Who Was James Wyatt Oates?
by Jeff Elliot

JAMES WYATT OATES (1850-1915) was a Santa Rosa lawyer, a savvy speculator who owned property all over town and a key player in launching the “Rose Carnival” parade in 1894. Apparently no one in Santa Rosa knew that he had also killed a man.

Called Wyatt by his family, he was the sixth of eight children born to an impoverished farmer in Alabama. He was the baby brother of William C. Oates, a seven-term Congressman and governor of Alabama. William most famously commanded the 15th Alabama regiment at Gettysburg that lost the Battle of Little Round Top, often mentioned as a pivotal moment in the Confederacy’s defeat.

The year after the war ended, 16 year-old Wyatt killed a man who insulted his sister. Wyatt fled but was persuaded by William to return and face trial, where he was acquitted only because his brother bribed the prosecutor - who happened to be the father of the victim.

Wyatt studied for the bar under his brother's guidance. He moved west in the late 1870s and primarily regarded himself as a writer, with short stories and travel pieces published in major newspapers and magazines.

He settled in Santa Rosa in 1881 after he married Mattie Solomon, a San Francisco socialite. Here he formed a law practice with a classmate from the college he attended while hiding from the law.

Mattie and Wyatt were an odd couple yet clearly devoted to each other.

She had poise and grace, the embodiment of Victorian America gentility.

He presented Southern courtliness if you were on his good side, but woe to anyone who rubbed his thin skin the wrong way. She was around six feet tall, towering over other local women in her only verified photograph. Besides being short-tempered he was also just short, five feet, seven and five-eights inches by his own description, and that probably counted the lift gained from the elevator shoes he apparently wore.

They had no children but their social circle was mainly a youthful crowd called “The Bunch.” They had long mentoring relationships with at least two young women, and in the last years of his life Wyatt would also follow his brother's example by helping a young man named Hilliard Comstock privately study to be an attorney. Oates was famously unpredictable. Brother William was a revered Confederate veteran, but Wyatt hated slavery and deplored the way the South tried to justify it - yet he argued the Southern states had every right to form a nation of their own. His volatile temper could surface without warning, as it did in 1913 when serving as City Attorney; at a City Council meeting he punched a man in the face - or as the Press Democrat eloquently put it, went “Bing!” on the guy.

His final years were melancholy and difficult. His mother-in-law always lived with the couple and when she died in 1910, Wyatt had her remains placed inside the holding vault at the Rural Cemetery, although Oates owned a large plot at the McDonald Ave. entranceway. When Mattie passed away in 1914 Wyatt had her coffin stored in the same little stone shed. Wyatt died the following year and was likewise stored away.

Then one of the executors of Wyatt’s will revealed he had made a very odd last request: Wyatt wanted the three of them...
Greetings,

Fall is coming to a close and it’s finally beginning to bring some much needed precipitation to the area. It’s the perfect season to snuggle up with recent editions of the Historical Society’s newsletters that may have been set aside, waiting for a quiet moment. Enjoy the stories of yesteryear. Enjoy reflecting on a past era of Santa Rosa.

The Board of Directors is excited to announce an upcoming General Meeting. On February 3, at the Central Library of Santa Rosa we will enjoy speakers and exhibits. Of course there will be cookies and good company. We hope you can join us. Please mark your calendar.

The Sonoma County Women’s Suffrage Project is about to have their kick-off event for a year of well-planned events on December 8. Visit their website at www.SoCoWomen2020.org for information about the upcoming events and the organization. The HSSR is proud to be a sponsor and supporter of their commendable efforts.

Neal Austinson decided to sell his collection of over 800 items related to Santa Rosa, he had been collecting (and saving from the dustbin) photos and paper ephemera since the early 1990’s. This summer, the Historical Society of Santa Rosa purchased the collection to both keep it intact and make it available to the public by donating it to the Sonoma County History and Genealogy Library. The collection contains over 25 photos of Santa Rosa pre-1950’s with quite a few from the late 1800’s along with binders on Luther Burbank, the Hoag family, and the Van Wormer family (who owned the land the SRJC eventually was built on). As time permits, watch for the photos in the collection to become available at https://heritage.sonomalibrary.org/

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Follow us on Facebook to enjoy vintage photos and Santa Rosa datum

Want to Contribute Content for the HSSR Newsletter?

