

THE

TRAILBLAZER

QUARTERLY BULLETIN
OF THE CALIFORNIA PIONEERS
OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY

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Elizabeth Jane Wimmer

1822 - 1885

SHE KNEW GOLD WHEN SHE SAW IT

WHALE BLAZERS

SAN JOSE, Jan. 1880: — The Oak Hill City Cemetery Committee was instructed to install 50 hitching posts and the planting of 50 trees within the cemetery property.

LOS GATOS, Feb. 1895: — Because of a recent anti-noise town ordinance, the Salvation Army was denied the use of their familiar drum and tambourines for their nightly parades. Undaunted, the dutiful group continued to march, but only to the time of subdued hand clapping.

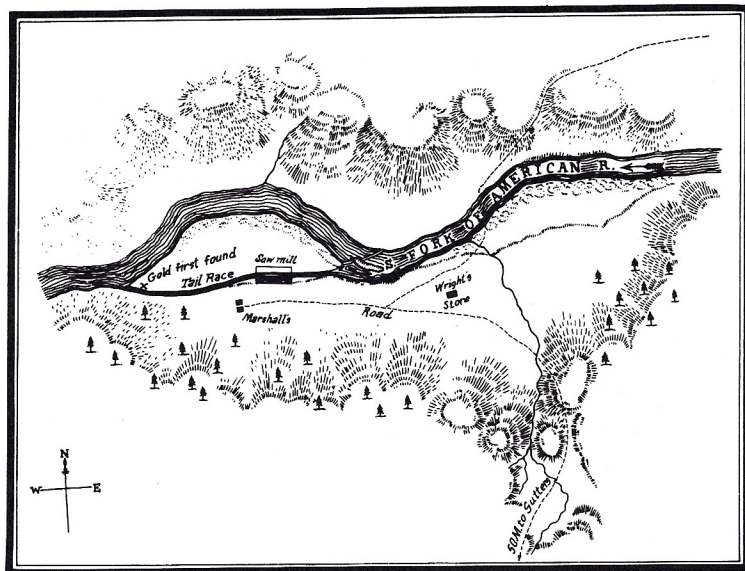
SAN JOSE, Jan. 1902: — The Standard Electric Co. was preparing to extend its power as far south as Los Gatos and Gilroy. Officials said the pretentious project would include artistic poles through each town along the route. It was also their belief electricity could be utilized for a variety of purposes among the homes of the better class.

SAN JOSE, April 1905: — The directors of the Mt. Hamilton Exploitation Co. met for the purpose of discussing plans relative to the proposed electric railway to Lick Observatory. The directors present being Major Chas. P. Braslan, Henry Doerr, T. S. Montgomery, John Bennett, T. C. Barnett and V. A. Scheller.

The daring scheme, which eventually perished, was to consist of two overhead monorails for safety, with planned speeds up to 200 miles per hour.

SANTA CLARA, May 1911: — Postmaster E. M. Don received word that free house to house mail delivery would begin June 15, 1911. Three mail carriers and one substitute carrier would make up the force. Twenty mail boxes throughout the city was anticipated.

SAN JOSE, March 1913: — Fifty miles of asphalt from San Francisco to San Jose was planned. According to the State Highway Commission the boulevard would be 40 feet wide and the same as a city street with concrete base and asphalt surface. This promised to virtually bring every home in the peninsula within easy motoring distance to San Francisco.



JENNIE STAKES HER CLAIM

By

Olive Engwicht

Early morning smoke rose from an open log fire near a newly built double log cabin in the beautiful Sierra foothill Cullomah Valley. The weather: cold and clear. The time: late January, 1848. The calendar day: possibly the 19th; possibly the 24th.

About a half-mile downslope, the pine-timbered skeleton of a saw-mill stood astride a race designed to carry water to power the flutter-type millwheel from the fast-running south fork of El Rio de los Americanos.

