at the top.

I have traveled the Mt. Hamilton Road many times with my own family and when my Daughter was young she would beg me to tell her of trips I made up there when I was a child. I was glad she loved the country as I did.

My Mother always referred to it as "going to the hills."
Someday with children of her own, that's what my Daughter will do.
She will go to the hills, and while our memories last, the old road
will live in us as it was when I sat on the box with Mr. Wiebel and
watched those marvelous horses, their black heads bobbing up and
down like the tick, tock of encroaching time.

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- Bibliography: Author's Recall

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