The HSSR seeks Santa Rosa Centric memoirs and research based pieces for our newsletter. Contact us at Newsletter@HistoricalSocietySantaRosa.org for more information.

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William ("Billy") Montgomery was one of the first Santa Rosa servicemen killed in World War II. He died on December 7, 1941, in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He was a gunner’s mate stationed on the battleship USS California.

In 1943, a new Santa Rosa street was named in Billy’s honor. It was along an old railroad line linking the eastern city limits with Farmers Lane. In the 1950s, Montgomery Village and Santa Rosa’s newest high school were also named for him.

Born in Ukiah in 1921, Billy was the only child of Joseph and Anna Montgomery. Joseph died when Billy was six. Anna later married Loren Hufft, and the family moved to Lincoln Street in Santa Rosa. Loren Hufft worked at the Press Democrat as a Linotype operator.

Billy attended Santa Rosa High School. He played in the school orchestra, delivered Press Democrat newspapers, and was a member of 4-H. While in high school, he joined the National Guard; his mother said that he loved marching and military discipline. Days after high school graduation in February 1939, he enlisted in the Navy.

According to a 1958 Press Democrat article about the naming of Montgomery High School, Billy was described as “a tall, good-looking boy…with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a ready smile.” His mother said he was “just an average boy who loved life”.

In 1985, Billy’s mother and Sonoma County veterans dedicated a showcase of memorial artifacts of Billy’s life at the Sonoma County Veterans’ Building. The items included his Purple Heart medal and President Franklin Roosevelt’s telegram notifying Anna of her son’s death.

Billy is buried next to his father in a Ukiah cemetery.

President Franklin Roosevelt declared December 7, 1941, “a day that will live in infamy”. The memory of Billy Montgomery — “an average boy” who died that day — lives on in the Santa Rosa street, neighborhood, and high school that bear his name.

Zinger’s Motel
Sleuthing by Karen Stone

In recent months the HSSR purchased a collection of Santa Rosa photographs and memorabilia (see Message from the Board page 2 for details). An photo of an unidentified Motel within the collection caught the interest of a Board Member and discussion ensued. Where had this motel been, and during what years? Details within the image were analyzed and discussed with great interest. Board Member Karen Stone exclaimed, “I’ve seen this!” Karen vowed to investigate and report her findings.

More than a year before the referenced meeting, in 2018, Gary Shatto had posted a different view of the motel (shown) on the Facebook page “I remember Santa Rosa when…” Gary’s post identified it as a 1958 photo of Zinger’s Motel.

Zinger’s Motel had formerly been Minger’s Motel, and was located at 3586 Mendocino Avenue (3586 Redwood Highway North). The posted photo provided a key landmark in the background, the Fountaingrove Round Barn. Now having a name, information about the motel, its owner, and history could be discovered. Through online newspaper archive Newspapers.com Karen sleuthed. The investigation and reveal is a great story of what can happen when Santa Rosa centric images are shared, and conversations occur.

Florence Velde owned and operated Zinger’s Motel on the site of Fountaingrove Inn and later Equus Restaurant, destroyed in the October 2017 wildfires. Florence Velde relocated to Santa Rosa in 1949 from South Dakota with her husband Lewis. They operated the motel for 28 years, retiring in 1977. Operating the motel “was a full-time job, day and night” for the two, her obituary quoted her daughter saying.

Operating the motel left no time for hobbies. Having survived her husband, Florence died at the age of 84 in 1993.
A Moving Story — Part I
by Denise Hill

Ed. Note: The following is part one of a two-part series.

The city is currently suggesting the Howarth Park Caretakers Cottage can not be moved. Perhaps that’s because you don’t see buildings moved that much anymore, but a century or two ago it was a common occurrence.

While it is a welcome sight to see houses moved instead of demolished, it is the resurgence of an old practice, not a new phenomenon. Building materials and skilled craftsmanship were expensive so buildings were moved for economic reasons, especially in rural areas and small towns. Additionally, the cost of labor in 19th century America was more expensive than elsewhere.

