

Early Mill Creek History By Wade Stuart

Verna as I told you I am too busy making history to write about it, but here is what I have put together to share with you.

I would like to take you from Healdsburg to a place out Mill Creek that once was known as Vernado. Vernado was named by Stillman Batchelor, a mining engineer, who had worked in Mexico. I believe I remember him say it meant venison.

I first traveled the road to Vernado as a little boy in 1919. My family and I drove from grandmothers San Francisco home to Healdsburg in our 1915 Dodge Touring Car. To traverse the rough road to Vernado we had to go by riding behind a team of horses in a small spring wagon. The transportation was rented along with a driver, Frank Lynch from Farmsworth's Livery Stable. Frank later became my father's foreman. He was a slightly built man, who had been a sailor on sailing ships. He always was called on to shimmy up our school flag pole when we were careless enough to pull the rope out of the pulley. Frank was never without his quid of "Star Plug" chewing tobacco. He carried his quid in a little pouch of skin in his cheek. When he made a profound statement he would always wiggle his nose and shift his chew from one cheek to the other.

Frank said it would take us about 3 hours to get to our destination. The road was very rough and for much of the way there was no road, only stream bed.

Now I'll tell you a little about the Mill Creek Road and some of the things along the way. Just after passing Nate Cole's home on the lower Westside Road was the turn that was the start of Mill Creek Road. It started with a steep slippery hill known as Hoppois Hill. This was one of the hills used by car dealers to demonstrate how good their new cars were. My father put many loads of gravel on this hill as the road bed was clay. There were also several springs that kept it slippery much of the winter time.

At the top of the hill where the road leveled out was a school that sat all alone in a big pasture. No homes could be seen from where it was located. This, we thought, was an awfully big school. They had more than thirty students. After passing the school, the road descended to Rickman's hill. In the pasture beside the road were the stumps of the old vineyard that we were told was killed by Floxeria disease. Wilda Rickman was a wonderful, pretty, and very popular girl, but much older she was in high school. The remarkable feature about Wilda was that she was born with only one arm yet was quite an accomplished pianist. Mr. Rickman and his son had had some kind of problem when they were caught operating the still.

Next on the left was the Clawson House. Frank Lynch and his mother lived there till my father built them a home on our ranch. In recent years Woodley and Margaret Frampton lived there. Further up the road was Mrs. Scott's home. She lived there only part of the time. I can't remember much about her except that she had a prune orchard off Rickman's Hill. This furnished my first lesson in prune picking. This orchard had the hardest ground that a tree could grow in. I believe my knees still show the scars.

A little farther down the road was Widow Peterson's chicken farm. We kids heard rumors that there had been some romance between bachelor Lynch and Mrs. Peterson.

The road forked here, the road to the right went up Ward Creek. This is where Collier, Valette, and Ward Oltman lived. Mr. Oltman was quite self-sufficient; he even grew his own tobacco.

Going up Mill Creek to the right, was a big beautiful home owned by Dr. Bennett. No one ever seemed to live in this big home. The Schriver's lived on the property and had some kids about my age. Mr.

Schraver grew many varieties of delicious mellons. He managed the Bennett Farm.

At this point, the road entered the redwoods. The landscape in the woods was a beautiful spot with a stand of old trees and a cold spring that ran the year around. My father kept a barrel there that was always filled with a steady stream of very cold water. This was a popular spot for Healdsburg people. It was known as "Barrel Springs". This was a favorite spot to stop and water the horses.

After that the road passed Foshers, Nicolette, and Pachonies of the Gray home. Mr. Gray won the county fiddling contest held in Santa Rosa.

Along in this area there was one place where wild bleeding hearts grew. There was another little area where wild Easter Lilies grew, just as they did on the backside of Fitch Mountain.

On coming to the place Palmer Creek intersects Mill Creek; Mill Creek made a sharp turn. Palmer Creek Road had to cross a very high bridge. I was always glad I didn't have to go over this deep gulch. There was a little hunched backed that lived up Palmer Creek and drove a big wagon pulled by two teams of mules. He hauled Hop Kilns down Westside.

My father also hauled wood for these Kilns, on a big wagon pulled by two mules, (wheelers) and two horses (leaders). The lead team had bells mounted to the harness. These gave notice that a big wagon was on the way and if you were in a buggy or small wagon you were to pull out into a "turn out". All of the Mill Creek Road was "one way" (the way you were going).

Just before reaching Huckleberry Hill was a sharp turn in the road, we called this Dead Man's Turn, because when cars just started to traverse the new road three members failed to make the turn. Their car turned over in the stream. One, the driver, escaped unhurt, second had a broken arm, while the third was caught under the car and killed. My father as usual was called to the scene to help. When he got there the unhurt driver was chastising the other survivor for moaning and complaining about his broken arm. He was telling him that he shouldn't make such a fuss, as that fellow who was under the car was hurt much more and he wasn't making a sound. Since there was no sign of a bottle, my father started searching and found where the driver had taken the remains of a gallon wine jug and hidden it up the hill in the brush. It was necessary to have this for evidence. In this area just before making a sharp turn to go up Huckleberry Hill was a secret spot where rare wild orchids grew in profusion.