The mill was the joint venture of Capt. John A. Sutter of Sutter's Fort and of James W. Marshall, a wheelwright by trade. About 10 Americans comprised the construction crew and a like number of Indians worked under the supervision of Peter L. Wimmer.

Wimmer's wife, Elizabeth Jane, known as Jennie, then 25 years old and pregnant with her third child, served as camp cook, preparing the food over a log fire. Two Indians and 9-year-old Sarah Wimmer, who was one of her five step-children, assisted her. In addition to cooking, on this particular day, Jennie had an extra chore—making soft soap. She took brown liquid lye, which she had made by leaching creek water through wood ashes, and dumped it into a pot which held an accumulation of left-over cooking grease.

Marshall, the camp boss, and Peter hung the heavy kettle over the fire for her and set it to boil. Then they walked down to the millrace diggings to close the head gate so that the sluiceway would drain and the Indians could continue their work of deepening the channel and clearing out boulders.

Soapmaking was a homely task common to every household of the period. Two things made Jennie's work special. First, her kettle's bubbling alkaline mixture would that morning accept a bright metal specimen from the millrace, and, in a kind of frontier alchemy, test it and prove it to be gold. Second, Jennie seems to have been the only person in camp with first-hand knowledge of gold mining. Eight years previously she had lived and panned for gold in the Lumpkin County gold fields of Georgia. She was the right person in the right place at the right time.

A report of the discovery, told from Jennie's point of view, is preserved in an article by Mary P. Winslow which the San Francisco Daily Bulletin carried in its Dec. 19, 1874, issue. In it, Jennie relates that she and Peter and their children arrived at Sutter's Fort from Missouri in November, 1846, with a party of 14 families (the Harlan-Young Company).

"On arriving, we found Fremont in need of men. My husband enlisted before we had got the oxen unyoked, and left me and our seven children at the fort where Captain Sutter arranged for a room for us. As soon as Mr. Wimmer returned from Santa Clara where he had been stationed during the winter, he joined three others and went over the mountains to what is now called Donner Lake to fetch over the effects of the Donner family. In June, 1847, (we) went to Coloma (to put up a sawmill) . . . We had from 15 to 20 men employed. We soon had a log-house . . . and a log heap to cook by."

Describing the events of the day Marshall made his find, she states that he and Peter went down to the millrace to check on the work which had been done during Marshall's absence of several days.

"The water was entirely shut off, and, as they walked along, talking and examining the work, on a little, rough, muddy rock, lay something looking bright, like gold. They both saw it, but Mr. Marshall was the first to stoop to pick it up, and, as he looked at it, doubted it was gold.

"Our little son, Martin (Baiz), was along with them, and Mr. Marshall gave it to him to bring up to me. He came in a hurry and said: 'Here, mother, here's something Mr. Marshall and Pa found, and they

want you to put it into saleratus water to see if it will tarnish.' I said, 'This is gold, and I will throw it into my lye kettle, which I had just tried with a feather, and if it is gold it will be gold when it comes out.' I finished off my soap that day and set it off to cool, and it staid there till next morning. At the breakfast table one of the work-hands raised up his head from eating and said, 'I heard something about gold being discovered, what about it?' Mr. Marshall told him to ask Jenny, and I told him it was in my soap-kettle. Mr. Marshall said it was there if it hadn't gone back to California.

"A plank was brought for me to lay my soap into, and I cut it into chunks, but it was not to be found. At the bottom of the pot was a double-handful of potash, which I lifted in my two hands, and there was my gold as bright as it could be. Mr. Marshall still contended it was not gold; but whether he was afraid his men would leave him or he really thought so, I don't know. Mr. Wimmer remarked that it looked like gold, weighed heavy like gold and would do to make money of. . . . Mr. Wimmer urged Mr. Marshall to go to the fort and have it tested. He did so, and George McKinstry, an assayer, pronounced it gold. . . ."