David Stevenson, a Scottish civil engineer born in 1815, traveled in the United States and Canada for three months. Noting that American laborers earned more than twice the daily wage of their British counterparts, he wrote, "In consequence of the great value of labour, the Americans adopt, with a view to economy, many mechanical expedients, which, in the eyes of British engineers, seem very extraordinary." Chief among these expedients was the moving of houses, to which Stevenson devoted a whole chapter of his 1838 book Sketch of the Civil Engineering of North America.

A review of the not too distant past will turn up records of buildings up to 180 tons that were moved and other buildings moved two, even three times before the 1900s. The process was not that different to the process used today. The foundation was excavated, the structure was braced underneath, and then jacked up (using steel rods inserted into a mechanism that would turn raising a center shaft that would raise the building), sections of the foundation were removed to allow placement of the screw jacks under the sills. A large building required more screw jacks than did a small one. Next sleds or carriages would be inserted, the structure set down back down on them, and oxen, horses, tractors, and even train engines were used to pull the building to the new site.

The rollers consisted of wooden carriages fastened beneath the building’s sills (by means of spikes projecting upward from the carriage) with wheels attached to the underside of the carriages. The rollers traveled over heavy wooden timbers placed beneath the raised building. By means of a rope and pulley or capstan arrangement, a team — generally no more than two animals were required — pulled the building along the timbers. As it moved forward, the timbers from behind were taken up and replaced ahead of it. As long as the move was well managed, the interior plaster would remain uncracked throughout. There are quite a few images of homes being moved during the wintertime when, assumed, the snow provided a better surface for pulling a house via a sled.

Starting in the mid-20th century, the creation of cheap building materials and the proliferation of power lines meant the end of widespread house moving. In addition to changing economics, the modern complications of telephone and power lines, plumbing connections, heavy traffic, and the necessity of obtaining special permits have all contributed to the present-day disinclination to move old buildings.

However, there are compelling reasons to move a house, rather than demolishing it, even today:

- The cost of moving and resettling into a house can be 30 to 50 percent less than the cost of a new home.
- Moving a house preserves the tax base protecting the local government entity from losing that revenue.
- Moving the house keeps a large quantity of debris out of the local landfill.
- The average new structure requires 5,000 board feet of lumber, resulting in 50 trees saved per structure moved.

…Continued page 7
I’ve lived on Webb Drive adjacent to Santa Rosa Creek for over 30 years. On my occasional wandering along the creek, I’ve noticed a wide path areas on each side that could accommodate traffic such as wagons or early automobiles. Could those “paths” have been used for early transportation? My neighbor, Pat Wall, who was raised in his home from the early 50s, mentioned there used to be a group of buildings just across the creek from his and my home. He pointed “somewhere over there” which I thought he probably meant the buildings west of Farmers Lane where Hank’s Creekside Restaurant is today.

Recently, a colleague also serving on the HSSR Board, Karen Stone, sent me a picture from a 1957 Press Democrat article about a house and cabins that were to be destroyed to make way for the Highway 12 expansion. They were located on Hwy 12 (or often called Sonoma Hwy) east of Farmers Lane, approximately across the creek from where the Hillside Inn is today, and across from Silva’s Grocery, now gone and replaced by apartments, and across from our homes on Webb Dr. which dead ends at Santa Rosa Creek.

The photo above shows a two-story house and a number of cabins and was taken March 1957. It was called Rincon Heights Auto Court. Their date of construction was undetermined, but they were destroyed March 1957 for the Highway 12 expansion. Its location is shown on the 1954 USGS map shown.

The auto court had ten small cabins and one large house. According to some descriptions it also had a gas station and a restaurant. In 1946, the gas station was Carver’s Service Station and in 1955 Brown’s Service Station, managed or owned by Elsworth W. Brown. The gas station and the restaurant were offered for lease 1952-54. I don’t know if there were any renters, but if there were, it only lasted until 1957.

The classified section of the Press Democrat advertised the house for rent or lease many times. It was listed as a three bedroom cottage or sometimes a house. Sometimes furnished, and sometimes not, no pets, sometimes a Frigidaire and all utilities. Rents ranged from $63 to $70 month. Occasionally, the cabins were listed for rent – three rooms for $6-7 per month.