On my first day of high school, Stanley Stuart drove Mildred, his sister, my brother and I in a Model T Ford to school. Mr. Stuart and my father purchased this car for our commute. On the way home we had to get out and get the burning logs and branches out of the road on Huckleberry Hill so we could not burn the tires. The night before my first day in school, I had spent most of the night on the fire line. The little sleep I did get was on the ground.

Just a little further up the road was a secluded spot where big logs had been stacked to form a bear trap. By the 20's there were no more bears in the area. Old timers said there were many at one time.

Then there was an area called "Bear Flats". This was a popular place to camp and picnic among the many large Redwood trees. There, trees had in the past had been badly damaged by fire and weren't desirable for lumber in the old days. When World War II came along all these trees were logged and a beautiful spot was destroyed.

The next home was owned by Mr. Honor and his son Ralph. They raised pigs, grew imperial prunes; three of them totaled one pound. The Honors were the only family to have electricity. It was generated by the Delco System generated powered by a gasoline engine and stored in wet cell batteries. Mr. and

Mrs. Honor had made their money in Alaska. He had a mule and she had a donut shop. One son Ralph worked the farm with his father and another son, Herbert, became a doctor and the last I remember he was in the Philippine Islands.

Across the road from the Honor's home, when I was a boy you could still see the big sawdust pile left by the mill that once stood there.

Just beyond Honor's and set back from the road was a group of houses. Perhaps it was a resort at one time. It was then Camp Rosenberg a Boy Scout's camp. This was a gift to the Scouts by the Rosenberg family that owned the clothing store, Rosenberg and Bush, in Healdsburg.

After Camp Rosenberg was a small house owned by the Lawler's. Before they moved in Jack Corvall lived there. (Someone should write a story about Jack and his brother). One day when Jack was away his neighbor across the creek, came over and sawed the supports to his house, on the downhill side, almost through. He left just enough to support the home so it wouldn't fall over into the road. He then put a very large charge of dynamite under the house below Jack's bed. The idea was that the explosion would get Jack in his bed and tip the home over into the road. He made two mistakes, first the charge went off before Jack got home and the second was so strong that it didn't topple the house, it blew a big hole in the floor. When the neighbor was questioned why he did this, his reply was that Jack kept him awake all night by throwing biscuits at his home. I never had the desire or opportunity to try Jack's cooking. I understand the neighbor spent the remainder of his life at Napa.

A little further was the turn off to Bill Smith and Mitchell Homes. The Mitchell place was purchased by my father and after he and Stillman Bachelor dissolved their partnership. The Smith place was purchased by my aunt and her husband Major Cooper.

Next to come, the last place where there was no bridge. It was called The Ford. Finally about 1925 they rebuilt this bridge. This was the first to have reinforced concrete sills to hold the long stringer logs that spanned the stream. I remember what a difficult time he had convincing the county supervisors that it should be wider than they wanted it to be. Just beyond the bridge was a big Redwood stump on which three mail boxes stood. These were not little rural boxes you see today. They were about as big as dog houses. The mail and groceries came three times a week by stage. Either Frank Lynch or Steve Farmsworth would drive a one horse box like wagon delivering the mail and groceries. The reins came from the horses through a hold in the box where the driver sat. When the mail came we left a note for the mailman as to what groceries he was to bring us next time he came. He would stop at Imrie and McClelland just across the street from Farmsworth's Livery Stable.

When we first lived on Mill Creek we didn't have telephones. Later about 1924 my father and Sam G. Stuart decided we should have phones. They got seven to go along with them, and they installed their own system. What a thrill it was to be able to crank the phone and talk to a neighbor or to central usually was Pearl who knew everything that went on in and about Healdsburg.

Where Angel Creek joined Mill Creek there must have been an Indian camp site, because after every heavy rain we would find among the bits of charcoal many small well shaped bird arrow heads and a few larger arrow heads and occasionally a spear hear. These were made from black volcanic glass that we believed was brought in from Lake Co.

Just beyond the cut we called "The New Grade" was a group of the remains of several buildings. One of these old piles of lumber was known as Bachelor's Hall. Later on, Byron Stuart built a home on the old foundation. Below this building and on the old road was a cool secluded spring surrounded by moss and Maiden Hair ferns. This is where we get our water by bucket for our school. My brother and I

kept a big Rainbow Trout in this spring. In a short distance the road widened to allow a sharp turn to the left for Stuart's Road to enter Mill Creek Road. This wide spot was fairly level and served as our school's playground. Daniel's School with its six to twelve pupils was located on a steep hillside above the road. The year after I left this school the county graded a playground and piped in water. Someday I hope someone will write a story about this wonderful little rural school.