Jennie, who had been given the specimen by Marshall during the period of time after the discovery when she served as his camp treasurer, carried it on her person in a small buckskin bag for many years. Winslow describes it as looking like ". . . a piece of spruce gum just out of the mouth of a schoolgirl, except in color. It is rather flat, full of indentations. . . . It can easily be identified by anyone who has ever seen it before. Several persons who had not seen it for years readily recognized it—among them is Colonel Gift, Samuel Brannan, Dr. Gwinn and many other well-known citizens."

The piece, which weighs 6 pennyweights, 11 grains, and had a 1848 valuation of \$5.12, is now on view at the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

Evidence someday may surface which will settle the troublesome question of the exact day of Marshall's discovery. Whatever the date, the event precipitated the California gold rush and the mass migration of forty-niners headed west to strike it rich. A few did; most did not.

Hordes of newcomers trampled under Sutter's dream of a pastoral New Helvetia. Gold-seekers bedeviled Marshall and hardluck dogged his footsteps all his life. The Wimmers prospered for a few years, mining

in the Coloma and Calaveras areas. Eight years later, the San Francisco Daily Herald, in its issue of Dec. 11, 1855, carried a story quoting information printed in the Empire County Argus which stated that the Wimmers, because they "gave thousands of dollars in relief to the destitute, . . . were not blessed with any too much of the goods of this world."

In his book, Salt Desert Trails, the late historian, Charles Kelly, wrote: "James W. Marshall, John Sutter and Mrs. Peter Wimmer, the persons primarily responsible for the (gold) discovery, all died in poverty." This statement is close to the truth.

Sutter lost his California holdings because the United States did not recognize the land claims he had acquired from the Mexican government and because the early wealth the gold discovery brought him slipped through his fingers. Further, he never was compensated for the supplies he advanced for the use of Fremont's forces during the Mexican War. The California legislature voted Sutter a monthly pension in 1870 which continued for six years. He moved to Pennsylvania in 1873 and died there in reduced circumstances in 1880.

Marshall, with the help of his friends, tried for many years to qualify for a state pension in recognition of his service to California in making the first gold discovery. He became bitter because help was denied him. He managed his finances badly and suffered from ill health as he aged. He made a lecture tour of the East in 1870, then returned to live in the Kelsey area. In 1872, Gov. Newton Booth signed a bill granting him a monthly pension. He died at Kelsey in 1885.

The Wimmers left Coloma in 1863, took up land at Mount St. Helena and operated a stock ranch. Mining remained their first love and 1868 found them in the San Simeon area of San Luis Obispo County where they developed a quicksilver mine, quicksilver at that time being of more commercial value than gold. Later, in partnership with Eugene Curley, they worked a gold lode on San Carpojo Creek, naming the mine the Polar Star.

They prospected near Los Angeles and in Orange County from 1880 to 1883, drawn there by the notion that they might uncover outcroppings of the Mother Lode in Southern California. Their final move in Jennie's lifetime took them to Valley Center in San Diego County, a gold-bearing region, where they purchased another stock ranch. Jennie died there in 1885. Peter died in 1892 at Josephine, near Cambria.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Elizabeth Jane Wimmer was born to Martin and Polly Cloud on their tobacco farm in Franklin Co., Virginia, June 18, 1822. Her father, a Revolutionary War veteran, was a county officer and served several terms in the state legislature. When Jennie was 16 years old she married her childhood sweetheart, Obadiah Baiz.

The panic of 1837 ruined Cloud financially. Hoping to recoup his fortune he took his family, including Jennie and Obadiah, to the new gold mines in Lumpkin County, Georgia. Cloud and his son, James, and Obadiah worked claims and Jennie and her mother operated a miners' boarding house. Jennie picked up her knowledge of mining during the two years she spent at the mines. Jennie and Obadiah moved to Lexington, Mo. in 1840 and took up land. Their neighbors were Peter and Polly Wimmer.