Retired Superior Court Judge Bob Dale recalls those cabins as being rentals and never fully occupied. Dale also remembers how unsafe it was to access the cabins from Sonoma Highway. In order to get to the cabins there was a steep, narrow entrance road which provided access – one way in and one way out with limited visibility in each direction. Dale noted that when a car was attempting to enter Sonoma Highway, the driver might see eastbound traffic, but westbound traffic was a different matter. Westbound drivers couldn’t see someone entering the highway. The entrance was also on a sweeping curve that added to the dangerous conditions, which he said, made for a lot of skid marks along the highway. The sweeping curve at that location added to the dangerous conditions. Mike Wall, who also lives across the creek, recalls hearing many car crashes over the years which highlighted the serious safety problem of the curve.

In March 1957, the City of Santa Rosa purchased the “admittedly uninhabitable” property with box-like cabins for the purpose of dumping fill from a widening project at Fourth Street and College Avenue. The fill would be used to widen Highway 12 and straighten the notorious curve east of Farmers Lane. The problem was — what to do with the cabins. The City considered various options – use them for low-cost housing for transient workers, use them for camping facilities by the Parks and Recreation Department, or to give them to the Santa Rosa Fire Department for fire suppression practice.

City Manager Sam Hood took the councilmen on a guided tour of the abandoned auto court to help make an informed decision. After inspecting the interiors of the “sagging, cramped, little structures,” they choose option three. The shacks were stripped of anything the recreation department could use and turned them over to the fire department for elimination. Thus ended the existence of any buildings along side the creek. The Rincon Heights Auto Court, gas station and restaurant were no more.

Highway 12 east of Farmer’s Lane was widened to accommodate more traffic. The safety island down the middle of Highway 12 prevented eastbound cars from stopping in at Silva’s Grocery for a quart of milk or a loaf of bread. Silva’s Grocery store closed its doors in 1960.
My name is Sharon Ridley-Smith. Ridley Avenue in Santa Rosa is named for my Great Grandparents, Janus Fletcher-Ridley and Alice Luella Murphy-Ridley. They owned and worked the land from 1885 to Janus’ death in 1925. The Tank House, sheep barn and chicken coop they built were demolished in 2012. One hundred and twenty seven years of history gone in an afternoon.

As a third generation Santa Rosan I have a passion for our town. Good or bad, it’s home. On the Facebook page, “I Remember Santa Rosa When….” a discussion started about houses being demolished in Santa Rosa. I started poking around Ancestry and newspapers.com and the following story unfolded.

Here is the story of the Snyder Home at 952 Sonoma Avenue, Santa Rosa, California (1905-2019). Even though the home is slated for demolition later this year, the story will help the home live on in our heart’s and minds.

Lifelong home Herbert Beverley Snyder (1886-1961) and Bessie Matilda (Beal) Beale (1887-1952). The couple would live in this home from 1908-1961, Herbert’s death.

Herbert and Bessie married in Santa Rosa on August 10, 1908. The couple would have three children, two living to adulthood.

This wonderful home was the scene of many social events. Newspaper articles often mention the home’s lovely gardens.

Bessie was an orphan at age three. She was raised by an Uncle George C. Richards. He owned a chicken ranch on Sonoma Avenue west of Macklyn Street. This location is two blocks from Bessie and Herbert’s home.

Herbert came to Santa Rosa with his Mother, Father and four siblings. Two sisters were born in Santa Rosa. Herbert was the oldest of seven children.

His parents would divorce in 1912. His Father and three brothers operated Snyder Bros Laundry both here and in San Rafael.

In June of 1907 Herbert lost his right arm at the shoulder in a derrick accident. He was 20 years old. Bessie would be his “right arm” throughout their lives. Herbert and Bessie were married 44 years at the time of her death in 1952.

By June 5, 1907 Herbert was “Holding his Own”. On June 12 he underwent surgery to remove his arm and shoulder blade which was crushing his chest. Blood poisoning had set in and he was not expected to live. By June 26 he had recovered enough to be out and about again. By August his recovery allowed him to travel to San Francisco’s Southern Pacific Hospital for treatment of impaired hearing caused in the accident.