The next home up the road was a big log home owned by the Coots' family. Walter Coots sometimes worked on the road for my father. Mrs. Coots was a beautiful and remarkable woman. She had been a Zigfield Follies Dancer and still danced at the annual musicals put on at the Healdsburg Legion Hall. I remember her doing a thrilling dance number with Elmer Sandborn. We didn't know much about dancing but we were impressed with anyone could kick as high as they did. Mr. and Mrs. Ed Gray lived next door in a home they had shipped piece by piece from a dismantled home in San Francisco. Mrs. Gray was a dear lady. She remembered our birthdays with cards for many years even after leaving the Healdsburg area.

Further on and just before coming to H.M. Hall's to the left of the road was a swampy area that was an old "Bear Waller". Henry Hall was a bachelor who had been a mining engineer. He was responsible for Stillman Batchelor and my father for moving to Mill Creek. Hall's home was at the foot of a very steep hill called "The Ladder". This was not only steep and narrow but it was very slippery on rainy days. On my first trip to this area I was much relieved to find that I could ride over it and didn't have to climb a big ladder.

At the top of the ladder the road forked to the left and went to the Red Slide Ranch, Magnesite Mine, and to Humphrey home. While the other fork went to Vernado. The Humphrey's home was a large rambling place with a big Redwood stump in the front yard. This stump was so large that it served as a dance floor. The Humphrey's had been entertainers and had several wonderful musical instruments. My favorite that they let me play was a bass Viola. We once went with great expectations to see Mr. Humphrey who was an actor in a movie. What a let down it was when we just got a glimpse of him as a cowboy in a barroom brawl. His mother was married to an oriental prince. Among the wonderful things she brought to Mill Creek was a Royal Persian cat. This cat founded a dynasty of cats. Not only did it establish a line of Persians in the Mill Creek area but Healdsburg, Santa Rosa, Petaluma and as far I know even Walnut Creek.

The road that forked to the right went through Vernado to the "Dog Ranch" owned by Jack Corvall. Stillman Batchelor and my father built a two story Redwood log house at the location later called Vernado. The homes originally had running water that came for a spring up in the valley by the way of a V shaped trough cut in a series of connecting logs.

Mr. Batchelor was like an uncle to my brother and I. He later started a post office and called it Vernado. When I first saw this area in 1919 it was like a tumbled down ghost town. Only three structures were still standing. One of these we lived in while my father was building the log house. Another that later became the post office is where my grandmother and I slept. I remember spending over a month in bed in this place suffering and recovering from Poison Oak poisoning. My poor concerned family tired everything to get me some relief. After they tired and true "Calamet Lotion" didn't help, an old timer told us that the only relief would be "Coon Grease". So my father set a trap and caught a Raccoon just below where I was suffering. I could hear the trap chains rattling. They did render out the fat and applied it to my skin. The odor was unforgettable. Now over seventy years later I can still recall the odor of "Coon Grease" needless to say I recovered maybe because of, but maybe in spite, of this treatment. I never, since recovering from this Poison Oak ordeal have ever had Poison Oak poisoning. Later on when in grammar school we boys would tattoo ourselves with the sap from Poison Oak plants.

The third standing cabin we called "The Skunk House". Behind this place was a larger hole in the ground where the former occupants had operated a counterfeiting plant. Later on a skunk got under the house and marked it for his exclusive abode. This area named Vernado had been a commune. I don't believe the counterfeiter had planned to share the wealth with the rest of the community. The only family that remained in the area from the original commune group was Sam Stuart's.

They purchased a place up on the hill above Daniel's School and next door to Mr. Samuelson's. Mr. Samuelson always wore bib overalls and took care of his invalid wife. Every year he would bring boxes of fruit to our school. When cherries got ripe he would stop at school and invite us up to pick all the Bing's and Royal Ann's we wanted.

Mr. Stuart and my father were good friends. Every year after they purchased Ford trucks, each would load his truck with apples and prunes and drive to Sacramento Valley. They would camp out there, shoot wild ducks and geese. They would also trade their fruit for sweet potatoes and rice.

Mr. Stuart was the first of the nine Mill Creek Families to have a radio. It was a battery powered speaker. Our whole student body went to listen to our new president give a speech in 1924.

Verna I think this is enough and maybe too much. Use any of it you wish to. Chop it up or throw it away. You won't hurt my feelings.

Here are some of the stories that are left to be told: About Nate Cole, his car, his suit, top hat and notches in his revolver. About William Collier's big diamond that he lost and found. About all the things that happened at Daniel's School. Stories about wild pigs, Rattle Snakes, trap lines, and fighting wild forest fires.

Wade