Peter was born in the outpost town of Cincinnati, Ohio, April 5, 1810, and grew up more woodsman than scholar. He married Polly Harlan at 18, established a first home in Indiana, removed first to Michigan, then to Lexington to join Polly's father, Capt. George W. Harlan.

Both Polly and Obadiah died with the fever in 1843, leaving Peter with five children and Jennie with two. A year later, Peter and Jennie married.

In 1846, when Harlan elected to go to California, the Wimmers joined him, becoming part of the migration of 500 wagons that traveled west that year. At Ft. Bridger, before attempting to traverse the new Hasting's Cutoff across the Wasatch Mountains and the Great Salt Desert, the Harlan party joined forces with Samuel C. Young's band and traveled the rest of the way as the Harlan-Young Company.

The Wimmers arrived safely at Sutter's Fort Nov. 15, 1846. Peter immediately joined John C. Fremont's forces in the war with Mexico. He served under Capt. John A. Aram in the Battle of Santa Clara as a second sergeant, first with the San Jose Company, and later with the Mission Santa Clara Company. After that winter's successful campaign, he returned to the Fort and accepted employment with John Sutter. By August of 1847 the Wimmers were on their way to Coloma.

Cover illustration copyright 1979 by Susan Engwicht Mayfield.

Map on pg. 3 redrafted from Wm. T. Sherman's 1848 original.



Donald O. DeMers, Jr.

This quarter's message is a bit different this time, in that we need a response from you, the members. It has been proposed that we hold an old-fashioned barbeque for our members that would *not* be in conjunction with a quarterly meeting. In 1875, when the Society first began, people would come from miles around to partake of half a barbequed steer and all the trimmings. The month of July has been proposed for such an event, and we would like to see what number of people might be interested. Please come to the March meeting and let us know if you would like to participate.

Another tradition that our group is trying to keep alive is our annual essay contest on Santa Clara County history. This year's prize will be two hundred dollars for first place in each of two divisions, and a prize of fifty dollars for the runner-ups. This contest is one of the most effective ways that we have found to preserve our past, so we hope that you will pass along the fact that the Society is again sponsoring the essay contest. More information will be forthcoming at the next quarterly meeting. See you there!

* * * * *

HISTORICAL ESSAY CONTEST OPEN TO ALL

The Society of the California Pioneers of Santa Clara County is again offering cash awards for the best essays on any subject, person, or place concerning the history of Santa Clara County.

There will be two categories of award in order that all interested people in the area may participate. The categories are:

1. Secondary (high school level) First prize, \$200; Second prize, \$50; Third prize, Award of Merit.
2. General Public (college level and all other participants) First prize, \$200; Second prize, \$50; Third prize, Award of Merit

DEADLINE IS APRIL 30, 1980. Winners will read their essays to the California Pioneers Society's quarterly luncheon meeting, Saturday, June 7, 1980.

Since we are well over 1600 members and one of the oldest orga-

nizations of its kind in California (1875), such recognition can be meaningful to the winners.

For further information concerning rules and regulations, please contact: Henry Calloway—294-1786 or Frances Fox—293-1879.

The Trailblazer is overly grateful to the author of this issue's feature story, "She Knew Gold When She Saw It", Mrs. Olive Street Engwicht. Olive is no new-comer to journalism. Among her varied newspaper positions, she held forth as editor of the Paso Robles Advertiser and did a bountiful stay with the Paso Robles Press. Our native daughter is the first woman graduate of the Department of Journalism at San Jose State College. This adept Pioneer is presently a free lance writer and contributes to children's theater and television projects in San Jose.

Adding to this family's array of accomplishments is Olive's daughter, Susan Engwicht Mayfield, who illustrated this edition's "gold" story. Gracias.