Bessie was a registered nurse at the hospital where Herbert was treated. She saw him at his worst and they would marry a year later. Indeed a love story.

From 1908-1912 Herbert was associated with the Santa Rosa Republican Newspaper. By 1912 Herbert was Circulation Manager of the paper. In 1912 Herbert took a position as Santa Rosa City Clerk. He would remain until 1918 when he ran for Sonoma County Recorder. From 1918-1958 Herbert would be re-elected to the Recorder’s position. During his tenure, he would transform the office into a modern and efficiently operated department. In 1948 he introduced photographic recordings speeding up the recording process.

Bessie would work side by side with Herbert until 1930. Bessie suffered with a brain tumor. She would be confined to Stanford Hospital in San Francisco for five weeks. The tumor was successfully removed and she returned home. Herbert’s sister, Luella Rose Snyder-Davis was a registered nurse and would attend Bessie during her convalescence.

Bessie would experience a full recovery.

Herbert and Bessie’s son, Herbert, Jr., would join his Father at the Recorder’s office in 1954. In 1958, Herbert, Jr. ...Continued page 7
Moving Story... continued from page 4

- And, of course, saving a house for its historic significance. A historic house is more than just an old structure; it is a discernible link to the area’s past.

There are some factors that need to be considered when moving a house today:

- A wood-framed house will be easier and less expensive than a cement or brick house because those are heavier and must be moved in one piece while a wood-framed house can be cut into pieces.
- Power lines, trees, and over and under-passes along the transportation route.
- Site preparation and new foundation where the house will be situated.

In the 19th century, buildings might be moved disassembled, partially disassembled, or intact. These same methods are still used today to preserve historic buildings from demolition. Partial disassembly involves the removal, marking, and transportation of structural components of a building rather than individual pieces. This method is less time- and labor-consuming than total disassembly (which is typically reserved for barns, sheds, and minimally finished buildings). The interior finish work, plaster, lath, and floors were removed first, then the roof. Non-load-bearing interior walls were handled as discrete units. The four exterior walls and any gables each comprise a separate unit.

Today, buildings are lifted using hydraulic jacks, the rollers are steel, and the moving dollies are made of a series of truck axels. Heavy-duty commercial trucks are typically employed to move the structure. These methods were used in the 1950’s through the 1970’s in Santa Rosa. Stay tuned for “A Moving Story – Part 2” documenting some of the structures moved since the late 1800’s in our city.

Cabins... continued from page 5

Silva’s Grocery Store was owned and operated by Mary and Tony Silva, and was located next door to the Hillside Inn – across the highway from the Rincon Heights Auto Court. According to Jacqueline Pennington Jewett who passed away in July, posted on the Facebook page “I Remember Santa Rosa” that Mary and Tony were her grandparents and had lived behind the store. The store only closed from 11:00 pm to 7:00 am “just by chance a customer would be in need of some groceries or some gasoline.” Among the variety of groceries carried by the Silva’s, the store brimmed with ice cream cones, root beer floats, milkshakes, penny candy and funny books. Jacqueline had wonderful memories of those times.

Gaye LeBaron wrote about the closing of Silva’s due to the highway’s expansion. Their customers were their friends. When the highway was widened and the island was put down middle “the eastbound traffic could no longer turn across into Silva’s parking area. Westbound traffic would go by much faster hurrying to catch the light at Farmers Lane. Silva’s closed. A trade-off. We improved the road. And we lost a landmark.”

Researching those long gone buildings just across the Santa Rosa Creek is fascinating to me. I learned the creek had a life different from today. I learned there was a popular rope swing across the creek near Farmers Lane. I saw remains of rock walls on the north side of the creek and wonder why they were built. I also learned there was another auto court Creek where Siesta Lane joins Fourth Street, but those are stories for another time.
Historical Society of Santa Rosa

Membership Application

The Historical Society of Santa Rosa intends to build a strong and diverse organization of individuals, families and groups to investigate, record and relate the history of the City of Santa Rosa. Membership includes subscription to the newsletter and priority invitations to HSSR sponsored events.

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