Our Pioneer Elisabeth Telfer says she helped finance the McKinley statue in St. James Park that was dedicated on Feb. 21, 1903. Elisabeth was a third grader at Hester School in 1902 when the valley children were asked to contribute their pennies or even nickels for the assassinated President's memorial. Elisabeth recalls that it stands on the exact spot where he addressed San Joseans in May 1901. He died on September 14, 1901.

It is of interest to note that Elisabeth, who is an avid traveler with the Californians, was a Trailblazer staff reporter during the rebirth of this publication in 1961.

Welcome New Members

Josephine M. Bade
Marie Bruno
Arvilla Fischer
Eldon R. Fisher
Janet Fisher
Betty Gassmann

Dolores Hojda
Walter Hojda
Lina S. John
Eleanora D. Joseph
Ruth Longshore
Patricia Loomis
Alba Joyce Martini

Clarence Moody
Carl Nissen
Vi Nissen
Edith Rolandetti
Emil D. Rolandetti
Mary T. Smith



Beyond the sunset

Alwine Bushong
Carl A. Carlson
Alfred Cassaletto

Elizabeth Driscoll
Maude J. Fales
Melba E. Hodges

Rachel M. Kimball
Margaret M. O'Brien
Alfreda Runge



TOURING WITH THE CALIFORNIANS

RESERVATIONS for the following trips will begin Saturday, March 1st at the Pioneer Luncheon. Beginning Monday, March 3rd, for reservations call Ruth Gross, 294-9830 between 9 a.m. and 12 noon, Monday thru Friday. After Ruth confirms your reservation, make check payable to "The Californians" and mail to 100 Serena Way, Santa Clara, CA 95051.

May 24-25-26, 1980 MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND—ALL ABOARD! Ride the Skunk Train through virgin stands of magnificent redwoods from Willits to Fort Bragg. This unique Mendocino Coast adventure will offer a jackpot of super scenes. Don't miss it!

June 11-20, 1980 Join Austen Warburton on this mild Wild West spectacular via Las Vegas and Hoover Dam, then on to Arizona to marvel to the ever changing hues of the Grand Canyon from both the south and north rims of this 217 mile chasm. We return along the historic route of the Pony Express and covered wagons across central Nevada. Say "Howdy" to storied outposts of the Old West on this one.

Sept. 11-25, 1980 ALPINE ADVENTURE

In 1633 the little Alpine village of Oberammergau was threatened by the Black Death that scourged Europe. The people of the valley prayed to be spared, vowing that they would present the story of the Passion of Christ every ten years thereafter. This inspiring event is the main feature of the Californians' first trip to Europe.

This trip explores in depth the Alpine area of Central Europe. You will feel more like a traveler than a tourist!

September is a beautiful time of year to visit Europe. The weather is more dependable and things are quieter after the hordes of summer tourists have gone home and the Europeans are settled down once again after their August vacations.

If you have been contemplating this trip, NOW is the time to make your decision and let the tour committee know if you wish to join us.

NOTICE

PLEASE check your membership card.
Does it have 1980 on it? If not please send three dollars (\$3) each for your membership to the Financial Secretary,
John Clark, 1900 Emory Street, San Jose, CA 95126
Phone 294-3176

LIFE MEMBERSHIPS ARE AVAILABLE New active members upon payment of \$1 initiation fee will have the option of paying the \$3 yearly dues or purchasing a \$45 Life Membership, (\$75 for husband and wife subscribing at the same time).

The same Life Membership privileges are extended to present members.



Get Ready Folks, for the
MARCH 1st.
LUNCHEON
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For Reservations

MENU VEAL CUTLETS VEGETABLE JELLO SALAD-DESSERT	LOU'S VILLAGE DOORS OPEN 10:30 <i>A delightful program has been drafted by our Committee.</i>
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LUNCHEON \$5.50

ATTENTION!

Members, please be more conscientious about sending in changes of address. If this task is left to the Post Office, we are charged 25¢ per RETURNED TRAILBLAZER.

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